Poverty and Learning

Readings from Educational Leadership

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Introduction

The Poor—
Not So Very Different, After All

Let me tell you about the very poor. They are different from you and me. They do not possess what they need and they suffer early, and it does something to them, makes them hard where we are soft, and cynical where we are trustful, in a way that, unless you were born poor, it is very difficult to understand.

After reading Jonathan Kozol’s evocative book, *Fire in the Ashes* (Broadway Books, 2012), the portraits of children growing up in abject poverty stayed with me. After a while, I found myself rewriting the famous F. Scott Fitzgerald quote (above) in which he crystalized his understanding of the very rich.¹ By substituting just a few words, I found I could create a myth about the poor, which, like Fitzgerald’s characterization of the rich, rings true to some degree. The kids in Kozol’s book who survived life in a hellhole tenement in New York City in the 1980s suffered some lasting scars that even later interventions and reversal of fortunes could not change. Those who did thrive did so because of their own inner strengths, and they often persisted as a result of the loving concern of the adults, especially teachers, who had reached out to them.
Although we all know that poverty changes the lives of children—and changes our lives, too—the polarized viewpoints of the day make us all eager to look for someone else—the government, philanthropists, charities and churches, the schools, or the poor themselves—to find the solutions. We may even believe that nothing can change.

In this compilation of articles about poverty and learning selected from past issues of Educational Leadership, our authors provide insights into the challenges that children who live in poverty face and the kind of solutions that are possible today.

Throughout the collection, the authors demythologize poverty as a culture and urge educators to see “students of poverty” as students who happen to be poor (Landsman, Gorski, Jensen). They look at the reasons for the existence and persistence of the uneven playing field (Rothstein, Kozol) and the solutions that can open up opportunities for students who deserve an equal chance (Potter, Neuman, Nisbett, McGill-Franzen and Allington, Parrett and Budge). Some of our authors help educators identify the students who may be part of the invisible poor—those who are homeless (Dill) and those whose frequent moves interrupt their schooling (Smith and colleagues). And all inspire us to try both little and big interventions that will make a difference (Nisbett, Tomlinson, Burke, and Naomi Thiers’s interview with Salome Thomas-EL).

Throughout each article, authors express a sense of urgency, for poverty is not something that affects a small minority. More than 51 percent of children who attend our public schools live in poverty. As Steve Suitts recently noted at the ASCD Whole Child Symposium on poverty and education, “We’ve reached the juncture in our public schools where the education of low-income students is not simply a matter of equity and fairness. It’s a matter of our national future…. If public education in this country fails, the nation fails, and that is the message we have to come to grips with.”

—Marge Scherer
Editor in Chief, Educational Leadership
Endnotes


Overcoming the Challenges of Poverty

Julie Landsman

Here are 15 things educators can do to make our schools and classrooms places where students thrive.

Last year, when I was leading a staff development session with teachers at a high-poverty elementary school, a teacher described how one of her kindergarten students had drifted off to sleep at his seat—at 8:00 a.m. She had knelt down next to the child and began talking loudly in his ear, urging him to wake up. As if to ascertain that she’d done what was best for this boy, she turned to the rest of us and said, “We are a ‘no excuses’ school, right?”

A fellow teacher who also lived in the part of Minneapolis where this school was located and knew the students well, asked, “Did you know Samuel has been homeless for a while now? Last night, there was a party at the place where he stays. He couldn’t go to bed until four in the morning.”

I couldn’t help but think that if the “no excuses” philosophy a school follows interferes with basic human compassion for high-needs kids, the staff needs to rethink how they are doing things. Maybe they
could set up a couple of cots for homeless students in the office to give them an hour or two of sleep; this would yield more participation than shouting at children as they struggle to stay awake.

This isn’t the first time I’ve heard of adults viewing low-income children as “the problem” rather than trying to understand their lives. In a radio interview I heard, a teenage girl in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina told her interviewer that she thought many people viewed poor families like hers as criminals. Crying, she described how it felt when city officials blamed her family for the lack of food and shelter they experienced after the hurricane.

A Forgotten Duty?

Sometimes it seems that we do not believe it’s our duty to provide basic needs and an education for all children in the United States, no matter where they grow up. For instance, in some schools I know of, when a student cannot pay for a reduced-price meal, the lunch is dumped into the trash in front of the entire school, humiliating that child.

The attitudes of policymakers also reflect a shift toward teaching students in differing ways depending on their economic status. Teachers often hear that poor kids come from violent, chaotic homes and that only regimented curriculums will allow them to succeed. Although wealthier children are taught through a variety of approaches that emphasize developing the whole child, the emphasis for low-income children is often on developing obedience.

At the same time, many rural, urban, and suburban schools serving low-income students challenge such prescriptive teaching. They quietly provide, intellectually and materially, for high-poverty students. For instance, they create programs that arrange transportation for students to theaters, concerts, and museums. Because Saturday and Sunday are two days of the week many poor children go hungry, some schools send kids home for the weekend with backpacks of food.
They create a welcoming environment where even the poorest parents feel comfortable.

Teachers and administrators at these schools offer challenging instruction while simultaneously addressing basic needs. This is a tricky balancing act that requires dedication, self-reflection, and reexamining what works—or doesn’t. Here, gathered from schools that succeed with students living in poverty, are suggestions for how to manage that balancing act.

What Teachers Can Do

Make Time for Extras

Can you create times for students to make up schoolwork, work on a project for history class, or just enjoy music and art? It doesn’t have to be every day. Teachers in a building might coordinate to set times before and after classes during which a child with an unstable home life can use a computer or read in silence—and when teachers can give guidance and build trust.

In one middle school where I worked, we let students spend their lunch hours with us, providing chess and checkers. It’s amazing how much information young men and women will share over a game board, from tasks they’re having trouble accomplishing to worries about food over the weekend. What we learned from these times helped us create programs that met students’ greatest needs.

Tell Students to Ask for Help

Spell out that you expect learners to come talk with you about a low test score, a comment on a paper, or their needs for resources. Some students simply don’t know the expectations regarding behavior, work, and interaction with their teacher. One teacher in a suburban high school assumed her students had access to the Internet and
assigned work on the basis of that assumption. When she found out that many students had no Internet at home, she organized time after classes for students to work on school computers—and transportation home—giving careful instructions about what she wanted from their time online.

Cut deals with students who don’t have essential supplies by providing those supplies while, at the same time, pushing these kids to work hard on their assignments. A homeless girl may have lost a pencil in the trudge around the city finding a place for the night or left her homework in the office of a shelter. A boy may not be able to get his work done by the due date because he has no quiet place to concentrate. By keeping a supply of pencils, paper, and notebooks handy and adjusting due dates for individual students, you can make sure students know you’re willing to modify conditions but you expect work to be done.

Use Visuals to Help Organize Assignments

Students whose lives are chaotic need to be reminded of exactly what work is due and when. Calendars and charts are visual cues that help kids organize time and tasks together, especially if you refer to them often. Write different tasks and events connected to each assignment—outline due date, media center day, or first draft due—on the calendar squares. A calendar both reminds students of the day of the week and creates a visual map to future tasks.

Imagine Their Obstacles—and See Their Strengths

If you grew up with economic security, remind yourself that you might not understand the things adults and children in families with barely enough for the basics have to do just to survive—and the obstacles they face. Some schools expect parents to get to parent conferences in the evening, which can involve a bus ride, babysitting expense, or
taking time off from the late shift. To illuminate what such expectations involve, one school’s social worker surveyed parents and teachers to see how many owned cars. Every teacher and teacher’s aide owned a car, but only 40 parents—in a school with 500 students—did.

Find ways to accommodate such realities. For instance, I worked as a visiting poet in a school where one-third of the students were homeless. We made sure each kid had two copies of the poems they wrote, one to leave at school and one to take to their parents, to keep their writing from getting lost in transit.

When high-poverty schools hire people from the surrounding neighborhood who are acquainted with the poverty there, these people can be experts regarding students’ situations. Connect with these staff members; ask their advice on how to affirm and provide for particular children. Jared, a young adult hall monitor at a school where I taught writing, brought into my class a poetry book by rapper Tupac Shakur. I read some of those poems with my students. Soon Jared was visiting my poetry sessions during breaks from his work, helping students with their writing and homework.

Understanding students’ obstacles should help you give them credit for their amazing resilience and delight in learning. Low-income children are often described in terms of what they don’t have or cannot do. Reframe your thinking to recognize the strength it takes for a child who had to find a couch to sleep on last night to simply make it in the school door.

Listen

In our rush to create silent classrooms and push test preparation, we lose sight of the complexity of children’s lives, and we lose our delight in knowing how they feel, reason, joke, or concoct ideas. In just 10 minutes, you can encourage students to write from a prompt like “I am from ______” or “I used to______, but now I ______.” Read their pieces to a small group or to the entire class. Elementary teachers often have a
daily circle time and even in secondary school, you can pull the chairs into a circle at the end of class and ask students about their plans for the rest of the day or a neighborhood event.

This listening is an important part of your job. Listening means slowing down or stopping, even for a minute as a student lingers by your desk. It means having music playing as you work in your classroom in the morning and nodding to a student who comes in early. If you let that student relax there most mornings, he might make it a habit to talk with you before each day begins.

Don’t Tolerate Teasing

By establishing clear classroom guidelines, including no teasing about clothes or possessions and talking with students about what these guidelines mean, you’ll establish a climate of safety. Effective guidelines state positive behaviors, such as: Be Physically Considerate, Be Verbally Considerate, or Try New Things. Talk about what concepts like consideration mean; for instance, showing verbal consideration includes not taunting or hurting anyone’s feelings. When you spend time up front working on behaviors, you save time the rest of the year. Classes become communities, and discipline problems diminish.

Connect Curriculum to Students’ Interests

When possible, connect the content you’re teaching to things students are fascinated with, like a song or video they keep talking about or the pollution in their neighborhood. By tapping into learners’ concerns, you can develop bridges to literature, science, or math. You might engage students in projects connected to community issues or problems, like cleaning up a playground or advocating for a bus for summer programs. Students can write letters to the editor, ask scientists to come in and talk about pollution, or find journalists who will talk to the class about issues in their city. Such actions give low-income students a sense of agency and possibility. You might also infuse their families’ traditions
and talents into classwork. Financially poor students often come from families rich in culture.

Speak Out

Advocate for impoverished children by speaking up about which students are tracked into general courses versus gifted programs or advanced classes. Insist on the giftedness of some of your poorer students. Some schools have programs that parallel advanced classes yet don’t require applicants to demonstrate academic skills that they may not have going in—but could develop. These demanding courses both challenge and support low-income students.

Other schools have opened up advanced placement or International Baccalaureate classes to anyone who wants to try them. Suggest similar programs and push for changes like providing bilingual conferences for parents who don’t speak English. You may get push back from those who want no deviation from the status quo. Be willing to be unpopular for your advocacy.

Find Allies

It’s hard to do this work in isolation. Forge a supportive network that keeps you going as you strive to make a difference for students and push for academic equity—through a book group, inquiry team, or lunchtime discussion on issues related to education and poverty. You’ll have someone to call when you’re trying to anticipate how your suggestions will go over at the next faculty meeting—and someone to talk with about how it went. There are more teachers willing to advocate for kids than is often apparent.

What Administrators Can Do

Principals and superintendents can do much to support both struggling students and committed teachers. Think in terms of getting resources to the neediest schools and students.
Develop a Trusting Relationship with Teachers

Can teachers talk with you about an idea or solution they have for addressing the needs of poorer students? One of the most successful urban principals I ever worked with asked teachers to come to him often with a problem combined with a suggested solution.

Standing up for overworked teachers builds trust. When the district tries to mandate more requirements or protocols in March or to add a new test, voice your concern for the load this might put on teachers, many of whom may be already providing for students materially. When you have a devoted staff, make sure they know you’ll challenge those who would add more burdens.

Spend Time in Classrooms

Observe not to evaluate, but to see how teachers do what they do successfully. Administrators, counselors, social workers, and even superintendents can be remarkable supporters for teachers by coming to classrooms—to work with students on a project, play piano for them, or just talk to them. When done in cooperation with teachers, such encounters add a great deal to a school’s collaborative climate.

Give Teachers a Picture of Students’ Realities

Through tapping the insights of social workers and district demographic services, and through family surveys, find out what household income and resources are like in your area and what resources students probably do or don’t have at home. Share with your faculty facts like the income ranges of your families or the absence of grocery stores or libraries in their neighborhoods—details that clarify what it means to be poor.¹

This information will help teachers avoid assumptions about what students have in their homes and appreciate the resilience of youth from high-poverty families who get to school each day filled with hope and energy.
Advocate for High-Quality Classes

Be aware of how tracking works in your school or district. Are poor students getting slotted into classes for low-skilled students early in their lives? Advocate for low-income kids to receive gifted education services.

Get more teachers into the neediest classrooms. A principal who states publicly that having five classes each containing 45 students is unacceptable—and that he or she will work to change these conditions—wins teachers’ trust.

Offer After-school Programs and Services

Work with teachers to find groups like the YMCA to provide volunteers for your school, so students have supervision and stimulation—including physical activities, art, and academic activities—more hours in the day. Local groups, businesses, and cultural venues will often contribute if approached by the principal or superintendent (see Figure 1.1). Consider providing wraparound services for your low-income students, such as access to medical and mental health professionals.

Communicate Commitment

Make clear that as an administrator, you’re in this for the long haul and will work on long-term solutions to inequity for children in your district. It is important that your entire staff knows you will persist in getting the services and programs your building needs.

Toward Vibrant Classrooms

These are just a few ways educators can ensure students aren’t marginalized by poverty—without making students feel they are a “problem.” Each school district will need to explore what might work in its unique situation. But my hope is that no school ever becomes a place where sleepy children are yelled at or where teachers lose our human compassion. Let’s create vibrant classrooms that tap into the brilliance of each child.
Many documentaries and public television programs (such as A Place at the Table, Viva la Causa, and Why Poverty) show what life is like for families living in poverty—for example, the realities of doubling up with relatives or taking two bus rides to get groceries.

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“It’s cool to do well at Granger,” exclaimed a 16-year-old we interviewed during a break in her daily advisory meeting. “It didn’t used to be that way here, my sister told me … but that’s all different now. I’m hoping to go to the university in two years!”

Located in Washington State’s rural Yakima Valley, Granger High School serves 388 mostly Hispanic students, 89 percent of whom qualify for free or reduced-price lunch. Over the past eight years, the school’s 10th grade reading performance has steadily climbed from fewer than 20 percent of students meeting Washington state standards to nearly 80 percent. Parent attendance at student conferences has grown from a dismal 10 percent to almost 100 percent, and the graduation rate has soared to over 89 percent. As the staff’s expectations of and relationships with students have grown, everything about the school has improved.

Two thousand miles to the east, in Saint Paul, Minnesota, 341 elementary students parade through the impoverished neighborhood
surrounding Dayton’s Bluff Elementary School. They’re celebrating having accomplished their goal of reading a million words in the past year. “Twenty-five books read this year by each of our students, and we’re letting our community know about it!” proudly proclaims Principal Andrew Collins, who leads the K–6 march with a bullhorn, while the students follow with noisemakers and banners.

Dayton’s Bluff has risen from being the lowest-performing elementary school in Saint Paul—and one of the lowest-performing in Minnesota—to becoming a school in which nearly 70 percent of students meet or surpass state standards in reading and 75 percent meet or surpass state standards in math.

From Low- to High-Performing

These schools demonstrate that it’s possible not only to reverse historic trends of underachievement but also to sustain their gains. So how did they do it?

Leaders in schools like Granger and Dayton’s Bluff began their remarkable turnarounds by making tough calls—and many of those decisions were about how to use resources. The budget in a high-performing, high-poverty school is a moral document, reflective of the school’s beliefs about the conditions necessary to sustain success for all students and the adults who serve them. As budgets constrict, school leaders maintain their success by working collaboratively with staff to stay focused on the priorities that guide their work. They know that cuts in critical resources can jeopardize their hard-won gains. Countering these challenges becomes their top leadership priority.

On the basis of a growing body of knowledge that has emerged from the research on school effects (Teddlie & Stringfield, 1993), coupled with more recent analyses of strategies that have guided hundreds of schools in their successful efforts to reverse historic trends of underachievement (Barr & Parrett, 2006; Calkins, Guenther, Belfiore, &
(Lash, 2007; Chenowith, 2007; Duke, 2007), we initiated a study seeking to understand how school leaders’ actions influence a turnaround in low-performing schools.

In addition to Granger High and Dayton’s Bluff, we visited four other high-performing/high-poverty schools: Taft Elementary in Boise, Idaho; P.S./M.S. 124, an elementary school in Queens, New York; Lapewai Elementary on the Nez Perce Reservation in northern Idaho; and Port Chester Middle School in Port Chester, New York. Despite high levels of poverty in their communities, these schools have sustained improvements on multiple measures of student success (achievement test scores, graduation rates, attendance rates, and behavior measures); and national and state organizations have recognized and honored them for their achievements.

An important message reverberates from these successes: A school can indeed overcome the powerful and pervasive effects of poverty on a student’s learning. Sustained improvements usually began with an individual or a small group of leaders committed to equity and the goal of successfully teaching every student.

**Asking the Right Questions**

The economic downturn and the recent passage of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act confront many district and school leaders with the confounding paradox of managing both recession-driven budget cuts and new stimulus funding intended to improve the achievement of underserved students.

Leaders in high-performing/high-poverty schools begin by asking questions. The questions leaders ask fall into three interrelated domains: (1) building the necessary leadership capacity; (2) focusing the staff’s everyday core work on student, professional, and system learning; and (3) creating and fostering a safe, healthy, and supportive learning environment for all. In tough times like these, their questions
may provide valuable guidance for other school leaders facing their
own challenges and opportunities.

Questions About Leadership

Do we have a data system that works for classroom and school leaders?

All schools in the study have implemented data systems to guide their
work. In fact, using data-based decision making was one of the two
most common explanations offered for the schools' success. (The other
was fostering caring relationships.)

Professional development in using data-based decision making,
coupled with establishing measurable goals and developing aggressive
time lines to achieve them, is vital to sustaining Lapwai Elementary’s
success. Concerned about the quality and level of teacher-parent com-
munications, Lapwai staff members decided to set a schoolwide goal to
have weekly contacts with families. They held themselves accountable
by reporting their contacts to the principal, Teri Wagner, who shared
the data at the district’s board of trustees meetings.

Are we eliminating policies and practices that manufacture low
achievement?

Research on the negative effects of low expectations, inequitable
funding, retention, tracking, and mis-assignment to special education
are well documented. All the schools studied confronted such policies
and practices.

When Richard Esparza came to Granger High as principal 10
years ago, changing beliefs about students’ potential was foundational
to all the other actions he took. He began by modeling his belief in stu-
dents’ ability to meet high academic standards and by stating that he
expected the faculty to believe the same thing. He worked with teach-
ers to eliminate a bell-curve mentality—accepting that some students
will fail—and a policy of one-chance testing. Instead, students who fall
below a C in their coursework are now required to get extra help, and they can retake tests until they earn a C or better.

*Have we extended learning time for underachieving students?*

Underachieving students living in poverty require more instructional time to catch up to their higher-achieving peers. All high-performing/high-poverty schools find a way to extend learning time for students who need it. The schools offer a blend of before- and after-school tutoring, weekend and vacation catch-up sessions, summer school and full-day kindergarten, and sheltered classroom support. At Queens's P.S./M.S. 124, for example, school is in session “pretty much five and a half days per week,” according to principal Valarie Lewis. On Saturday mornings, middle school students who need to catch up attend small learning academies.

*Have we reorganized time to better support professional learning?*

Eighty percent of a district's or school's budget is typically allocated toward personnel; becoming a high-performing school therefore requires making significant investments in people. Schools must find their own ways to reorganize time to support the development of communities of practice (Wenger, 1998). They can repurpose time traditionally set aside for faculty meetings, reorganize the schedule to accommodate common planning time, bank time for professional development, or locate funds for ongoing release time.

At Dayton's Bluff Elementary, grade-level teams of teachers use release time to review classroom-based assessment data, discuss instructional strategies, and plan for each upcoming six-week period. As teachers discuss individual students' performance and specific teaching strategies, the school's literacy coach and a district-level instructional coach look on and take part. By participating in collaborative planning sessions, coaches are better able to provide just-in-time support.
Questions About Learning

Does our instructional framework guide curriculum, teaching, assessment, and the learning climate?

Leaders in the schools we studied credit much of their success to a high level of instructional program coherence. Several of the schools began their improvement efforts by adopting a comprehensive school reform model. For example, P.S./M.S. 124 selected Core Knowledge, whose framework emphasizes building students’ knowledge base in world history, geography, civics, literature, science, art, and music.

Schools customized the reform models to better fit their needs. Finding the content to be “too Eurocentric,” teachers at P.S./M.S. 124 have added content relating to Africa, Latin America, and Asia. In addition, they have incorporated knowledge about the various ethnicities and cultures represented in their student body.

Do we have common assessments, and do we embrace assessment literacy?

High-performing/high-poverty schools establish clear learning targets and engage their students in activities that help them acquire assessment literacy. These activities include selecting individual learning benchmarks, compiling portfolios, making public presentations of work, completing reflective revisions, and participating in student-led conferences.

Leaders in the Lapwai School District use professional learning time to focus on developing assessment literacy and common classroom-based assessments. At Granger High, the initiation of student-led conferences not only improved students’ understanding of their own learning, but also significantly improved parents’ attendance rates at their child’s conferences.
Are all students proficient in reading?

Second only to safety, ensuring that all students develop literacy skills became a priority in most of the schools we studied. Designing a comprehensive approach to reading improvement may entail conducting an analysis of students’ unique needs (for example, those of English language learners); developing an understanding of the influence of poverty on reading achievement (Neuman, 2008); and examining the research base, especially concerning adolescent literacy (see Slavin, Cheung, Groff, & Lake, 2008).

All teachers at Port Chester Middle School consider themselves to be English language arts teachers. To sell this idea, school leaders began by helping teachers understand that students’ inability to read proficiently was a significant barrier to learning the content the teachers were attempting to teach. Now all teachers teach 24 bundled key reading and writing skills.

Do we provide targeted interventions?

The schools we studied use data to identify students who need before-, during-, and after-school small-group and individual tutoring; self-paced interventions using technology; one-on-one academic advising and coaching; homework support; or additional assessment time.

Taft Elementary in Idaho focuses on developing literacy skills early. The school offers full-day kindergarten and keeps class sizes small. In addition to the district-adopted reading program, Taft assesses the proficiency of all students and, if necessary, assigns students to one of three different reading interventions that provide different approaches to literacy learning.

Questions About the Learning Environment

Is our school safe?

In all the schools studied, particularly the secondary schools, leaders emphasized safety for students and staff as a prerequisite for learning.
At Port Chester Middle School, principal Carmen Macchia explained, “In the beginning … kids would hold their bladders all day out of fear of what might happen to them in the bathrooms.” The school established structures, such as the frequent presence of school staff in bathrooms and hallways, to help students become accountable for their actions. The staff’s expectations and modeling of appropriate behavior and other good citizenship practices encouraged students to help promote school safety, which authentically contributed to changing students’ perspectives from one of “ratting out” their friends to one of civic responsibility to their school.

*Do we understand the influence of poverty on student learning?*

Although the concept of a culture of poverty has been refuted (Gorski, 2008), too many educators continue to believe that people who live in poverty share a common set of beliefs, values, attitudes, and behaviors (such as a poor work ethic, alcohol or drug abuse, and apathy toward school). To counter these myths, leaders in the schools we studied use data and research to support high expectations of students. An ethos of professional accountability for learning is tangible in all the participating schools, in contrast to schools that blame students and families for poor achievement.

When Taft Elementary School welcomed more than 60 refugee students one year from 16 different countries, principal Susan Williamson knew the importance of developing an understanding of the cultural and socioeconomic characteristics of the refugee students’ families (Budge & Parrett, 2009). Enlisting the help of a former refugee whom the refugee community trusted, Susan and a small team of teacher leaders conducted multiple visits to each student’s home. Although the purpose of these visits was to invite students to a two-week summer camp designed to familiarize the students with Taft and foster friendships, the visits also helped teachers gain a much better understanding of the cultural and socioeconomic influences on these students’ lives.
Have we fostered a bond between students and school?

The high-performing/high-poverty schools we studied provided “protective factors” that help build a bond between students and school. Paramount among these factors is promoting caring relationships between adults and students as well as among peers.

Although Granger is a small high school serving only 388 students, many students felt disconnected from school. Former principal Esparza’s focus on personalization led the staff to reorganize the school day to include a well-designed advisory program. All professional staff members, including the principal, advise a small group of 18–20 students four days each week and stay with those students for four years, navigating their path toward graduation and beyond. The advisory teacher regularly reviews each student’s progress through school-generated biweekly reports, holding students accountable for staying on track. Advisors identify any student who falls behind and work with the student’s teachers to intervene. “It’s all about relationships with the kids,” explained current principal Paul Chartrand, “and the advisory program is key to our continued success.”

Other high-performing/high-poverty schools provide additional protective factors, such as restructuring into small learning communities and removing economic barriers to participation in various extracurricular activities. Some schools work to counter the adverse effects of student mobility by dedicating staff to the task of welcoming and placing new students.

Do we engage parents, families, and the community?

High-performing/high-poverty schools do not go it alone. Instead, they build positive and productive relationships with students’ families and the broader neighborhood and community. In partnership with the city of Saint Paul and the Amherst H. Wilder Foundation, Dayton’s Bluff Elementary provides students and families with a recreational facility
and the services of a nurse-practitioner, dentist, and social worker at the school.

Leaders in the schools we studied engage stakeholders in various ways—for example, hiring a school/family/community liaison, offering adult mentoring and community service learning programs, ensuring two-way communication between the school and the family, and using the school as a community center.

Tough Decisions, Tough Times

Leaders in the six schools we studied expressed confidence that the processes they had in place would guide their decisions regarding the use of possible stimulus funding. The principals voiced concern for two top priorities: (1) maintaining and perhaps adding staff, because keeping personnel is key to a low student-teacher ratio and caring relationships in school; and (2) providing targeted support to the students who need it most. “Target the lowest-performing kids,” cautioned one principal, “even if the stimulus money doesn’t last forever.”

Leaders in high-performing/high-poverty schools recognize their efforts and successes as a continuing journey. Whether surviving budget cuts, carefully targeting new stimulus funding, or both, leaders in all schools may benefit from reflecting on the questions leaders ask in high-performing/high-poverty schools to support and sustain student success.

References


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Students who live with poverty often come to school with problems that affect how well they learn. Despite caring about these students, teachers may feel ill-equipped to give these students the help they most need. How can teachers support these students so that they can find a path out of poverty and what role might schools have in giving students an equal chance at success, despite their unequal beginnings?

EL authors have tackled these questions from a variety of angles, looking at systemic problems that go beyond schools and offering suggestions for what classroom teachers might do.

Whose Problem Is It?

Richard Rothstein (“Whose Problem is Poverty?”) asserts that when we focus solely on school reforms as the cure for the achievement gap, we
suppress discussion—and even awareness—of how the physical and social deprivations of poverty limit achievement. He notes:

Teachers see for themselves how poor health or family economic stress impedes students’ learning. Teachers may nowadays be intimidated from acknowledging these realities aloud and may, in groupthink obedience, repeat the mantra that “all children can learn.” But nobody is fooled. Teachers still know that although all children can learn, some learn less well because of poorer health or less-secure homes. (p. 42)

- Discuss a time when you observed that a student’s stressful home conditions (from poverty or some other source) impeded his or her learning. Were you able to make up for these conditions by redoubling your efforts at good instruction targeted toward this student’s needs?
- When you have taught students from impoverished families, did inadequate health care, frequent moves, or lack of adult attention make achievement more difficult? Describe what you observed and how you responded.
- Do you think closing the achievement gap is within teachers’ and administrators’ control—or is this a myth, as Rothstein believes? If you believe that educators can’t completely close the gap even through stellar practice, what keeps you striving to do your best?

A Place for Ability Grouping?

Halley Potter (“Boosting Achievement by Pursuing Diversity”) writes about the benefits of creating socioeconomically diverse schools. Read her discussion of whether ability grouping has a place in such schools and her examples of how some successfully integrated schools tackle the issue of differentiating instruction without resorting to resegregating students through rigid ability grouping.
• What is your opinion of ability grouping in schools? Do the benefits of clustering students by ability level outweigh its disadvantages (diluting diversity and possibly keeping students stuck in low-level work)?

• What kind of ability grouping does your school or department engage in? How does it affect students? If you’ve been teaching more than 10 years, have you seen the tendency to group students by ability change over the years?

• Talk about the issue that Potter raises of encouraging students from different backgrounds or races to interact together socially. In your school, do students tend to self-segregate at lunchtime or to socialize? If so, has your school tried anything to break down this tendency? (Your group may want to consider reading sections of Beverly Daniel Tatum’s 2003 book, *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?*).

**Rising Segregation—and its Consequences**

Several articles discuss the reality that neighborhoods and schools across the United States are increasingly segregated by both race and income. “Students without money,” writes Susan B. Neuman in “The American Dream: Slipping Away?”, “are increasingly confined to homogeneously poor neighborhoods, yielding a density of material deprivation that is unprecedented in our history.”

The stakes of segregation by income are high: Research shows that students from impoverished families tend to fare worse academically in high-poverty schools and better in schools with economically mixed student bodies.

Kids who grow up in neighborhoods with a high concentration of poverty are set back as readers, Neuman argues. Their environment offers fewer books, less enriching literacy work in school, and may even lack street signs that help develop the sight-to-sound connection.
Neuman and a colleague researched in detail the amount of literacy-related resources—from street signs free of graffiti to interactions with adults in the public library—available to children in one wealthy and one poor neighborhood in Philadelphia. Disparities were striking: the rich neighborhood boasted far more stores selling children’s books, a wider selection of books within schools, more libraries, and so on.

- Does the pattern Neuman found bear up in your area? Think of a wealthy neighborhood and a poor one within a 30-minute drive of your school. Pooling your group’s knowledge, do a rough estimate of how many bookstores (or stores that sell educational toys or kids’ books) exist in each area. What’s each library—especially the children’s area—like (how big, how accessible, and in what sort of condition)?

- Take a short walk or drive through both communities; note how much inviting print (street signs, attractive store signs, and so on) you see in each. Observe for a brief time each area’s public library; what do you notice?

- Consider Neuman’s suggestions for “changing the trajectory” of how a lack of resources weakens the reading skills of poor children. Particularly if your school serves kids who live in neighborhoods similar to the Badlands, how might you carry out these suggestions in your school? Can you identify one change you could implement throughout the coming school year?

- Discuss Neuman’s argument that to really change things, we must “un-level the playing field” by proving more resources and supports to kids in poor neighborhoods. Do you agree?

- For more perspectives, look at the special section on resegregation, featuring Jonathan Kozol, Beverly Daniel Tatum, and other leading voices, in the November 2010 *Educational Leadership*.
Small Changes with Big Benefits

The task of creating equal education opportunities in a society full of uneven opportunities can seem nearly impossible. But, as Richard E. Nisbett reminds us in “Think Big, Bigger … and Smaller,” even small changes can yield long-term benefits for students who start out at a disadvantage.

Consider one of the low-tech interventions Nisbett describes that has been shown to improve the school achievement of struggling students. When teachers clearly tell students about the powerful role that effort—as opposed to purely natural intelligence—plays in getting high grades, and show students that they themselves can build stronger neural connections through applying themselves to learning, even chronically failing students start to work harder and do better.

- Tune in to the messages that your school communicates to kids. Examine the language used to recognize high academic achievers, descriptions of famous people in textbooks and class readings, or even the comments you write on student work—about what leads to accomplishments: native ability or hard work? What might give students the message that only people with special abilities can achieve? How might you infuse messages about the importance of strong effort in a way that would motivate students who are far behind and discouraged?

- Spend a class or two talking with students about how the brain develops and how, through applying effort, they can actually strengthen their own intelligence (You may find the December 2009/January 2010 EL article “How to Teach Students about the Brain” and the accompanying downloadable handout for students helpful). Are your students aware that intelligence is malleable, or do they perceive it as a fixed commodity they either possess or don’t? What about the low achievers in your class?
Answering the Tough Questions

In “Tough Questions for Tough Times,” William Parrett and Kathleen Budge explain how high-poverty schools have raised student achievement by closely examining their policies and practices.

- According to Parrett and Budge, a school’s budget is “a moral document” that reveals what the school believes is necessary for student success. Do you agree with this statement? How can your school spend money more wisely?
- Parrett and Budge provide several questions about leadership, learning, and the learning environment for school leaders to think about. Choose one question from each category and examine how your school stacks up. What are you doing well, and how might you improve?
- Select one of Parrett and Budge’s questions for more focused study. Gather data that helps answer the question, analyze the data, and develop a list of strategies for improvement.

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Related ASCD Resources

At the time of publication, the following ASCD resources were available (ASCD stock numbers appear in parentheses). For up-to-date information about ASCD resources, go to www.ascd.org. You can search the complete archives of Educational Leadership at http://www.ascd.org/el.

ASCD EDge®
Exchange ideas and connect with other educators interested in math on the social networking site ASCD EDge at http://ascdedge.ascd.org.

Print Products
Hanging In: Strategies for Teaching the Students Who Challenge Us Most by Jeffrey Benson (#114013)
Excellence Through Equity: Five Principles of Courageous Leadership to Guide Achievement for Every Student by Alan M. Blankstein and Pedro Noguera with Lorena Kelly (#116070)
Creating the Opportunity to Learn: Moving from Research to Practice to Close the Achievement Gap by A. Wade Boykin & Pedro Noguera (#107016)
Meeting Students Where They Live: Motivation in Urban Schools by Richard L. Curwin (#109110)
Engaging Students with Poverty in Mind: Practical Strategies for Raising Achievement by Eric Jensen (#113001)
Teaching with Poverty in Mind: What Being Poor Does to Kids’ Brains and What Schools Can Do About It by Eric Jensen (#109074)
Turning High-Poverty Schools into High-Performing Schools by William H. Parrett & Kathleen M. Budge (#109003)
Fostering Resilient Learners: Strategies for Creating a Trauma-Sensitive Classroom by Kristin Souers with Pete Hall (#116014)

PD Online® Courses
Teaching with Poverty in Mind (#PD11OC139M)

For more information: send e-mail to member@ascd.org; call 1-800-933-2723 or 703-578-9600, press 2; send a fax to 703-575-5400; or write to Information Services, ASCD, 1703 N. Beauregard St., Alexandria, VA 22311-1714 USA.
This collection of articles from *Educational Leadership* brings together fifteen insightful and passionate pieces that will help you better understand how poverty affects learning and what educators can do to make a positive difference for each learner every day. The authors examine the existence and persistence of economic inequality, demythologize poverty as a culture, explore interventions large and small, and discuss practical ways to engage, support, and challenge students living in poverty. With candor and compassion, they inspire us to think creatively about ways to help these young people see and achieve their full potential.