# Poverty and Education

From a War on Poverty to the Majority of Public School Students Living in Poverty

A Report on the Spring 2015 ASCD Whole Child Symposium

**WHOLE CHILD**
**SYMPOSIUM**
The ASCD Whole Child Initiative

**ASCD**®

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ASCD is the global leader in developing and delivering innovative programs, products, and services that empower educators to support the success of each learner. Comprising 125,000 members—superintendents, principals, teachers, professors, and advocates from more than 138 countries—the ASCD community also includes 56 affiliate organizations. The nonprofit's diverse, nonpartisan membership is its greatest strength, projecting a powerful, unified voice to decision makers around the world. Learn more about how ASCD supports educators as they learn, teach, and lead at www.ascd.org.
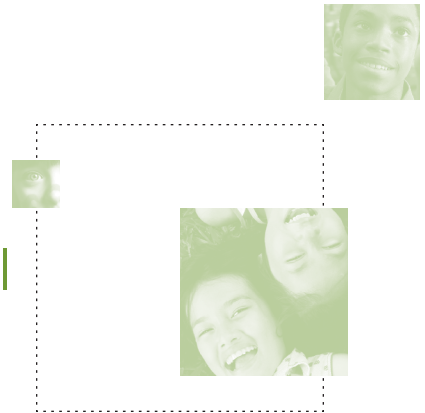
**Whole Child Initiative**

Launched in 2007, ASCD's Whole Child Initiative is an effort to change the conversation about education from a focus on narrowly defined academic achievement to one that promotes the long-term development and success of children. Through the initiative, ASCD helps educators, families, community members, and policymakers move from a vision about educating the whole child to sustainable, collaborative action. ASCD is joined in this effort by Whole Child Partner organizations representing the education, arts, health, policy, and community sectors. Learn more at www.ascd.org/wholechild.

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A Report on the Spring 2015 ASCD Whole Child Symposium

## ASCD Places Educators at Forefront of Discussion: The Panelists

ASCD's Spring 2015 Whole Child Symposium brought together education experts across research, systems and school administration, teaching, publishing, and nonprofit advocacy to examine how poverty affects learning—and what policymakers, community leaders, and educators can do to address this increasing trend line and ameliorate its corrosive effects.

- **Tiffany Anderson** serves as superintendent of the Jennings (Mo.) School District. Anderson has been a public school administrator for 18 years, and she is committed to eliminating the achievement gap that contributes to the cycle of generational poverty. She has improved achievement as well as closed achievement gaps in rural, urban, and suburban public school districts. Anderson was also named an *Education Week Leader to Learn From*.

- **Kathleen Budge** (@kathleenbudge) is an associate professor at Boise State University where her scholarly activity focuses on leadership, poverty, and rural education. She is also the coauthor of *Turning High-Poverty Schools into High-Performing Schools* (ASCD, 2012).

- **Brittney Maness** teaches 4th grade science at the 150-student Clinch School in Tennessee. The Clinch School is a rural Title 1 school in Sneedville, Clinch County.

- **Judy Seltz** is the executive director of ASCD. Prior to becoming executive director, Seltz served as the chief officer of Constituent Services and the deputy executive director. In that capacity she directed the association's work with its affiliates and other constituent groups in the United States and across the globe, as well as oversaw the association's public policy, governance, and Whole Child programs.

- **Steve Suitts** is a senior fellow of the Southern Education Foundation, the nation's oldest education foundation founded in 1867 to advance fairness and excellence in education. Suitts is the author of more than 125 books, articles, and monographs, including his most recent report, *A New Majority Research Bulletin: Low-Income Students Now Have a Majority in the Nation's Public Schools* (Southern Education Foundation, 2015).

- **Sean Slade** (@seantslade) has more than 25 years of experience in education in a career that encompasses four continents and five countries. Slade serves as the director of ASCD's Whole Child programs and promotes the integration of learning and health in schools and the benefits of school-community relationships. He coauthored the 2014 ASCD Arias publication, *School Climate Change: How do I build a positive environment for learning?*

- **Luis Torres** (@principal55) is the principal at Community School (CS) 55 in the Bronx, N.Y. He is responsible for turning CS 55, once the lowest performing school in New York City, into a model school. Torres was also a 2011 ASCD Outstanding Young Educator Award winner.

# Introduction

The United States' longstanding narrative around poverty, especially its damaging effects on children and their ability to succeed academically, has often been depicted as a problem confined to specific regions or localities, such as inner-city neighborhoods, and occurring mostly within specific ethnic or minority populations.

Recent research helps debunk myths such as these and forces our nation to confront a harsh new reality: For the first time in recent history, the majority of U.S. public school students now live in poverty. According to the Southern Education Foundation (SEF), 51 percent of the students attending the nation's public schools now come from low-income households.

SEF Senior Fellow Steve Suitts, who authored the study ("A New Majority Research Bulletin: Low-Income Students Now a Majority in the Nation's Public Schools"), says this "defining moment" in public school enrollment is the "consequence of a steadily growing trend that has persisted over several decades."

According to Suitts, in 1989, less than 32 percent of public school students were classified as low income. By 2000, the number had climbed to over 38 percent. By 2006, the national rate was 42 percent. The Great Recession propelled that figure up to 48 percent. In 2013, the number crossed the threshold to become 51 percent.

> "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, because when one group becomes the majority of our students, they define what that future is going to be in education more than any other group."
>
> —Steve Suitts



**VIDEO CLIP**
http://bcove.me/79f9wwmu

In the spring of 2015, ASCD held the third in its Whole Child Symposia series to explore how poverty affects the ability of children to learn and achieve to their fullest potential. Education researchers, school administrators, classroom teachers, authors, and nonprofit leaders were invited to share their expertise and recommendations for how policymakers, community leaders, and educators can positively address the increasing numbers of public students living in poverty.

"The purpose of our Whole Child Symposium . . . is really to be proactive in the education debate as opposed to reactive, to discuss the most relevant issues that need to be discussed, and [to put] educators back in front of the education debate."

—Sean Slade

# Why This Topic?

The negative and wide-ranging effects of poverty are hard to ignore. Poverty affects our economy, overburdens our health care and criminal justice systems, and the ability of our education system to ensure that children achieve to high levels. In a January 2015 opinion piece, New York Times writer Charles Blow talked about the need to reduce our "obscene level of childhood poverty." Blow's commentary referenced a Children's Defense Fund report ("Ending Child Poverty Now") that pointed out the "corrosive cruelties of childhood poverty: worse health and educational outcomes, impaired cognitive development and the effects of 'toxic stress' on brain functions."

Blow implored us: "Surely we can all agree that working to end child poverty— or at least severely reduce it—is a moral obligation of a civilized society."

ASCD's Whole Child Spring 2015 Symposium created the forum for important conversations about the harmful effects of poverty on a child's ability to learn and what we can do as educators to counteract them.

> "If we do not address poverty as it relates to our children's ability to learn, then it seems like we are going to bear the consequences of not dealing with it."
>
> —Sean Slade



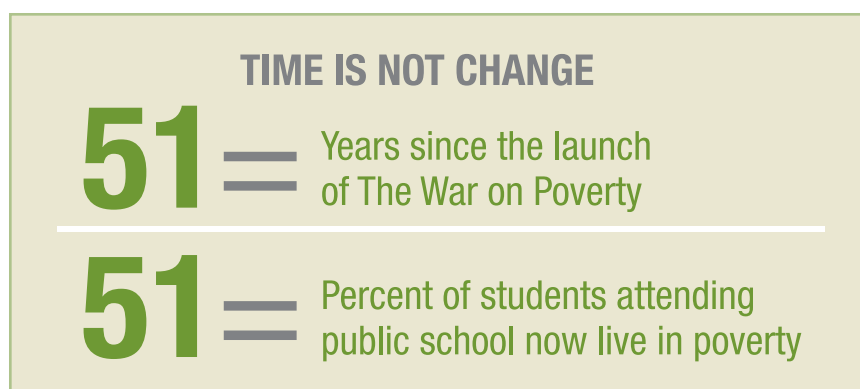**VIDEO CLIP**
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# A Shift from the War on Poverty to a War on the Poor?

In 1964, President Lyndon B. Johnson declared "unconditional war on poverty in America." While acknowledging the difficulty of "winning" such a war, Johnson said that the United States "shall not rest until that war is won. The richest nation on earth can afford to win it. We cannot afford to lose it."

Johnson's War on Poverty focused attention on and targeted resources toward eradicating poverty, including the expansion of Social Security and the start of Medicare as well as the creation of the Elementary and Secondary School Act (ESEA). Title I of the ESEA was established to direct targeted federal resources toward high-poverty, high-needs schools.

Fastforward 51 years: That same number (51) now comes to signify the percentage of public school students who live in poverty.

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**TIME IS NOT CHANGE**

**51** = Years since the launch of The War on Poverty

**51** = Percent of students attending public school now live in poverty

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So what happened—or more importantly—what *hasn't* happened over the last five decades to lead us to this point? How have we come to this egregious moment where the majority of children who attend public school live in poverty?

> "I think that there was a brief moment at the beginning, and a few years [during] the War on Poverty, when there really was a national commitment to changing the lives of poor people. I think there was a sense that we were in this together, that unless we could really make this War on Poverty work, that we would all fail."
>
> —Judy Seltz

**VIDEO CLIP**
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"We had massive cutbacks in the programs that were to uplift poor families and low-income families. And so by the late 1980s, we began to see this clear growth in the return of a substantial number of low-income students enrolled in the public schools, and it has continued. And it will continue."

—Steve Suitts

"I look at this 50-year mark as an opportunity to look back and see if we can't do this again, do it differently, do it better, and work with some persistence across communities with a real commitment to each child and each family. Public education is so entangled with our future economic development and health that if we don't fix public education for every kid who walks through the door, it's a really bleak future."

—Judy Seltz

Researchers like Suitts say that the only things that will halt increasing numbers of public school students living in poverty are profound, systemic changes in economic, social, and education policy as well as in our educational practices. Ensuring equitable funding of our nation's public schools, regardless of zip code or geographic location, and mounting national outcry against the normalization of poverty seem like good places to begin.

# Inequitable Funding Mechanisms

For most public school systems in America, the majority of funding is based upon the collection of local property taxes, so the ability of a child to receive a high-quality, whole child education often depends upon her zip code.

> "We have a system of financing of education in this country in which the end result means that the students who have the greatest needs get the least resources."
>
> —Steve Suitts



**VIDEO CLIP**
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> "The whole funding system for public education needs to be rethought . . . most school districts get most of their dollars from local property taxes, except in some states where the state pays between 60 and 70 percent of the cost of public education. And that creates inequities in neighboring districts; particularly the inner rings of a lot of large cities are . . . really underfunded. And the ripple effects of that in terms of recruiting quality staff, being able to maintain and repair and build new buildings just goes on and on."
>
> —Judy Seltz

**VIDEO CLIP**
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"If public education in this country fails, the nation fails, and that is the message we have to come to grips with.

—Steve Suitts

## Inflexible Funding Formulas

School system leaders such as Tiffany Anderson know firsthand what's broken with our nation's education policies and how to fix them to better direct much-needed resources to public schools serving children in poverty. Local flexibility is a top priority, according to Anderson.

"Title I is so broken. [There are] so many different rules that reduce the flexibility. So, the money looks like it's there, but the flexibility isn't there to use it how you need to use it. I would just love a listening ear from someone who actually can help fix the policies."

—Tiffany Anderson

**VIDEO CLIP**
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Title I of the ESEA (now known as No Child Left Behind) provides federal funding to local school districts to help them meet the educational needs of disadvantaged students, primarily those living in poverty. Districts and schools can use Title I funds to support extra instruction in reading and mathematics, the hiring of additional teachers, instructional materials, and after-school and summer programs to extend and reinforce the regular school curriculum.

Many education advocates believe that serious flaws exist in the formula by which these funds are distributed. According to the Formula Fairness Campaign, "one provision sends more money for each disadvantaged student in a large school district and less money for each disadvantaged student in a small district, even if the poverty rate in the smaller district is higher than the poverty rate in the larger district." This practice, referred to as "number weighting," can result in funds being taken from small schools with the most poverty and given to big schools with the least poverty.

Another provision of Title I results in more federal money being allocated to states that spend more per pupil on public education (i.e., "wealthy states") and less to states that spend little (i.e., "poor states"), according to the Formula Fairness Campaign. The result is that legislatures in states where support for education is weakest are able to dictate how much federal funding goes to help disadvantaged students.

Legislative and regulatory changes to Title I that better support the targeting and use of Title I funds allocations would seem to be a solution worth working toward.

# Never Underestimate the Power of Relationships

Yet beyond local flexibility in how to spend funds targeted toward poverty and education, Anderson believes that you have to tackle three things to improve student outcomes: relationships, pedagogy, and curriculum. But she says that relationship building is the most important skill that educators need to possess—and produces positive dividends. Relationship building—between students and teachers as well as between the school and the community—can be enacted today and with little to no cost.

"Kids will work hard for you if they trust you; they won't if they don't. Guess what? Adults are the same way."

—Tiffany Anderson



**VIDEO CLIP**
http://bcove.me/ir9uh128

Anderson's district is one of the highest-poverty, highest-minority schools in her entire state. For teachers who work in her system, she said, priority No. 1 is scheduling home visits with families identified as being in poverty.

"Each child receives a backpack of supplies and is told by the teachers how excited they are that the children will be coming [to their classrooms]."

—Tiffany Anderson

After the visits, administrators talk with the teachers about what they observed, heard, and talked about during their home visits.

"You may have seen a dim home where you don't have a lot of bright light, a home with no colors. And so, when they come into your classroom, if you're going to decorate with all these colors and things, kids may just be jumping off the wall. You'll be saying, 'something's wrong with the kids.' No, something is wrong with you and what you did with that classroom. So, we talk about how do you greet your students and how do you build a relationship."

—Tiffany Anderson

To strengthen parent participation and engagement, Anderson provides practical, much-needed incentives: Each of her schools is equipped with washers and dryers, and parents who visit their child's class can wash one free load of laundry per day per visit. Groceries are exchanged for volunteerism.

"You cannot get sandwiched into the conversation that resources are too small and parents aren't involved. That is reality. But we can control the environment in our classrooms in a way that helps lessen that opportunity and access gap."

—Tiffany Anderson

Luis Torres turned the lowest-performing school in New York City into a model school. Torres could be described as a kind of school–community matchmaker. He looks at unmet community needs and finds ways to meet them inside the physical walls of his school building.

"We actually have a hospital in the school with a nurse, doctor, dentist, [and] psychologist in the building. . . . What we've done in our building is what I like to call 'community matching.'"

—Luis Torres

"I've become the community leader. I've had to literally step up and become the community voice. I'm the voice of the voiceless right now in my community."

—Luis Torres

**VIDEO CLIP**
http://bcove.me/67iovlvf

Kathleen Budge learned a lot about communities in poverty when researching and writing her book, *Turning High-Poverty Schools into High-Performing Schools*. She acknowledged that our society fosters deeply entrenched stereotypes about people who live in poverty.

"As educators . . . our theory of action, our mental map cannot help but be affected by that. So, we're going to have to always work against that, and it doesn't cost us any money. We can get on the Internet and educate ourselves. We can build relationships. The most powerful thing by far is building relationships with people who are living in situations that we may be very unfamiliar with."

—Kathleen Budge

For Brittney Maness, building relationships with her fellow school-based educators leads to fostering better teacher-student relationships.

"We have four high school faculty members. We have a math department, science department, history, and English. And together, we really work to know what the child goes through on a daily basis. . . . I know everything that there is to know about these kids."

—Brittney Maness

**VIDEO CLIP**
http://bcove.me/t9fo800a

The takeaway: Relationships are everything, and building them does not require a huge financial investment. And the human resources expanded in creating, nurturing, and growing them would seem to pay dividends that defy expectations.

## Cultural Competency 101

Educators must better understand poverty and its effects on the ability of students to learn so that they can reach, motivate, and adapt their teaching practices appropriately.

"One of the things that . . . is so important for teachers and principals to have influence in these kids' lives is to believe that kids aren't *of* poverty. . . . When I talk about a 'culture' of poverty . . . if we think about culture as norms, beliefs, and behaviors, people that live in poverty are as diverse in those things as people who live in any other socioeconomic strata in our country."

—Kathleen Budge

**VIDEO CLIP**
http://bcove.me/f1n997hr

But living *in* poverty is not being *of* poverty, says Kathleen Budge. There is a difference, but it is a critical difference. A teacher must know their students but—with regards to poverty—cannot assume nor respond as if this environment is a culture.

Referring to poverty as a "culture" inadvertently assumes that every student experiences or identifies with an impoverished environment the same way. The word choice conflates children with their living conditions, rather than seeing them as individuals with specific backgrounds, interests, relationships, fears, joys, and motivations. Education that is designed and targeted to each singular child—rather than the broad environments they live in—provides the best antidote to poverty by engaging them in their own successes.

"Although that seems like . . . maybe splitting hairs, being in something is different than being of it.  And there's such a bigger, I think a more . . . hopeful message that's very real when we think about separating kids' growing identities [from] their living conditions."

—Kathleen Budge

This ecosystem shared by students, their home lives, and the school is a dynamic one. A student's environment—including their family, neighborhood, social, and local communities, will shape the culture in the school and, in turn, its ability to engage and promote the child. Schools can be a locus of change for a community, but the community can also be a locus of change for the schools. We must encourage that change to be powerful, positive, and focused on the success of each child.

"There's this belief that the schools will fix the communities. And somewhere along the line people have stopped investing in the communities around the schools."

—Luis Torres

"We have very high standards in our schools, but if the standards in the community do not match the standards of the school, what happens is you have a cycle of failure. Everything you teach in the school for students not to do, they're retaught to do when they go back to their communities. We have to start pushing for the communities . . . to be invested in [their schools].

—Luis Torres



**VIDEO CLIP**
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Johnson's war on the condition of poverty has become today's "War on the Poor," which disparages and depersonalizes those living in poverty, and assumes that some are less disserving of economic security than others. A simple shift in our thinking—that each child is our own child—could influence how we collectively work to better educate children in poverty.

# My Kids vs. Those Kids

Author Robert Putnam's new book, *Our kids: The American dream in crisis* (Simon & Schuster, 2015), details the United States' growing inequality ("opportunity") gap, which has been emerging for the past 25 years. Americans have shared a longstanding belief that everyone, regardless of their circumstances, should have an equal shot at improving their situation. Putnam's book details how and why this slice of the American dream is becoming increasingly impossible to reach.

> "Putnam asserts that we're moving away as a society from seeing everybody as our kids and we're moving towards this more myopic view of our kids are 'those kids in front of me' or literally they're our kids that live in my neighborhood, my street, and my house."

—Sean Slade



**VIDEO CLIP**
http://bcove.me/uhs3u9es

> "I think it's easier to be blind to a lot of diversity around us."

—Judy Seltz

> "I think there's also a sense of competition that creates this division between my kids and other kids. Every parent, every grandparent, every uncle and aunt wants that child that they care about to succeed. And getting them in the right kindergarten and the right school district, all of that is a very familybased decision. But what we don't quite yet come to terms with is the whole country has to improve a lot more, folks, if we're going to have in a global economy a competitive workforce."

—Steve Suitts

# Who Can Do What?

What are the roles that society, the education sector, and school systems and individual schools play in countering the effects of poverty on a child's ability to receive a high quality education?

> "I think as a society we need to commit ourselves to holding accountable the policymakers in this city and in the state capital to the fundamental notion that . . . that a child is born with equal worth. And if we believe that, then we will . . . insist that policymakers get out of the dysfunction and build an education system that this country [that] is as good as the principles and the beliefs that we hold dearest in our democracy."
>
> —Steve Suitts



**VIDEO CLIP**
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> "I think that one of the things that educators can do is use their voice outside of the classroom. Nobody can tell the story better about what schools need and what kids need than educators who work with them every day."
>
> —Judy Seltz

"From a district standpoint, it's essential that we continue to be the voice . . . as well as insist upon changes being made. . . . We must continue as a district to be creative in how we utilize resources so that needs are met, but at the same time we must continue to bring the voices to the table. I just say speak truth to power to insist upon some changes being made if we are going to move together as a nation."

—Tiffany Anderson

"Those people [who] are living in the affluent communities have to understand when your child goes to college, who's going to be there? When you send them out into society to live on their own, who's going to be around them? Who's going to make up their community that they're living in?"

—Brittney Maness



**VIDEO CLIP**
http://bcove.me/av5wdwfs

"And as Robert Putman said, 'these are all . . . our kids,' not just those few. They're all our kids."

—Sean Slade

# Summary

When launching the War on Poverty, President Johnson acknowledged that "many Americans live on the outskirts of hope—some because of their poverty, and some because of their color, and all too many because of both." Poverty, Johnson said was a "national problem," one that required a collective response across all levels of government and society. His speech singled out every American to do their part.

Negative stereotypes about people living in poverty appear deeply entrenched, despite the fact that people who live in poverty are as diverse in their norms, beliefs, and behaviors as people who live in any other socioeconomic stratum in the United States. Poverty spans geographical and ethnic boundaries, from urban cities to rural towns. It spans communities that have battled poverty for decades to communities where poverty has arrived recently, unexpectedly, and in a rush. Fifty-one percent of our nation's schoolchildren live in poverty, threatening to become the "new normal" of the public educational experience.

This conversation goes well beyond the goals of equity and fairness—although a strong argument could be made that these two goals should be enough to spur collective action. We ignore the corrosive effects of poverty on our nation's children to our own peril. As Steve Suitts said, "It's a matter of our national future, because when one group becomes the majority of our students, they define what that future is going to be in education more than any other group."

# Actions

Addressing the multifaceted challenges that poverty imposes upon children can seem daunting if not impossibly complex. Nevertheless, there are a number of specific actions policymakers can undertake to have direct and profound impact on the education, well-being, and conditions in which children in poverty live.

## Fully Fund Title I

While the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) is ostensibly education legislation, it is also in essence an anti-poverty program. Indeed, it was first conceived and passed as part of President Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty legislative package. Title I is the cornerstone of federal aid to K–12 schools and provides supplemental funding to local school districts to help meet the educational needs of students in high-poverty schools.

No Child Left Behind (NCLB) authorized $25 billion in appropriations for Title I in fiscal year (FY) 2007, the last year the law referenced a specific fiscal year and authorization amount. The current appropriation for Title I overall in FY15 is $15.5 billion. As Congress noted when NCLB was passed, "Such funding [the authorization level goal] . . . is critical to helping schools close the achievement gap and low-income students achieve and succeed academically."

Notwithstanding this specific authorization level in the current iteration of ESEA (albeit eight fiscal years old), many experts estimate the total amount necessary to fully fund Title I to properly serve the more than 11 million eligible children would require an annual expenditure of $50 billion. While this is a formidable investment, national leaders should prioritize the funds to both ameliorate the effects of poverty on children and close the achievement gap with more sustained and targeted educational supports.

## Maximize Meal Programs

More than one in five U.S. children live in households that are "food-insecure"—having limited or uncertain access to adequate food—at some point during the year (Child Trends Data Bank, 2014). For some children, the food they receive through the National School Lunch and School Breakfast Programs is their only sustenance. Both direct certification, through which students qualify for free and reduced-price meals by living in households that receive Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program or other benefits, and the community eligibility provision, which allows high-poverty schools to eliminate school meal applications and offer free breakfast and lunch to all students, have simplified meal program eligibility and eliminated barriers to participation. These efforts should remain priorities when the Child Nutrition Act is reauthorized. States with low direct

certification rates should receive support in improving their systems and expanding child access. In addition, the summer nutrition programs, which offer free meals to children in areas where 50 percent or more of students qualify for free or reduced-price lunches, should serve greater proportions of the children who qualify. For example, the reauthorized Child Nutrition Act could provide support for organizations to transport children to meal sites or to serve meals through mobile units.

In addition to increasing program access to school meals, the 2010 reauthorization of the Child Nutrition Act introduced new nutrition guidelines aimed at curbing childhood obesity and improving student health. The rules, which include providing students with more fresh produce and less salt and fat per meal, should be maintained in the next reauthorization; however, adhering to the new requirements has become a financial burden for many school districts. As such, the per-meal reimbursement for school breakfast and lunch should be increased by 35 cents to ensure schools and districts can afford to meet the heightened federal requirements.

## Improve School Climate

High-poverty schools are more likely to struggle with school climate concerns such as absenteeism and truancy, bullying, and trust and engagement issues that can weaken the learning environment (Jensen, 2013; the Center for New York City Affairs, 2014). Meanwhile, education research has consistently demonstrated that a positive school climate is associated with academic achievement, effective risk prevention efforts, and positive youth development (National School Climate Center). Policymakers should support district and school efforts to administer school climate surveys that gather perceptions from students, families, and staff. The resulting data should inform decision making about policies and practices and help establish positive learning environments.

## Improve Access to Advanced Coursework

In 2009–10, schools with more than a 75 percent poverty rate offered significantly fewer Advanced Placement courses than wealthier schools—an average of four courses compared to nearly a dozen at schools with 25 percent poverty or less (Sparks, 2015).

Students in poverty should receive just as much access to relevant and challenging coursework through multiple pathways (e.g., Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate, dual-enrollment programs) as their wealthier counterparts. But simply offering them the same number of rigorous courses isn't enough. They should also be provided with the academic supports they need to thrive and succeed in those courses. In addition, states and districts should cover any costs incurred by enrolling in the courses or by taking associated course exams.
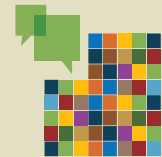
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## WHOLE CHILD
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