

## In The Real World: Poorness Is Not Just a Money Thing

*Children of poverty need schools filled with people who truly believe in and who care about them.*

Christopher Peal

**W**hat causes a kid to give up? I don't mean just not giving full effort, but, plain and simple, shutting it all down and quitting.

Poor kids—primarily those deemed so because they get free or reduced-price lunch—do give up. But so do rich kids. And, for that matter, so do children from the now oft-toted “Main Street” middle class.

Do these children bail on school and life because their family has no money? Do they give up because the work is too hard? Could it be they feel that absolutely no one in the world loves them? Does it happen when they have been beaten down so many times by people or by the system that they just can't pick their heads up one more time? Or do they completely quit when we quit on them?

Rich, poor, or in between, the best thing about kids is just that: They are kids. They all smile the same. They all hug the same. They all play the same. They all believe what we tell them. Deep inside they will try their very hardest if they think we really believe in them—or until we stop offering, stop hoping, and stop caring. I wholeheartedly believe that the poorest child of all has no one who hopes for him.

Poorness is not only about whether a child is wearing the latest Polo jeans straight from Nordstrom or a 3-year-old Salvation Army version. Being poor isn't about holes in shoes, but rather about having holes in a comforting and protective shield around a heart. Poorness is having nothing on the inside to draw from, and no one on the outside to draw it out.

Many have written about being poor and schooling the poor. Some have hit the mark well, while others espouse pure lunacy, especially when touting “no way out” or “suboptimal brain” theories. When each day closes, it is all about the quality of our relationship with these children, the maximization of time and

available resources we give to them, and the standards to which we hold them and ourselves.

Two of my favorite writers on the topic of poverty are Marian Wright Edelman and Jonathan Kozol. Both share a consuming passion for children who are not getting a “fair shake” from schools and school systems. Often, the children they write and speak about are indeed financially poor. These children may not have money, but they also do not have schools filled with people who truly believe in and care about them.

For children in poverty, there is a greater need for extra help, for afterschool programming, for breakfast and lunch programs seven days a week, and for mentoring. But what they need most are people who are truly committed to believing in what they do, and in serving them.

A piece that I encourage every educator to read is Ina Hughs' *A Prayer for Children*. I cannot escape her picture of praying for children “who are born in places we wouldn't be caught dead,” “who go to bed hungry and cry themselves to sleep,” “who can't find bread to steal, who don't have rooms to clean up, whose pictures aren't on anybody's dresser,” and “whose nightmares come in the daytime.” I still choke up—even after having read them literally hundreds of times—when I reach her words about kids who “live and move, but have no being” and “who will grab the hand of *anybody* kind enough to offer it.”

Principals and teachers can never quit on a child. They have to constantly be the ones offering their hands for kids to grab. They deserve our best. Every day. Every hour. Every minute.

---

**Christopher Peal** is principal of Meadowbrook Elementary School in Novi, Michigan. His e-mail address is [christopherpeal@wlcsd.org](mailto:christopherpeal@wlcsd.org).