A principal, superintendent, parent, and social worker weigh in on mitigating the impact of poverty on the nation’s schools and children.
A PRINCIPAL’S VIEW: A HOLISTIC APPROACH

When I close my eyes at the end of the day, I think of my daughters sleeping safely in their beds. They are warm, full, and I know they had an opportunity to complete their homework and feel successful. Then my thoughts drift to my other children—the students at the school I lead, Earl Boyles Elementary. I worry about the ones I know are sleeping in cars or in shelters, waiting until Monday to eat and be warm. The ones who go to bed on someone else’s couch, worrying where they are going to sleep the next night because they couldn’t find shelter for the week. They do not have the opportunity to prepare for the week ahead, do their homework, have warm meals, or wash their clothes.

Although poverty impacts children and families in many ways, a major concern is a child’s ability to learn when they come to school. If a child is hungry, tired, ill, or worried about shelter for the night, it will not matter if you are the best instructional leader in the nation. That child is not prepared or ready to learn.

Poverty impacts my students daily: My school serves 445 students in grades pre-K-5; 78 percent receive free- or reduced-price lunch. I have found that elementary principals must adopt a holistic approach to learning to properly address the effects of poverty on children and their families. By building cohesive, collaborative systems that work together—instead of in isolation—we can change children’s lives.

I rely heavily on community resources and partnerships to positively impact my school community. We are a schoolwide Title I school and have the following supports in place for our families:

- Schools Uniting Neighborhoods (SUN) After-School Program;
- Bi-weekly food pantry;
- Positive Behavioral Intervention Supports (PBIS) programs;
- Full-day kindergarten and half-day preschool;
- School support staff, such as a full-time counselor, part-time health assistant, certified music teacher, and PE teacher;
- 90-minute reading block for all students, with a 30-minute intervention block to individually serve students at their level with specific interventions; and
- Free breakfast through the National School Breakfast Program.

Principals’ roles are varied: instructional leader, operational manager, and parents’ partner in their children’s education. We have to be compassionate to parents’ needs to ensure positive educational outcomes for their children. All of this takes courage, time, a dedicated staff, and engaged families to make a difference. Poverty is like a bone-chilling cold draft that seeps into an old home. We have to be innovative and holistic leaders to insulate our most precious valuable gift: our children.

Ericka Guynes is principal of Earl Boyles Elementary School in Portland, Oregon.

A SUPERINTENDENT’S VIEW: THE IMPACT OF FORMULA FUNDING

The poverty gap—the biggest factor that affects student achievement—is widening in America. The good news is that we know that education disrupts poverty. However, more and more students need extra support to successfully compete in a 21st century global economy. Title I funding helps ensure access to public education, which is a basic civil right.

Title I is a provision rooted in the Elementary and Secondary School Act (ESEA)—a massive, federal program created during the Lyndon Johnson presidential administration’s War on Poverty. The program was designed to distribute federal funding to schools and districts that have a high percentage of students from low-income families. Schools qualify for Title I funding if at least 40 percent of their students come from low-income families. That formula has been used since 1965.

As superintendent, I let my principals know the role of the district office is to support and assist in the Title I application process. The district looks to see that principals, teachers, staff, parents, and students can work as a team. The team goal is to uncover interventions that work for students and to establish a positive working culture for all stakeholders.

It’s also important to recognize that it takes at least three years for positive and substantial change to occur. There is no silver bullet. At the same time, we should focus on services to students that need help the most. Federal dollars are appropriated to ensure that students are given opportunities for success. Thus, tutoring, technology, improved teacher effectiveness, counseling,
and other effective programs can help ensure that funds based on the percentage of students in poverty are going to improve struggling schools, not just increasing test scores.

All children deserve to attend well-financed schools that provide a strong education. Good schools develop great kids who perform well in society. Yet, we know that is not the case in many neighborhoods across the county. Some schools need more help than others. Title I is an important tool that helps provide opportunities for all students. In addition to funding, what is also needed is alignment with other relevant systems, such as health care, housing, and community resources, these can be used to partner with schools to enrich the lives of kids.

Lyndon Johnson’s Great Society made important strides towards the elimination of poverty. As we prepare the next generation of learners to be college- and career-ready, we encourage our government to help develop the capacity by providing leadership and resources.

Marc Jackson is superintendent of the Silver Valley Unified School District in Yermo, California.

A PARENT’S VIEW: SUPPORT FOR FOSTER CHILDREN

Being a foster parent for 15 years has provided me an opportunity to understand how intense, high-poverty environments affect children. Many foster children come from high-poverty situations; often, they are exposed to neglect and abuse. These environments put them at risk for major traumatic stress.

One way educators and school counselors can support foster children is to understand this stress, and seek professional development focused on mitigating it. The local child welfare agency can provide this training for educators.

In addition, educators can develop supportive partnerships to reach out to families. When foster children return to their biological families, who often live in poverty, it’s important for schools to engage these families in the educational process. What I have learned is that engaging these families takes a special commitment from principals and teachers. Social workers are also a big part of the equation. Their intervention before, during, and after foster care goes a long way toward helping the child adjust. The social worker, who is responsible for monitoring the child’s educational progress, should be a part of the team partnership that includes the principal, teacher, student, and parent.

Supportive teams and partnerships should be developed from structures and resources that already exist, such as Parent Teacher Associations (PTAs). PTAs and specialized community PTA groups can address the needs of specific groups of families. For example, the nation’s first Foster Parent PTA in Maryland trains parents living in poverty situations to be more effective educational supporters once they have been reunited with their children. The Foster Parent PTA also organizes traumatic stress training for foster families, who are often provided with only basic-level training on stress and educational support.

Teachers can work with the PTA or another organized parent group (OPG) to identify support areas for both foster families and biological parents. For example, foster parents can be encouraged to attend school functions and, when appropriate, the biological parent should also be invited. At least one parent/teacher or team conference should include the child’s agency social worker. Foster parents should introduce the child to the principal, reinforcing the idea that the child is being supported by a team of individuals.

Families provide more supportive learning environments when they feel their school wants them to be involved. Principals can look to PTAs or OPGs to assist parents in meeting these expectations, and can help identify additional external resources for families, as well as increase family engagement generally.

Strong school-family partnerships help parents support academic achievement, and principals are key in setting a welcoming tone for parents.

Sam Macer is a parent, foster parent, and PTA leader in Baltimore, Maryland.

A SOCIAL WORKER’S VIEW: CREATE OWNERSHIP

Poverty can impact a student’s development in numerous ways: food insecurity, health issues, and exposure to violent neighborhoods, to name a few. Poverty can also impact mental health and social functioning.

Poverty does not create mental health issues, per se, but the presence of numerous psychosocial stressors caused by poverty and families’ limited access to resources can create traumatic experiences and reduce students’ abilities to cope with the difficulties of life. These experiences can lead to mental health diagnoses such as post-traumatic stress disorder and major depressive disorder, which have both been linked to poverty.

It’s also important to recognize that it takes at least three years for positive and substantial change to occur.
What is more, students in resource-poor areas are more likely to lack mentorship, community guidance, safe living and learning environments, quiet study areas, and other external assets that students not living in poverty are more likely to have. In addition, research has shown that students in foster care struggle academically at a greater rate than any other subgroup, and students from families receiving welfare achieve at a lower rate than those who do not receive public assistance.

When working with students living in poverty, school social workers need to establish a relationship built on mutual respect, acceptance, care, and commitment to the community. They should use an empowerment approach when working with students, engaging them in their own change effort. This method of interaction not only creates ownership by students of their own solutions, leading to sustainable change efforts, but also has the potential to help students take ownership of other areas of their lives.

School social workers assess for a range of issues that impact the student’s academic success in the home, school, or community environment. Once barriers to learning are identified, a mutually agreed upon plan to address those barriers is created. These plans may include provision of basic needs and services such as counseling by the school social worker, referrals to school-based and community resources for mental health treatment, parental support, and academic supports.

School social workers may also provide special education services such as assessment and counseling to identified youth. They often uncover barriers to learning that were not the original presenting problem. As a result, they may engage in advocacy for the student as part of an overall school reform effort, create counseling groups with other students, or initiate more universal interventions aligned with Tier I of multi-tiered systems of support. These efforts are intended to help students focus on academics by reducing the psychosocial stressors associated with poverty.

Principals can support this process by ensuring that school social workers are consistent members of support teams that develop behavioral interventions with students, communicate to all staff the importance of socio-emotional learning and behavioral interventions, and include school social workers in site-based decision-making to ensure that these services are embedded in the school’s strategic plans.

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