Open Doors for Students in Poverty

Follow these guiding tactics to retain high-quality teachers and prevent burnout.

By Regina Stewman
Twelve years ago, I returned to Springdale, Arkansas, to serve as principal in the community where I grew up. I immediately saw that the demographics of my home town—and my assigned school, Robert E. Lee Elementary School—had changed. In the past, Springdale had a homogenous, Caucasian, middle class population. But in the past 20 years, the population shifted, with a dramatic increase in the English-language learner (ELL) population as well as an increase of students living in situational poverty. Staff lacked an understanding of the new student population, as well as strategies to successfully handle the rapidly changing demographics.

To prepare myself to lead this school, I sought professional development through Ruby Payne’s writing and her aha! Process model. In addition, the staff did a book study on Payne’s book, *A Framework for Understanding Poverty*, which led to reflection and change. Over time and after having a few successful encounters, staff developed meaningful relationships with students and their families. We felt confident in our ability to deal with the situational poverty our students faced.

I didn’t begin to see the difference between situational and generational poverty however until I opened a new school nearby. Sonora Elementary School (SES) is located in a small, tight-knit community on the outskirts of Springdale, Arkansas. SES serves 700 students in grades K-5, with 77 percent of the students qualifying for free or reduced-priced lunch. Forty percent of students identify as limited English speaking students, and 11 percent identify as needing special education services. Approximately 50 percent of the students attending SES live in a rural area outside of the city limits. Most of the students at SES live in generational poverty.

It’s important for educators to understand the differences between situational and generational poverty. Situational poverty occurs when a family’s financial support decreases based on a specific event, such as a death in the family, a divorce, or a change or loss in jobs. It is usually temporary, and families typically have hope that the circumstances will be short-term. Generational poverty, though, involves a family that has been in poverty for more than two generations. Typically, patterns and behaviors are established, with little hope for change.

**Barriers to Education**

Students living in generational poverty often exist in survival mode. They endure stressors such as abuse, hunger, and early imposed responsibilities for younger siblings. They lack goal-setting skills that will help them plan ahead. These stressors and a lack of goals lead to low engagement, usually both academic and extracurricular, and a high risk for dropping out. These students are also at risk for chronic absenteeism, an inability to read on grade level, and an overall disconnect from school. Families living in generational poverty often do not have the resources to provide educational support in the form of books, tutors, homework help, or Internet service.

Generational poverty also impacts instruction in a multitude of other ways. Transportation, for example, is a big obstacle, as most of our families either do not own a car, own only one car used by the working parent, or cannot afford gas to drive to school. Over 80 percent
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Find strategies to implement a Breakfast in the Classroom program in Principal magazine’s “Food For Thought.” In this article, author Meredith Barnett discusses creative approaches to combat hunger after school and during the summer months.

Retain Quality Staff

There are many challenges to hiring and retaining quality staff who will effectively serve students living in generational poverty. It takes time and skill to serve this population. Teachers spend significant time after school and during the summer months continuing relationships with students through online educational tools or in other face-to-face avenues, such as tutoring. Our school’s summer mobile library, for example, ensures children have access to literature during the summer months and allows teachers to see if other basic needs, such as food, are being met.

It can be difficult to find teachers with the right attitude, and who are willing to sacrifice all the extra hours necessary to ensure student success. Teaching is definitely not an 8 a.m. to 3 p.m. job, where you can turn off what you have seen or heard. You take the children home with you in your heart. This is one of the reasons that teachers burn out so easily.

1. It’s not personal. Children do not sit at home and plan how to make a teacher’s life miserable, or how to interrupt classroom instruction. Russell Barkley, clinical professor of psychiatry and pediatrics, says, “The kids who need the most love will ask for it in the most unloving of ways.” Educators must act as the adults in interactions with students.

2. Seek first to understand. Students will act in unloving ways, but there is a reason for each and every action. Many negative behaviors that students exhibit result from chronic stress disorder. It is important that teachers are aware of students’ circumstances, which can significantly impact the students’ day, as well as the day for the entire class.

3. Rigor, relevance, and relationships are required! School improvement expert Willard R. Daggett’s coined phrase, “Rigor + Relevance + Relationships = Increased Student Achievement,” has significance for all students. But it is especially critical in our encounters with students living in poverty. Relationships are key in ensuring that children know that we truly care for them. John Maxwell said it best: “People [students] don’t care how much you know until they know how much you care.”

of our families depend on district bus transportation. If students miss the bus or are removed from the bus for discipline or safety issues, they are left with no access to school. Transportation can also be a barrier to student engagement in extracurricular activities, as is the lack of expendable funds to pay for registration fees or specialized equipment.

We also find that health and nutrition is a concern for our families living in generational poverty. Students struggle with maintaining their energy levels while at school, often due to a lack of nutritious food in the home or a diet that is high in sugar. The result is multiple visits to the nurse’s office with complaints of an “upset” stomach or an inability to focus on class instruction.

Recently, our district has started to provide breakfast every morning through the Breakfast in the Classroom program, which has led to a decrease in nurse visits. We also work with local agencies to provide students with snack packs to take home with them each weekend. To further aid in filling this void, this summer we are launching a mobile library. Not only will we deliver books to students during the summer months, but we will use the mobile library as a vehicle to continue to provide healthy snacks to identified students.

In addition, our teachers have shifted the ownership of the learning to the students. Our students, even in kindergarten, help create individual and classroom goals with ongoing tracking. When we take a schoolwide assessment, we recognize growth at incremental levels because we want students to see and “own” their progress toward a goal. We also use school funds to purchase learning resources and tools that children can take home. For example, we have piloted students taking technology tools home to extend school hours. Before students take iPads and LiveScribe Smartpens home, we train them and their parents on the technology. As a result, students and parents are engaged at a higher level.

Guiding Concepts

Despite the numerous obstacles, it is a privilege to serve students living in generational poverty. But it requires professional growth by school and district leadership in order to help teachers really make a difference with students and their families. I adopted this quote by Ghandi as my inspiration: “Be the change you wish to see in the world.” If we want to see change for these families we, the educators who serve them, have to do whatever it takes to make the difference. Over the years, I have found that it is vital that teachers internalize the following concepts.

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emotional and physical. We can ensure teacher—and student—success by making sure we do not work in a vacuum. Here are four keys to keeping everyone on the same page.

1. **Celebrate successes.** Because teachers may not see the fruits of their labor in the short time a child is in their classroom, it is vital that we share successes with all faculty as children progress through the grades. The success a second-grade student experiences is a true reflection of the work of the kindergarten teacher, first-grade teacher, and all the support staff who have also worked with this child and his or her family. When a teacher experiences success, with even one child, take time to share the success with others. Your school will build upon these individual successes to create a culture of achievement for everyone.

   Celebrations are part of our culture, both with the faculty and with the staff. We also try to share our celebrations outside our four walls using Facebook, Twitter, and our school and district websites.

2. **Have a common purpose.** Your school community will naturally follow an established common purpose. Take time with your staff to discuss your school’s vision and mission. Invite parents and other community stakeholders. Then, take time to define your core beliefs. Key to having a common purpose is also communicating and being transparent about where you are in the process.

3. **Work collaboratively.** To foster success, develop a culture where everyone works collaboratively. Organizing weekly professional learning community meetings for each grade level has been an invaluable tactic at my school. Keep in mind that administrators must also ensure that there is time for cross grade-level conversations, as well.

4. **Provide tailored professional development.** Teachers need training on how to create conditions of success and hope. At my school we have used the work of Eric Jensen. His two books, *Teaching with Poverty in Mind: What Being Poor Does to Kids’ Brains and What Schools Can Do about It* (2009) and *Engaging Students with Poverty in Mind: Practical Strategies for Raising Achievement* (2013), have been tremendous resources for our staff. I encourage principals to use Jensen’s work for book studies. Make sure to schedule time for implementation, reflection, and professional conversations.

   Children living in generational poverty face a host of barriers negatively impacting their academic success. But schools can be the ultimate force to open doors of hope and possibility. School administrators must be mindful of the strain this has on teachers serving in schools with high concentrations of generational poverty. It is truly a community effort!

Regina Stewman is principal of Sonora Elementary School in Springdale, Arkansas.