



# EQUAL FOOTING



## Students in poverty start school at a disadvantage. Here's how you can help families close the gap.

By Rachael George

Poverty should not hold kids back. However, it does, and year after year, we see students enter our schools who are academically behind students who come from higher-income households. There is a night-and-day difference between the ability of the two groups of students to identify concepts of print, letters, and sounds. In many schools, simply by looking at demographic data, you could, with a high degree of probability, identify which students came from which households. This is a problem.

Identifying the problem is easy; planning how to overcome the challenges and implement effective strategies is much more challenging. I

thought I'd have a leg up because I spent most of my career working in a secondary setting with high-poverty, high-risk students. I thought that experience would help me at the elementary level. Not so.

While there were similarities to leading a secondary school, my first year working at the elementary level was very eye-opening. I still remember the first time I took a class of first-graders into the computer lab to practice logging in. The class was with me in the lab for only 30 minutes, but by the time the teacher came back, I was sweating profusely and had three kids crying, one barking like a dog, and another hiding under a computer desk!

My initial approach to serving elementary kids living in poverty was similar to how I'd approached middle school students. I thought I could simply scaffold it down a bit, and it would work. As many of you can already predict, this assumption was incredibly incorrect. The soft skills and social-emotional learning I expected middle school kids to possess were lacking in my elementary students, and I quickly realized we needed to address these areas first.

## Pay special attention to pre-K families; often, preschool is a family's first parental experience with education.

What kept me going: looking into students' eyes and knowing they were counting on me. The kids had hope, and dreams. There was excitement. It was my job to lead the staff so great things could happen for these students.

Over the course of the past four years, I have come to see and understand the effect of poverty on elementary students at a much deeper level. At Sandy Grade School, we have three different pre-K programs in our building, housed in four classrooms. Two are Head Start classrooms, one is an "Early Childhood Special Education" classroom, and the last is a full-day "Preschool Promise" classroom for 4-year-olds, which is unique to Oregon. Each of these programs is special in its own way, but each of them shares the common mission of serving students living with significant challenges, including poverty.

### Common Challenges Faced by Families in Poverty

#### 1. Navigating the paperwork

All intervention programs require enrollment or application. Unfortunately, this process is incredibly challenging for families living in poverty. Many parents are working multiple jobs. They are unsure of how to complete the paperwork, and many speak another language. If we want to serve these families, we must go out to recruit them and help them with the paperwork. This means taking recruitment to where they live and using easy-to-read forms in the parents' native language. It is also vital to have someone available on-site, virtually, and by phone, to help answer questions and walk parents through each question and step in a nonthreatening manner.

#### 2. Overcoming fear

The challenges don't stop after registration. For many parents experiencing economic challenges, their previous experiences in school settings have not been positive—and that fact can be difficult for teachers to understand, especially if, for them, school has always been a happy place.

We often work with mothers who are worried about their children attending school and how they will perform. They want to be able to look in on them to reassure themselves that their children are OK, but they are intimidated by the school setting. This fear is hard to overcome, and it takes time. However, with the right type of interaction and relationship-building, parents can become more comfortable.

Principals should work with staff on how to welcome families into the building, office, and classrooms. Pay special attention to pre-K families; often, preschool is a family's first parental experience with education.

Physical plant considerations are imperative. Placing the classrooms of younger students closer to the office can make a significant difference in how you serve these families, because they are the most frequent visitors with the highest level of need. Proximity to the office can make it more efficient to serve these families and may help ease family fear.

#### 3. Absenteeism

Students living in poverty often exhibit a higher number of absences, particularly in pre-K and kindergarten settings. These absences used to frustrate me—the students were missing so much! But I realized my frustration wasn't helpful, and that I completely misunderstood students' absences. We switched our approach to figure out *why* students were absent and worked *with* families. Even when students missed half a month of school, we didn't give up on the kids and parents.

Home visits and relationship-building between teachers and parents helped us address absenteeism. Once a strong relationship was built, families were more open to hearing about the importance of regular school attendance. Often, conversation would reveal that students weren't in school because the child didn't want to go or "something had come up." More often than not, our conversation would then shift into a supporting,

coaching role, and we worked with the families to set up routines and boundaries to ensure student attendance.

#### 4. Social-emotional learning

We want students to exit pre-K with strong social and emotional skills so their transition to kindergarten will be much smoother. We've found that students who enter kindergarten without this background struggle to share, get along with others, and understand the feelings of those around them.

To address this gap in skill, we spend significant time vertically aligning our behavioral expectations while still maintaining developmentally appropriate practices. In addition, our staff works to enhance our social-emotional lessons to cue many "in-the-moment" opportunities with students where these skills can be practiced. The collaboration between pre-K and kindergarten, along with explicit teaching of social and emotional skills, has shown statistically significant benefit in terms of reducing negative consequences and interactions.

#### 5. Trauma

With poverty comes a high probability that students have been exposed to trauma or chronic stress. In programs that serve populations of students with significant need, we often experience extreme student behavior that is unsafe. Such actions can be very overwhelming for staff and other students, but it is vital that we support students where they are and help them move forward.

As a staff, we have had to intentionally slow down and seek to understand and examine triggers and fixations that lead to such behavior. Over the past four years, we've spent a significant amount of time educating all staff regarding the issues faced by students who experience trauma or poverty. We have had to rethink how we redirect students, how classroom teachers manage behavior, how we create a sense of community among the students, and how we create a safe and predictable environment on a daily basis.

#### 6. Academic deficiencies

An obvious barrier facing families living in poverty is the academic gap in vocabulary, language, and exposure to the written word. While one might want to address this problem by scaffolding down kindergarten skills and

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expectations, it's important to keep instruction developmentally appropriate. There are many fun and engaging ways to incorporate academics and kindergarten readiness skills in order to close the academic gap and encourage and foster engagement.

We strive to ensure that all students enter school healthy and ready to learn, and we support this effort by creating and maintaining programs that target students before they enter kindergarten.

"Little Steps" is a program that targets children ages 3 and 4. We invite parents and students to attend workshops every two months to learn about kindergarten readiness skills and ways to facilitate growth and development. Sessions are held in the children's future kindergarten classrooms and facilitated by teachers and staff from the building. Events begin with a read-aloud by the kindergarten teacher and are followed by fun activities that build skills children will need in kindergarten.

Our "Jump Start" program targets students entering kindergarten the following year. This program runs during the spring months, always following our Kindergarten Round Up, and is designed for students who have been identified as needing additional academic support based upon data collected during the Round Up. Typically, the program includes 12 sessions that help children expand their kindergarten readiness skills. The teacher who coordinates the program focuses on enhancing student ability to write their names, strengthening fine and gross motor skills, developmental writing, concepts of numbers, phonemic and letter identification, school readiness, observation, exploration, and fostering a love for reading.

Come next fall, each of us will have another cohort of kindergarten students. We know that in each cohort there will be some students already behind because of their living situations. If we know this now, why aren't we acting? What's your action plan? 

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#### RECOMMENDED READING

*Teaching With Poverty in Mind: What Being Poor Does to Kids' Brains and What Schools Can Do About It* by Eric Jensen

*Helping Children Succeed: What Works and Why* by Paul Tough