

Poverty Matters

Fifty years ago, President Lyndon B. Johnson stood before Congress and the nation and declared an “unconditional” war on poverty in America. His Economic Opportunity Act promised a better life to those living “on the outskirts of hope,” and at the heart of that promise was education.

Sadly, the decades since have produced an even greater gulf between rich and poor, between the haves and the have-nots, between the well-educated and the poorly educated. And the hardest-hit victims of this failure to eradicate poverty are our nation’s children.

A 2013 Educational Testing Service (ETS) report, *Poverty and Education: Finding the Way Forward*, clarifies just how widespread and damaging the condition of poverty is for children. It reminds us that in addition to communities where generational poverty is baked into the culture, there is a fresh class of situational poor, casualties of the new century’s housing and employment downturns.

The report reveals that 22 percent, or one-fifth, of American children are living in poverty, and 2.8 million of those live in “extreme poverty” on less than \$2 a day. The report also reiterates that poverty engenders numerous related disadvantages, including growing up in single-parent homes, being exposed to toxins that lead to health issues, food insecurity, and unstable housing and parental employment, to name a few. All of these factors impact a child’s learning outcomes.

Research shows disparities between high and low family income and student achievement begin early and hold true throughout a child’s school years. For example, on standardized tests, 67 percent of two-year-olds from higher-income families are proficient in expressive vocabulary, compared to 55 percent of their lower-income counterparts. This correlation plays out through high school: seniors from higher-income families score 100 points higher on the SAT Critical Reading test than their lower-income peers.

Likely, there is not one among us who believes poverty should limit a child’s educational opportunities. NAESP has long supported the right of every child to fair and equitable educational opportunities. But as the ETS report points out, the effects of poverty *do influence* a child’s chances to achieve at the highest levels. Sublimating this fact only serves to perpetuate the cycle of poverty that prevails for far too many children, despite educators’ best efforts to help overcome it.

Despite the adverse effects of poverty, educators remain steadfast in their efforts to level the playing field. However, they also want society to serve as equal partners in the effort, lifting disadvantaged families out of poverty and closing all the gaps for children so they are as prepared for school as their higher-income peers.



Interventions

Principals, who are highly trusted by the public, have the power to influence policies and execute programs that can mitigate the effects of poverty on children. Principals can draw upon the findings of the ETS study to strengthen recommendations for education policymakers. Two key recommendations, in particular, directly align with current NAESP priorities.

Broadening access to high-quality preschool education. Kindergarten readiness may be the single most important factor determining an individual’s success in school and beyond. Research shows that early learning is especially impactful for low-income students. NAESP is leading efforts in pre-kindergarten to age 3 (P-3) alignments to maximize early learning and help close achievement gaps for low-income children. This work is based on the Association’s *Leading Early Childhood Learning Communities: What Principals Should Know and Be Able To Do*, which sets key early-learning standards that promote readiness for at-risk children. This body of work is currently being revised and updated, and it will be released at the Association’s annual conference in July.

Recognizing the importance of a high-quality teacher workforce. We know a teacher can have the greatest influence on a disadvantaged student’s educational performance, but principals play a crucial role in high-quality teaching. NAESP and the National Association of Secondary School Principals recently released recommendations that will upgrade teacher evaluations and improve instruction. The strategies described in *Supporting Principals in Implementing Teacher Evaluation Systems* will be especially useful for teachers serving high-needs schools. With 22 percent of students in poverty, the strain on teachers can be enormous. More than ever, teachers serving this student population need instructional coaching, mentoring, and timely feedback that new approaches require.

Though President Johnson’s dream of a nation without poverty is far from realized, the hope he sought to bring to the poorest Americans prevails within our nation’s schools. For every child who comes to school with an empty stomach, tired from sleeping in a car or ill from exposure to smoke or toxins, there is a breakfast program, a health counselor, a tutor, teachers who believe in him or her, and a quiet place to study. A caring principal who knows that poverty matters makes all this possible.

As school and community leaders, principals are in a pivotal position to advocate on behalf of children in poverty and to help others understand the full impact of poverty on a child’s chances for success in school and life. As a principal, your advocacy and action can profoundly change a child’s life—poverty matters and what you do about it matters, too. ■