

Student Poverty Isn't an Excuse; It's a Barrier

By Helen Ladd, Pedro Noguera, Paul Reville, & Joshua Starr

Education policy in the United States has taken a turn in a new direction, and anyone with a stake in public education should celebrate this. Policymakers increasingly recognize that stresses related to student poverty—hunger, chronic illness, and, in too many cases, trauma—are the key barriers to teaching and learning. And calls for tending not only to the academic but also the social, emotional, and physical needs of children are gaining ground across the country. Indeed, the inclusion of the whole-child perspective in the Every Student Succeeds Act shows that this mindset has moved from the margins to the mainstream.

This is a far cry from where we were as a country in June 2008, when a diverse array of education, health, economics, faith, and civil rights leaders—including two of us, Helen Ladd and Pedro Noguera—created the Broader, Bolder Approach to Education to advance an education policy agenda that addresses the barriers poverty poses to children's educational success. Eight years ago, we urged policymakers to implement quality early-childhood-education programs, health and nutrition supports, and enriching after-school and summer options for students. Research shows that these supports are critical to boosting achievement and helping students graduate with the skills to succeed in college, careers, and life.

Although it was backed by substantial scholarly evidence, many dismissed the agenda as radical. An opposing camp led by civil rights organizations and high-profile district leaders called the initiative's focus on mitigating the effects of poverty an "excuse" for weak accountability and bad teaching. Their perspective has largely driven education policy, resulting in more high-stakes testing and a "no excuses" mindset for most reform efforts.

But it is clearer every day that their strategy hasn't worked. Gaps in achievement have persisted and even grown. For example, stagnation or declines in scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress, or NAEP, among English-language learners and racial and ethnic minority students have highlighted growing deficits for those students relative to their more advantaged

peers. And as Detroit, Newark, N.J., and other high-poverty urban districts that emphasized the use of student test scores to make key decisions show, poverty and structural racism stand in the way of substantially improving academic and social outcomes and limit the success of attempts to improve teaching. The good news is that when poor children have the same opportunities as their better-off peers—high-quality prekindergarten, enriching after-school activities, reliable health care, and nutritious meals—their teachers can teach more effectively, and they can achieve at higher levels.



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Our increasing national understanding of the importance of such opportunities has led to a shift toward better education policy. High-quality prekindergarten is a top priority for the Obama administration, and cities from Boston to New York to San Antonio are demonstrating how to make it happen. New York City increased the number of children served in quality, full-day pre-K programs from 13,000 to over 70,000 in just two years. With growing numbers of students coming to class hungry, the community-eligibility provision in the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010 has helped high-poverty schools not only make lunch available to all students in high-poverty schools, but also serve them breakfast and even dinner. And in teacher-powered schools, those closest to the classroom—teachers, parents, and students themselves, who were sidelined just a few years ago—are taking on a more central role in shaping school policy.

The challenge we now face is to transform these examples into a cohesive response to the widespread injustice and poverty that continue to hold schools and students back. Racial inequities—such as hugely disparate rates of expulsion between black and white students and the lack of college-preparatory coursework in high schools serving students of color—are endemic. And for the first time since the federal government began subsidizing school meals, over half of all U.S. public school students now qualify for free or reduced-price lunch.

We need a refreshed policy agenda that builds on this momentum to broadly define public education as a public good that directly mitigates poverty's impacts and prepares all students for college, careers, and civic engagement by supporting learning from birth year-round.

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This means providing schools with the resources to both meet the full range of student needs and attract middle-class families to reduce segregation, which has been on the rise since desegregation efforts were dismantled in the 1980s. It means designing accountability systems that help teachers improve their craft and make working in high-needs schools more attractive. Massachusetts and New Jersey have long been leaders in providing equitable funding across districts. California's new local-control funding formula, which returns more control over funding to local districts, is designed to deliver more resources to schools serving poor and vulnerable students. California has also pioneered a holistic accountability system to accurately assess conditions that are essential for teaching and learning. We urge other states to follow these examples.

We need to ensure that all schools, including charter schools, are transparent in their use of public and private funds. We must ensure that no school uses low test scores to target students for expulsion. Finally, we must confront the segregation and concentrated poverty that make sustained school improvement virtually impossible, and ground school improvement efforts in community input so that key voices are heard, valuable assets are leveraged, and critical needs are met. The new flexibility that ESSA provides offers states and districts the opportunity to demonstrate that they are up to the task.

With some of the most divisive arguments about poverty and accountability behind us, educators, parents, and policymakers should seize this moment to address education—what former U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan calls "the civil rights issue of our time." Only a bold agenda that tackles the pernicious effects of poverty will answer that call.

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