

Living and learning in poverty

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Maggie Peters works with students in the Hoopa Reservation.
Photo by George Nelson.

Thanksgiving is coming, and Maria Cortez worries that there will be no feast for her family.

Her husband lost his job, and her day care business has dried up because so many in her neighborhood are unemployed. She lives in La Puente in a one-bedroom unit built in the back of a house with her husband and three teenage children.

Cortez tearfully says that she tells her children they must eat less, so items they receive from the local food bank will last longer. Last year she received a Thanksgiving food basket from Family Resource Center of Rowland Unified School District, where her children attend school.

"I don't know what we will have to eat for Thanksgiving this year," Cortez tells Jennifer Kottke, the center's grant program coordinator, who is visiting to make sure the family is doing OK.

Kottke, a member of the Association of Rowland Educators, says it is difficult for the center to meet the rising needs of students and their families. "Some days are very hard," she says. "We are seeing more and more families living in poverty."

Kottke is not alone. CTA members throughout the state say there are more poor, hungry and homeless families in their schools. Yet despite increasing poverty, schools are expected to close the achievement gap single-handedly. Studies show poverty impacts academic achievement, but most schools have decreased services and programs helping poor students — even though they are more impacted by budget cuts than wealthier students. Meanwhile, billionaires such as Bill Gates and Eli Broad demand business-driven "reforms" to raise test scores, blame "bad teachers," and continue to ignore the effects of poverty.

Poverty may be the elephant in the room, but the "Occupy Wall Street" movement is prompting new conversations about equity, tax fairness and corporate greed. Despite having the eighth-largest economy in the world, the Golden State does little to care for its underprivileged members.

Poverty is spreading rapidly

An estimated 2.2 million children in California — one in four — lived in poverty last year, according to new U.S. Census data. The number of Californians living in poverty increased to nearly 6 million — more than the populations of most states. Children of color are four times more likely than white children to be born into the most "economically fragile" households, with 69 percent of Latinos and 71 percent of African Americans categorized as "income poor," compared with 32 percent of whites, according to a new report from the Center for Community Economic Development.

California ranks 40th in the nation in child homelessness (where 50th is worst), according to the National Center on Family Homelessness. The McKinney-Vento Homeless Education Assistance Improvement Act of 2001, part of No Child Left Behind, defines this as living in cars, motels, shelters, campgrounds or "shared housing."

School districts, says Kottke, have been trying to pick up the slack, and the Family Resource Center offers food, clothing, tutoring, mental health referrals, and programs ranging from preschool to mentoring. There are also dental and health care clinics for students and families. But grant money is drying up for her center — and similar ones throughout the state — that help alleviate suffering.

Educators throughout the state believe things are getting worse.

"Kids are worrying about where they are going to sleep tonight, whether dinner is going to be a bowl of cereal or a bowl of rice, whether they will have clean clothes, how they will get school supplies," says Lynette Henley, a member of the Vallejo Education Association who teaches at Hogan Middle School. "When I first started teaching here 30 years ago, you had a kid here or there living in poverty. Now, at least 15 kids in my class are poor. Poverty is no longer the exception; it's just a way of life."

Unemployment, home foreclosures, and the closure of a naval base have hurt Vallejo badly, says Henley. "You have people losing their homes due to foreclosure, and you have more evictions because people can't afford to pay rent. And you have renters having to leave because their landlord is going through foreclosure, so you have secondhand victims of foreclosure. I overhear conversations of kids about

moving in with their grandmother or living with an aunt, saying they have to move. There are a lot of disconnected telephones when I call.”

In Redwood City, a suburb about 20 miles from San Francisco, most students are either affluent or poor, and the middle class is rapidly disappearing, says Bret Baird, a physical education teacher at Kennedy Middle School and president of the Redwood City Teachers Association.

“More students are living in crowded quarters,” he says. “I’ve gone on home visits at night, and you see two and three families living in a one or two bedroom place. Parents are working two or three jobs. It’s eye-opening. You think your reality is everyone else’s reality until you find out it isn’t. It makes me think twice about having students doing homework at home when they have no quiet place to do so.”

June Garland, director of community services and support in Newport–Mesa Unified School District, verifies addresses of new enrollees and makes visits. She has seen children living in storage units, backyard sheds, and the garage of someone’s home.

“We also have a lot of what we call ‘unaccompanied youths,’” she says. “These are kids who are 16 or 17 and a parent has thrown them out on the street. Many of them are too old for foster care.”

“Food is a huge issue,” reports Pamela Hosmer, program manager for the Children and Youth in Transition program in San Diego Unified School District. “A lot of organizations and nonprofits that provide food are tapped out. Last year, Feed America provided nine of our elementary schools with weekly bags of food for children to bring home to supplement their nutrition on weekends. We need to do this. If kids are hungry, they can’t learn.”

Suffering is widespread

While poverty has traditionally been viewed as an urban issue, it hugely impacts rural areas.

“Klamath–Trinity Joint Unified School District has a 100 percent free meal program for all students,” says Maggie Peters, an eighth–grade math and science teacher at Hoopa Elementary School, located in the Hoopa Reservation. “All our students get breakfast and lunch at school year–round.”

More than 80 percent of the district’s students are Native American, many born into “generational poverty,” says Peters, who is president of the Klamath–Trinity Teachers Association. “Poverty is directly correlated with education, and in impoverished, rural communities, families are largely impacted by drug and alcohol addiction, depression, neglect, abuse, and health issues such as diabetes. This, compounded by the lack of sufficient social services to address the needs of the community, creates generations of students who struggle simply to function in the classroom, which results in decreasing educational success and continues the cycle of poverty.”

As the economy worsens and tuition rises, college students are finding themselves destitute, hoping their sacrifice will pay off upon graduation with a new career.

“I can only imagine how it will feel to finally have a job where I can support my children in a home of my own and have financial security,” says Deanna Herrin, a student at Riverside Community College and a member of Student CTA.

Herrin has recently divorced and is renting rooms from relatives. She has applied for financial assistance. If her car breaks down, she fears, she won’t be able to commute to campus, an hour away.

“The only way I can support myself and my children is by getting a degree. It’s taking longer than I thought it would take. But I’m hoping that once I transfer and earn a bachelor’s degree, I’ll get a job.”

Obstacles created by poverty

Poor children are just as capable of success as affluent students, but they face more obstacles.

“They are not read to aloud as often or exposed to complex language and large vocabularies,” says Richard Rothstein, a former research associate of Economic Policy Institute and an education author. “Their parents have low–wage jobs and are more frequently laid off, causing family stress and more arbitrary discipline. The neighborhoods through which these children walk to school and in which they play have more crime and drugs and fewer adult role models with professional careers. Such children are more often in single–parent families and so get less adult attention. They have fewer cross–country trips, visits to museums and zoos, music or dance lessons, and organized sports leagues to develop their ambition, cultural awareness and self–confidence. Each of these disadvantages makes only a small contribution to the achievement gap, but cumulatively, they explain a lot.”

Multiple studies show children living in poverty are at greater risk of emotional problems including anxiety, depression and low self–esteem. Chronic stress has been shown to adversely affect concentration and memory in children, which can impact their ability to learn.

“Our kids feel more stress,” says Anaheim Elementary Education Association member Sara Camm, a sixth–grade teacher at Orange Grove Elementary School, which serves low–socioeconomic students. “Students come to school upset. They say their parents are fighting all the time. Parents are trying to make ends meet and don’t intend for their actions to stress out their kids, but it happens.”

Children in low–income families are more prone to asthma, resulting in sleeplessness, irritability and lack of exercise, which can result in obesity, say studies. As a result, they are absent more.

"Poverty clearly affects children's readiness to learn and their success on standardized tests," says education expert and author Diane Ravitch. "The achievement gap exists before children enter school. Some children have consistent access to good nutrition, good medical care, educated parents, safe and healthy neighborhoods — and some don't. All of this affects children's readiness to learn. We know that economic conditions affect test scores, because every testing program shows differential success in relation to family income: Children from affluent families have the highest scores, and children whose families have the least income have the lowest scores. This reflects different experiences and different access to opportunity."

Research from Gerald Bracey shows America's scores are low in comparison with other countries — only when there is a high percentage of children who are living in poverty. His research found that American students attending schools with low poverty rates actually did quite well.

Poverty has been linked to lower reading levels by www.kidsdata.org. Statewide, just 30 percent of economically disadvantaged children scored proficient or higher on the state's English-language arts standardized test. Students in higher-income families did twice as well. Low-income students also score lower on Advanced Placement test scores.

When poor students only attend school with other poor students, achievement is impacted.

"Many students are burdened with going to economically segregated schools, where almost every student is poor," says Ravitch. "This depresses their motivation, since they are surrounded by a community that has been left behind."

Education cuts hurt poor children more

According to the California Budget Project, California ranks 46th in the U.S. in K-12 spending per student, having spent \$2,856 less per student than the rest of the U.S. last year. In the past four years, California has cut \$20 billion from schools and colleges. This has had a greater impact on students who are poor and already at a disadvantage.

Poor students whose parents are not college educated benefit the most from counselor services. However, 29 California school districts have no counseling program at all, according to the California Department of Education. The ratio of students per counselor in this state is 945-to-1, compared with the national average of 477-to-1, ranking California last in the nation.

A report from UCLA's Institute for Democracy, Education and Access shows that California's low-income students suffer disproportionately compared with more affluent students (see sidebar).

"The findings point to tremendous needs of California students and California public schools — needs that the federal government is best positioned to address in the short term," concludes the report. "The short term is crucial for the millions of students who can't wait for the economy to improve. They only get one chance to have a high-quality and equal education. But California also needs to reform its system for funding public schools."

Time to tackle poverty

Today's "no excuses" philosophy from politicians and wealthy financiers ignores the impact of poverty on education and implies schools alone are responsible for raising student achievement. Those who espouse this ideology — including billionaires Bill Gates and Eli Broad — expect nothing of society and everything of schools, which is neither fair nor realistic, says Rothstein.

"Nobody should be forced to choose between advocating for better schools and speaking out for greater social and economic equality," he says. "Both are essential. Each depends on the other."

The issue of poverty in relation to student achievement was discussed in the past, says Ravitch, but ended when corporate leaders espoused the philosophy that schools should be run like a business.

"The present climate of school 'reform' narrative is led by millionaires and billionaires who believe that schools can eliminate poverty by privatizing management, giving more tests, merit pay, closing schools, and other carrots and sticks," says Ravitch. "The free market works for them, so they want to bring the free market to education. They don't seem to realize that the free market has many losers — like the millions now in poverty — and they don't want to talk about growing income inequality. They prefer to steer the national conversation to teacher evaluation and charter schools. One does not hear them complain about massive budget cuts to education or its negative consequences for children in poverty and our education system. The very things that these children need most are now out of reach, and the corporate reformers are silent about that."

CTA has launched a tax fairness campaign and endorsed the "Occupy Wall Street" movement to address inequities, such as the fact that 1 percent of Americans hold a third of the nation's wealth, and corporate income grew over 400 percent from 2001 to 2008, compared with 28 percent for individuals.

"The real question is: Whose responsibility is it to address the issue of poverty?" says CTA President Dean Vogel. "Some say that poor people should pull themselves up by their bootstraps. But if people don't have boots, it becomes a community issue. Poverty and how it affects students and their families is an issue we can no longer afford to ignore."