

COMMENTARY

We Can Overcome Poverty's Impact on School Success

By **Michael A. Rebell** and **Jessica R. Wolff**

In passing the No Child Left Behind Act in 2001, Congress stated that one of the law's main purposes was closing the achievement gap between disadvantaged children and their better-off peers by ensuring that all students in the United

States would be proficient in meeting challenging academic standards by 2014.

But, over the past 10 years, we have made only incremental progress toward reaching that goal. There has been some small gain in 4th grade reading and math scores, but no gain whatsoever in 8th grade scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress, and significant achievement gaps remain between students from different racial and ethnic groups.

Implicitly acknowledging this reality, President Barack Obama announced last fall that his administration would grant states waivers that would, among other things, postpone the 100 percent proficiency goal until 2020. But neither that target, which is inherently unattainable, nor a substantial closing of the achievement gaps, which is achievable, will, in fact, be met by 2020 or any other time in the foreseeable future, unless our policymakers acknowledge the most blatant gap in NCLB and the educational policies of most states. That gap: the failure to recognize and act upon the severe impact of poverty on the chances for the school success of millions of American schoolchildren.

America does not have a general education crisis; we have a poverty crisis. Results of an international student assessment indicate that U.S. schools with fewer than 25 percent of their students living in poverty rank first in the world among advanced industrial countries. But when you add in the scores of students from schools with high poverty rates, the United States sinks to the middle of the pack. At nearly 22 percent and rising, the child-poverty rate in the United States is the highest among wealthy nations in the world. (Poverty rates in Denmark and in Finland, which is justifiably celebrated as a top global performer on the Program for International Student Assessment exams, are below 5 percent). In New York City, the child-poverty rate climbed to 30 percent in 2010.

It is clear that poverty has a profound impact on learning. Achievement gaps for disadvantaged children begin before they start school and widen throughout their school careers. But research shows that change is possible.

Most students in this country come to school equipped with the basics for success. They arrive having received the preschool experiences they need to be ready for grade-level work; their health and mental-health needs are largely being met; they enjoy a range of both academic and nonacademic learning experiences beyond the school day that complement what they learn in school; and they receive the family support that ensures they are motivated and prepared to learn

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when they are in school. These advantages, however, are largely absent from the lives of children raised in poverty.

Almost no one would disagree with the basic proposition that socioeconomic factors substantially affect learning, but many people are skeptical of whether schools, even in collaboration with other government agencies and community organizations, are capable of responding to these needs on a broad, systemic basis.

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Such skepticism is unwarranted. For the past three years, working with a statewide task force of experts and advocates in a variety of fields and a team of seven education economists, we have examined the legal, economic, and policy issues associated with providing a broad range of comprehensive services to low-income students. In 2011, we issued five white papers that demonstrate how the impediments caused by poverty that limit school success can be overcome on a large scale. These papers **conclude**:

- Students are entitled to educationally relevant supports in the areas of early-childhood education, expanded learning in out-of-school time, health care, and family engagement and support—that is, those services which directly affect success in school.
- Access to these comprehensive educational services is a legal right and must be made available to all children, not merely to some children when political trends and budget cycles coincide.
- Each state needs to create a policy infrastructure for fulfilling this right by crafting standards, parallel to K-12 education standards, in early childhood, expanded learning time, health care and health education, and family engagement.
- States can provide these services for a reasonable price. We estimate it would cost approximately \$4,200 per student per year (above current costs) over the 18 ½ years from birth through high school to provide the array of comprehensive services that poor children need. We believe the economic and social benefits to providing them would, in time, return more than double the value of the investments made.

A growing body of research clearly demonstrates that America will attain its goals of promoting equity and preparing students to function effectively as citizens and productive workers only through a concerted effort to eliminate the substantial socioeconomic barriers that limit school success for many. Moreover, a number of demonstration projects have shown the dramatic gains that can result from coordinated efforts to meet children's broad learning needs.

We know that we live in economically difficult times, but so do the growing numbers of children whose educational opportunities are being stunted by present policies. Implementation of the full program that we envision—and absorption of the full price tag—would take a decade or more.

Social change comes slowly in this country. If we are going to make substantial progress in closing the achievement gap by 2020—or ever—now is the time to adopt realistic policies to meet these goals.

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