



UNLOCKING OPPORTUNITIES: SERVICES THAT HELP POOR CHILDREN SUCCEED IN THE CLASSROOM

Part 1: How Poverty Affects a Child’s Ability to Learn

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Poverty affects children negatively in a number of ways that make it harder to succeed in school.

Low-income children are more likely to be in poorer physical and mental health than non-poor children, and they are more likely than higher-income children to live in neighborhoods and families marked by instability.

This brief is the first part of a DC Fiscal Policy Institute series on the intersection between poverty and the school environment. It focuses on the kinds of services that can be delivered through schools – beyond basic classroom instruction – to alleviate the effects of poverty on students. This first installment offers a summary of research on the risk factors associated with child poverty and their impact on educational outcomes. The remainder of the series will focus on the kinds of services DC Public Schools provide that can help address the effects of poverty, along with recommendations to strengthen them.

Many DC Children Are Impacted by the Negative Consequences of Poverty.

Across DC, over one in four children, or 28,600

children under 18, lived in poverty in 2012. That means living on less than \$18,500 per year for a

family of three. Poverty rates are far higher in eastern and southern parts of the District. In some neighborhoods in Wards 7 and 8, the child poverty rate is greater than 50 percent.

DC’s high child poverty rate appears to contribute to a number of negative outcomes for children and families, including the following:

TOPICS TO BE COVERED IN THIS SERIES:

- Homelessness Services
- Physical and Mental Health Services
- Parent Engagement Services
- Expanded Learning/Out-of-School Time Programs
- Wraparound Service Models

Poor physical health. Children in DC rank worse than the national average on the prevalence and severity of asthma, obesity, prevalence of chronic conditions and lack of engagement in physical activity.¹

Poor mental health. DC Action for Children found that nationally, as many as one in four children meets the criteria for a severe mental health disorder that impacts their ability to function day-to-day. They estimate that this would translate to between 7,200 and 9,200 children in DC.² Adolescents ages 13 to 18, are most often impacted by anxiety disorders (32 percent),

¹ 2011/2012 National Survey of Children’s Health, <http://childhealthdata.org/learn/NSCH>.

² DC Action for Children, “Children’s Mental Health in DC: The Mismatch Between Need and Treatment,” <http://www.dcactionforchildren.org/sites/default/files/snapshots/Snapshot-MentalHealth.pdf>. There is little data on the incidence of

mental health disorders in DC. However, the Department of Mental Health notes that the incidence of mental health illness in DC is similar to the incidence nationally.

behavior disorders, mood disorders, and substance abuse disorders. However, the Children's Law Center recently reported that more than 5,000 District children who need mental health services may not be receiving them.³

Neighborhood instability. Parents in DC are more likely to report that their children are never safe or only sometimes safe in their neighborhood or school when compared to the national average. More than one in four parents report that their children do not live in supportive neighborhoods.⁴ In addition, some of the neighborhoods in DC with some of the highest levels of child poverty also have some of the highest incidence of violent crimes.

Family instability. Child abuse and neglect is far more common in DC, at a rate of 23 per 1,000 children, compared with 9 per 1,000 children nationwide.⁵ In addition, the number of homeless families in DC has risen significantly during the recession, rising from 587 in 2008 to 983 in 2013, a 67 percent increase.⁶ For the last two years, DC's emergency shelters for families have been overwhelmed, leading the city to place homeless families in motels and, in 2014, in recreation centers.

There were over 2,450 homeless children in DC Public Schools in school year 2012-13. The share of students within a DCPS school who were homeless ranged from less than 1 percent to a high of 24 percent. About one in eight schools had a student homeless rate of more than 10 percent. Ward 8 has the most schools with more than 10 percent of

students being homeless (5), followed by Ward 7 (3), Wards 6 and 1 (2) and then Wards 4 and 5 (1).

The Negative Impacts of Poverty Can Affect Education Outcomes. Children who grow up in poverty have a significant disadvantage compared to their counterparts when it comes to school readiness. Children who live in poverty have worse outcomes in a range of areas including: health, cognitive development, school achievement and emotional well-being. Living in neighborhoods with poorer environmental quality, a lack of access to nutritious food, frequent exposure to trauma and stress, a lack of parental engagement, and a lack of a rich learning environment all contribute to difficulty for low-income children in the classroom. The following section outlines research on the impact that living in poverty has on educational outcomes.

Poor physical health. Children who come to school hungry or who suffer from chronic illness are more likely to face obstacles to learning and have poorer attendance at school.⁷ Research shows that low-income children are more likely to suffer from asthma, lead poisoning, low birth weight, stunting, developmental delays, and learning disabilities which can contribute to difficulties in the classroom.⁸

Research from Turner and Berube finds that living in a low-income neighborhoods can lead to health problems and hinder school efforts to boost educational outcomes.⁹ For example, they note

³ Children's Law Center. 2014 Children's Mental Health Report Card. <http://www.childrenslawcenter.org/sites/default/files/clc/CLC-2014-Mental-Health-Report-Card.pdf>.

⁴ 2011/2012 National Survey of Children's Health, <http://childhealthdata.org/learn/NSCH>

⁵ US Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Child Welfare Information Gateway, "Child Abuse and Neglect and Fatalities 2011: Statistics and Information."

⁶ Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments Annual Point in Time Count 2008, 2013

⁷ Turner, Margery Austin & Berube, Alan, "Vibrant Neighborhoods, Successful Schools: What the Government Can Do To Foster Both," Urban Institute, July 2009.

⁸ Brooks-Gunn, Jeanne & Duncan, Greg, "The Effects of Poverty on Children," *The Future of Children: Children and Poverty*, Vol. 7, No.2 (Summer/Fall 1997) and Currie, Janet, "Health Disparities and Gaps in School Readiness," *The Future of Children: School Readiness*, Vol. 15, No. 1 (Spring 2005).

⁹ Turner, Margery Austin & Berube, Alan, "Vibrant Neighborhoods, Successful Schools: What the Government Can Do To Foster Both," Urban Institute, July 2009.

that low-income families often live in neighborhoods without access to full-service grocery stores, which affects their ability to access lower-cost, healthy food. This, in turn, can lead to higher obesity levels among children and iron deficiencies, both of which hurt school performance. In addition, low-income children are more likely to live in neighborhoods that have poor air and water quality as well as in housing that exposes them to a variety of hazards such as lead, asbestos, mold, roaches and rodents. These conditions, Turner and Berube note, can lead to higher levels of asthma, or higher severity, which can reduce school readiness and academic achievement.

Poor mental health. Children who grow up in poverty are much more likely to experience socio-emotional difficulties that impact their ability to do well in the classroom. Paul Tough finds that low-income children are more often exposed to trauma and stress on a frequent basis, especially during their key developmental years.¹⁰ In such cases, he finds, children are often not able to develop bonds to parents or other caregivers that are necessary for the child to help alleviate their stress. Tough finds that children who are exposed to trauma and stress do not as easily develop executive function abilities – which are those functions that help us to concentrate, plan, organize, recall information, and analyze – and have greater difficulty handling stress in their lives. The lack of executive function skills, Tough notes, can impact how well children do in the classroom.

Another outcome of repeated exposure to trauma and stress is the development of chronic, toxic

stress. Research from Evans, Brooks-Gunn, and Klebanov found that toxic stress limits the ability to develop key skills necessary to learning, including memory, attention, and language.¹¹ They found that toxic stress regularly increases the blood pressure and cortisol levels of children and that these children performed worse on academic tests than their unstressed counterparts.

Children living in low-income families are often exposed to more family friction and conflict which can impact their ability to learn. Research from Evans finds that that children in low-income families more often face violence, separation from their family and other family instability.¹² Evans found that low-income children are more likely to spend at least a week in foster or institutional care and more likely to experience abuse and neglect.

Lack of parental engagement. In addition to individual effort, school factors, and neighborhood influences, a child's family plays a significant role in their ability to succeed in school. When parents are engaged in a child's education, they can reinforce what is learned in the classroom and track their child's progress over time. Students considered to be at greatest risk, including those from low-income families, have the most to gain from quality family engagement in their education.¹³ However, a parent's ability to get involved in school activities can be affected by poverty.¹⁴ Low-income parents may work multiple jobs and have less free time and resources available to regularly participate in school activities.

¹⁰ Tough, Paul, "How Children Succeed: Grit, Curiosity, and the Hidden Power of Character," Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company, New York, NY (2012).

¹¹ Evans, Gary W; Brooks-Gunn; Jeanne & Klebanov, Pamela, "Stressing Out the Poor: Chronic Psychological Stress and the Income-Achievement Gap," Pathways Magazine, Winter 2011, Stanford Center on Poverty and Inequality.

¹² Evans, Gary W., "The Environment of Childhood Poverty", American Psychologist, Vol. 59, No. 2, February/March 2004, pgs. 77-92

¹³ Harvard Family Research Project, 2007 <http://www.hfrp.org/family-involvement/publications-resources/family-involvement-in-school-and-low-income-children-s-literacy-performance>.

¹⁴ Evans, 2004.

Neighborhood instability. Low-income neighborhoods often have fewer early education and development options that help prepare children for school. In addition, many low-income neighborhoods have higher crime rates, higher levels of physical deterioration, and poorer municipal services.¹⁵ As a result of living in neighborhoods with higher levels of crime, low-income children are more likely to experience violent crime and indicate that they are afraid to go out.¹⁶

Low-income students and their families move around much more than other children, and this mobility also impacts educational outcomes. Turner and Berube note that frequent moves from school to school affect a child's ability to learn, and schools with high levels of student mobility struggle to succeed.¹⁷ High housing costs are a key factor contributing to student mobility, forcing families to move, or become homeless, which can make it difficult for children to attend school and/or continue to go to the same school they have been attending.

Low levels of literacy. Parents are their child's first teachers and studies show that the more words they use when speaking to an eight-month old infant, the larger the child's vocabulary will be at age three. Unfortunately, children in low-income families on average are read to less, exposed to more television, and have less access to reading materials, both books and online than other children. A landmark study on language development found that children from low-income families hear as many as 30 million fewer words than their more wealthy peers before the age of four.¹⁸ *The combination of poverty and*

reading behind grade level may play a role in a child missing school on a regular basis.

Conclusion

The District's approach to boosting student achievement needs to go beyond improving the quality of classroom instruction to also address the challenges that poor children bring with them to school. Giving students from disadvantaged backgrounds the supports they need is critical to improving the performance of DC's lowest-performing schools, most of which have high poverty rates. These supports can help ensure that all students can benefit from the classroom improvements the DC Public Schools system is pursuing.

Working with other District government agencies, private foundations, and community-based organizations, DC schools can mitigate the negative impacts that poverty has on children's ability to learn. The remainder of this issue brief series will focus on specific areas where schools can play this role, including:

- Services for students who are homeless
- Physical and mental health services
- Parent engagement services
- Expanded learning/out-of-school time programs
- Wraparound services

Visit www.dcfpi.org to read the remainder of the issue briefs.

¹⁵ Evans, Gary W., "The Environment of Childhood Poverty", *American Psychologist*, Vol. 59, No. 2, February/March 2004, pgs. 77-92

¹⁶ Brooks-Gunn, Jeanne & Duncan, Greg, "The Effects of Poverty on Children," *The Future of Children: Children and Poverty*, Vol. 7, No.2 (Summer/Fall 1997)

¹⁷ Turner, Margery Austin & Berube, Alan, "Vibrant Neighborhoods, Successful Schools: What the Government Can Do To Foster Both," *Urban Institute*, July 2009.

¹⁸ Hart, B. Risley, T. *Meaningful Differences in the Everyday Experiences of Young American Children*, 1995.