

The Impact of Poverty on Education



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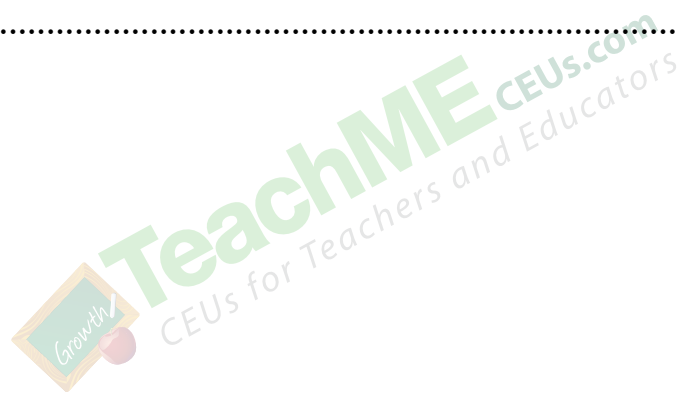
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Introduction

The disparity in the accessibility, efficacy, availability and experience in education between the one available to a low-income student and the education more affluent students enjoy cannot be overstated. Children who experience poverty from a young age enter their school years, in many cases, with factors and experiences that will compromise their education; they have higher stressors and health conditions that will affect everything they do; and they may not have access to the same levels of quality education that higher-income families do - perpetuating the disparity between the educational experiences of the poor and the well-off.

Much of this disparity comes down to the cycle of poverty - systems that perpetuate impoverished families from generation to generation. While much of the power to break this cycle belongs to officials in government, there are steps that we as teachers can take to support the struggling students and families in our care. A good first step involves educating ourselves comprehensively on the current state of poverty in America - which is where this course will begin.

Section 1: The Current State of Poverty in America

School-age children constitute one of the demographics most permanently affected by the experience of poverty. Their entire lives can be impacted by the consequences of being poor at an early age. Before we discuss how best to help school-age children suffering the impacts of poverty, it's best to attain a solid understanding of what poverty is, as well as the specific impacts that it imparts on young children.

What is poverty?

The concept of 'poverty' goes far further than a discussion of dollar amounts earned or subsisted upon per day. When we talk about poverty, we talk about quality of life (or lack thereof); we talk about endless struggle and impactful deprivation. Children who live in poverty don't have access to resources to help them thrive - including a quality education. This lack of resources means that children grow up with a similar lack of resources - and are similarly unable to provide for their children. This concept is known as the generational cycle of poverty (Peer, 2020).

People who live in poverty may not be able to afford medical treatment; they may not have shelter, electricity, or adequate food. This lack of proper nutrition can also confer stunted growth or unhealthy outcomes for students living in poverty.

Many impoverished countries are the homes to people who, subsequently, do not have access to sanitary conditions or even clean water. This directly influences associated rampant strains of preventable diseases and unnecessary, premature death for affected children (Peer, 2020).

Poverty can be calculated simply by a person's income, but there are more nuanced ways to consider this metric. The quality of life that a person or family is able to easily afford with their income, as well as the time that they need to trade for a livable income, are both factors that contribute to the concept of poverty (Peer, 2020).

Regardless of nuances, details can be helpful. It is estimated that over 689 million people worldwide live in extreme poverty; these people survive on a budget of less than two dollars a day. Most (two-thirds) of these persons are children and youth. Extreme poverty rates tend to skyrocket surrounding political and war crises, and are often accompanied by high rates of violence.

The majority of people who survive extreme poverty will have little or no schooling. The Federal Poverty Line in America suggests that a family of four living on an income of \$494 a week is considered to be living in poverty (Peer, 2020).

How many children live in poverty?

It's estimated that some 1.3 billion people (or 22% of the world's population) are in this plight, including 644 million children. In America, children represent the poorest age group. In 2018, nearly one in six American children lived in poverty. In addition, nearly 73% of poor children living in America are persons of color (Peer, 2020).

The impacts of childhood poverty are dramatically wide-ranging. Even if poor children have access to an education, they are more likely to drop out of school, be unemployed later, and even to experience involvement with the criminal justice system.

It's estimated that childhood poverty costs America about \$700 billion dollars per annum due to lost productivity, health crises, and increased crime rates that are associated with children living in poverty (Peer, 2020).

What are the personal impacts (both short- and long-term) of poverty?

Unfortunately, children who live in poverty have documented impacts that last far longer than their formative years. Because they experience these hardships from an early age, there are many permanent personal ramifications. As there is such a large segment of

the population that suffers these hardships, as well, there are many institutional impacts that the entire nation feels keenly (Peer, 2020).

In 2017, the United States poverty rate was 12.3%, resulting in approximately 40 million Americans living in poverty at that time. Many of these are people who cannot work, including the elderly, the disabled, or young children. Poverty tends to contribute to social determinants of health, the places that people living in poverty are able to live, and their work status - as well as the type of recreation that they are able to pursue. Children living through poverty not only have to deal with food scarcity or low-quality living conditions, they also have to deal with toxic stress and the potential consequences of a lifetime of income and economic inequality (Peer, 2020).

Youth who are poor tend to have increased exposure to violence, escalated risks of self-harm, and poor health outcomes when compared to their more affluent peers.

What are the institutional impacts of systemic childhood poverty?

Aside from the dramatic harmful personal effects of poverty on those who experience it - which we will explore in greater depth in the next section - the fact that childhood poverty exists results in many complex social issues at a cultural and economic level that ultimately impact all of us. Low-wage stagnation and financial instability have been issues that many governments have tried to tackle for decades; however, the fundamental issue persists. No one policy or organization can tackle it alone.

One of the most critical issues stemming from childhood poverty is the non-inclusive system that it creates. In a perfect world, everyone has the same opportunities; in the world in which we live, unequal prosperity tends to perpetuate itself through reduced opportunities as well as reduced health and personal outcomes (Mosesly, 2018).

There are many misconceptions and myths that encircle the fully-ingrained institution of poverty - some prevailing even into modernity, among many people. These myths include the idea of an American dream attainable only through merit as well as the less rosy-tinted ideas that poor people don't know how to manage their money well or are lazy, addicts, or simply coasting through life on government benefits. The fact that many people believe these myths to be true only reinforces their underlying issues. It also shifts the blame for systemic poverty from our shoulders to those experiencing it - an insidious form of victim-blaming which is more than unfair: It's unhelpful (Mosesly, 2018).

As a result of this general misunderstanding of rampant American poverty, the government often enables policies that perpetuate the problem instead of solving it. Since we, as a culture and community, do not understand the true, complex nature of poverty, we cannot take steps to give support where it is most needed (Mosesly, 2018).

Poverty is described by many as something personal and individual; the very isolated experience of someone who needs food, shelter, clothing or medical attention and is unable to do so with any ease or regularity. However, a more informed, all-encompassing definition of poverty would be this:

Poverty is the social and economic exclusion of entire groups of people.

Examined from this point of view, it is clear that there are at least six factors that help to perpetuate this prevailing system of inequity. Of course, as poverty is a very complex, multifaceted issue, and some of these issues also seem to stem from the institution of poverty - making it clear that poverty is often a circular issue (Mosesly, 2018).

The factors that are both perpetuating of poverty as well as direct symptoms of it on an institutional level include:

- **Unregulated Capitalism:** The system which feeds, successfully, off a wealthy class and a poorer class leads to sporadic concentrations of power, capital, and employment. Naturally, after a while, it becomes extremely difficult - or even impossible - to move from one class to another.
- **Hoarding of Resources:** When it is apparent that poverty is an issue, people react by wanting to protect themselves. This leads to people and corporations seeking to find, obtain, and hold (whether they are using them or not) vital resources - generally, in quantities that constitute more than a single person or corporation needs. This results in scarcity of resources and higher prices for other people, including people who may truly need those assets.
- **Decline in Labor Unions:** As it becomes clear that ours is a dual-class society, labor unions built to protect lower-income people (and their jobs) enjoy reduced power to bargain for better conditions. As a result, people who belong to labor unions - who tend to be from lower-income communities - have even lower wages and much-reduced benefits.
- **Social Oppression of the Poor:** There is a stigma associated with poverty, a stigma that causes many higher-income people to wish to distance themselves from the poor if at all possible. This results in systematic exclusion, mistreatment,

and exploitation of an entire group of people - people already underrepresented and underprivileged due to their income levels.

- **Institutional Racism:** Due to the fact that, many times, there are specific groups of people who bear an unfair share of the weight of poverty, many people will allocate privileges and resources unfairly to entire groups of people. This presents challenges to people with lower incomes that they wouldn't necessarily have had to otherwise face.
- **Rural Isolation:** People with lower incomes often cannot afford to live in larger cities. As a result, they tend to congregate in smaller, more rural communities. This likewise distances them from infrastructure, resources, and places with higher economic activity - disallowing them potential ways to create more revenue. Unfortunately, this is also associated with less power in decision-making, as places with more economic activity and larger populations generally have more power when it comes to crafting and influencing policy decisions.

As each of these factors both helps to cause and strengthen the experience of poverty and stems from it, it's clear that much needs to be done - by those suffering economic inequality as well as those benefiting from it - to confront this issue (Mosesly, 2018).

It also shows that poverty is a cycle; not a linear problem.

What is the cycle of poverty?

The term 'cycle of poverty' refers to the concept of cyclic, intergenerational poverty that tends to - much like a line of cascading dominoes - perpetuate itself and continue easily, gaining more momentum with each generation until a family is so entrenched in poverty it is unthinkable that any progeny would be able to dig themselves out (Peer, 2020).

Essentially, it boils down to the idea that parents who are poor are forced to raise their children in a lifestyle affected by (and even dictated by) the constraints of poverty. Those children, unduly burdened with the downstream effects of an extremely low-income lifestyle, are very likely to grow up vulnerable to adulthood poverty; during which they are extremely likely to have children themselves who, as a result, grow up in an impoverished household (Peer, 2020).

Because children tend to be more vulnerable than adults to the negative impacts of poverty - as they are very impressionable and very much still developing during this early age - the cycle of poverty is an extremely hard one to break. The idealistic solution

is clear: Increase protections against poverty by providing low-income adults with more access to quality childcare, higher education, and adequate employment. However, as many people subscribe to the myth that poverty is the fault of those who fall victim to it and there are hardly economic and financial incentives to help poor people thrive, this solution largely remains out of reach (Peer, 2020).

What are the current prevailing strategies targeting the end of the cycle of poverty?

Even though the incentives to helping end poverty remain largely unattractive (to the non-poor), there are nonprofits and charities, as well as some governmental organizations, who have dedicated themselves to strategizing ways to break the cycle of poverty.

Because it has been realized that it is not a simple problem, certainly not one to be erased with a simple (albeit helpful) influx of cash, experts who have studied the matter have come up with one leading strategy to break the cycle. Termed the 'two-generation approach,' this solution aims to help a family grow economically by, first, supporting each parent separately as both a parent and a worker; and, secondly, investing in the future of the children (All4Kids, 2019).

The idea is that if parents have the opportunity to invest in higher education and get better jobs, they will enjoy higher pay - which will allow them the opportunity to raise their children with a higher level of reliability and comfort. The strategy used by nonprofits also works to allocate favorable childcare resources to these parents, so parents feel safe leaving their children in a safe and healthy environment while they go to work (All4Kids, 2019).

The children themselves benefit from this situation, as, because they are being well-cared for during both the night and day, they can avoid the numerous pitfalls of chronic stress and poor nutrition that often coexist with poverty. By investing this type of care, education, and overall improvement into both generations suffering from poverty at the same time, it's possible to achieve enough economic growth within the family so that in order to escape the cycle of poverty (All4Kids, 2019).

This solution is dependent upon two protective factors against poverty - both dealing with education. Both parental education and childhood education can help families escape the cycle.

Understanding the Benefits of Parental Education as a Way to Protect Against Poverty

Children whose parents have enjoyed the benefits of a higher education and who attend high-quality childcare generally have more positive developmental benefits than children who do not have these. The advantages usually seen in children who have these characteristics are multifaceted, and include:

- **A Quickly-Growing Vocabulary:** When researchers compared the relative size and ease-of-use of the vocabularies of a wide pool of eighteen-month-old children, they found that there was a significant difference in both factors between children whose parents were highly educated and had a more moderate income and children whose parents were not highly educated and had a lower income. This difference only became more marked with time. By the time a child reaches three years of age, the child of parents with college degrees will have a vocabulary that is two or three times as large as a child with parents who have a high school degree (All4Kids, 2019).
- **Someone To Help With Academic Problems:** Children who had the benefit of educated parents tended to struggle less severely with academic issues precisely because - when they did struggle - there was someone in the home who understood. With their parents on hand to assist with the obstacles of academics, children were less likely to become frustrated enough to act out - and more likely to succeed, even if their experience was harder than it needed to be (All4Kids, 2019).
- **A Naturally Higher Chance of Achieving:** The exact mechanisms have not yet been elucidated, but an analysis of wide-scale economic data has shown that maternal education has a substantive link to the intellectual outcomes of a woman's child - even if the child has other indicators of poverty. Higher education for parents (rather than income) is also linked with higher scores on standardized tests and higher grades for children, showing that - possibly - parents with higher education were able to implement achievement-fostering practices in their homes for their children, even if they didn't necessarily have more resources for doing so (All4Kids, 2019).

Investing in parents and their education as a proactive, protective practice against childhood poverty could be one way to nip childhood poverty in the bud, before a child even needs to feel the effects of poverty (All4Kids, 2019).

However, investing in parents is only one half of the current gold standard for fighting poverty with a two-generational approach.

A child's own education is also vital for that child to grow up with as many opportunities as possible - making access to a good school and reliable education for a child the other protection that a child has against the long-term effects of childhood poverty.

Researchers have found that even the simple ritual of attending school each day can combat many of the ill effects of traumatic childhood events and other chronic stressors that come hand in hand with poverty. Therefore, although it is by no means a comprehensive solution, simply prioritizing the accessibility of good schools with good academics, social opportunities, and more will go a long way toward breaking the cycle of poverty for many affected families (All4Kids, 2019).

What challenges do poor children face in school (especially when compared to their higher-income peers)?

Once a child has gotten to school, their struggles are by no means over, unfortunately. Even if low-income children have access to a good education, they will still experience many unfortunate setbacks merely as side effects of their upbringing. Any solution that looks at eradicating the income gap and substantially improving the lives and educations of children facing poverty need to address the following challenges that many low-income children face when going through school:

- **Lack of adequate preparation for school:** As opposed to many of their higher-income peers, children with a low income may not have access to high-quality early childhood programs and education. Many of their classmates who had this type of access will enter kindergarten with several key skills already well-developed - such as the ability to recognize letters easily, or to count simple objects up to ten. While these may seem like easily-learnable skills, the fact that some children arrive in kindergarten on day one knowing how to do them and others don't is an early driver of income-based educational disparity (Convertino, 2017).
- **An inherently smaller beginning vocabulary:** While one of the points of schooling is to provide children with access to the tools to build a larger vocabulary, studies show that this is another area that low-income children come to school with a natural disadvantage: On balance, low-income children enroll in kindergarten having heard millions fewer words than a typical middle-class child. This lack of

familiarity with many words makes it much harder to learn how to read even once a child is in kindergarten (Convertino, 2017).

- **Poorer nutrition when compared to their peers:** Lower-income children are far likelier to go to school hungry. This can make it difficult to concentrate on one's studies (Convertino, 2017).
- **Inadequate access to medical care:** Poorer families may not be able to get their children to the doctor as often as is recommended. Far from simply being able to meet with a pediatric doctor or primary care physician with regularity, children often need to meet with specialists such as eye doctors and dentists. Lower-income families may not be able to engage with these doctors to realize that a problem exists or be able to afford corrections and interventions when they're prescribed. Sometimes, problems such as vision issues make it much more difficult to learn appropriately for children from low-income families (Convertino, 2017).
- **Lack of reliability when it comes to their home:** Children need a stable, trustworthy home environment. Unfortunately, low-income families tend to move around a lot, which can result in disrupted education and stressors for children. The lack of continuity with educators and fellow classmates can make learning rough for some children; also, a lack of standard curricula in many states (and across the country) could result in students missing entire subjects or concepts, depending on when they move (Convertino, 2017).
- **Coping with a dysfunctional family:** Low-income children tend to have to deal with a myriad of distracting or even harmful issues at home. Instead of being able to come home to a calm atmosphere, one conducive to rest, reading, learning and growing, poor children often come home and have to experience and navigate adult problems. On a more practical level, children may not have the space, time, or resources to complete their homework or other projects while they're at home with a family that is struggling - resulting in their falling even further behind their peers (Convertino, 2017).
- **Lack of familiarity with the English language:** Because of racial inequality problems in modern America, more and more impoverished children are naturally not fluent in the English language. As the majority of educational resources tend to be available solely in English, this places these children in an even more difficult situation (Convertino, 2017).

- **Lack of access to enriching social activities and extracurriculars:** Many middle-class students are able to afford and enjoy clubs and activities ranging from sports lessons, art, dance, and music after school and on the weekends. Even less formally, these students are often able to go on family trips to museums, shows, historical sites, and other places that can bring dry academic subjects to life - igniting passion and curiosity in this subset of students, leaving others far behind (Convertino, 2017).

Section 1: Summary

When considering the intergenerational, cyclic problem of poverty, it's important to realize that it's very complex - and there are factors involved which both perpetuate and stem from systems of poverty. While there are protective factors - education for both parent and child being one - it's vital for many governments, charities, schools and individual people to realize the scale of the problem so that real change can happen.

The ways in which poverty affects families and young children are manifold and insidious. In the next section, we'll take a look at the ways that the reduced preparation for education, lowered access to good medical resources and nutrition, and increased presence of chronic stressors can affect children in long-lasting and extremely detrimental ways.

Section 2: The Lasting Effects of Poverty

The co-founder and CEO of Stand for Children, a nonprofit that advocates for a high-quality education for all, notes that the impact that poverty has on a child's psyche, physiology, and ability to access and utilize a good education is significant - and that it starts early (Taylor, 2017).

As we have seen, children who grow up experiencing poverty tend to begin school behind their peers in many ways, and they often do not have the health or support required to truly thrive in an academic setting. The National Center for Education Statistics has even attributed the effects of an early childhood in poverty to lower levels of achievement in academia; they have noted that they can see this effect from kindergarten all the way through twelfth grade, suggesting that a difficult childhood is extremely burdensome and difficult to overcome even for children who do make it to their high school graduations (Taylor, 2017).

That last is a salient point: Data does show that low-income students are far less likely to make it to the end of high school. One study showed that low-income students were five times more likely to leave high school early than their high-income peers. When they did make it to graduation, it tended to be delayed: Poor students were thirteen times less likely to graduate when initially planned, instead taking five or more years to get through their required high school courses (Taylor, 2017).

These effects can be traced both to an impoverished student's potentially less-than-desirable home situation as well as the likely under-resourced nature of the school that they are able to access. Many times, too, there is simply not an emphasis placed on the goal of going to college that is often very present in the homes of middle-class students. Students suffering from poverty from an early age have neither the foundation, the tools, or the motivation to complete high school and attend college - necessarily putting them at a huge disadvantage to their wealthier peers (Taylor, 2017).

One researcher noted that the common existing avenues to providing relief to students experiencing financial pressures fall far short of the mark. Academic grants and other forms of institutional aid do exist, at the collegiate level and for elementary school students. However, these relief packages rarely provide enough to cover the full needs required by a student suffering from poverty, and so do not provide much help (Taylor, 2017).

The Unequal Equation of Educating Poor Students

It's been posited that the current education system exacerbates many of the issues experienced by children experiencing systemic poverty. While school can be a protective factor and a tool to help break the cycle of poverty, as noted above, it needs to be a first-rate school, providing a comprehensive education and extra support to help compensate for the lack of resources that poor children may naturally have (Taylor, 2017).

Unfortunately, this isn't always the case. For schools that see high rates of impoverished students, the current education system does not have the ability (or motivation) to help: students who come to school with less are often given less to work with, instead of more to compensate for their lack of initial support. Schools expect less of those students, spend less on those students, and even assign them less experienced and effective teachers (Kati Haycock, The Education Trust).

The U.S. Department of Education has confirmed through a report that 40% of schools that are identified as low-income do not get their fair share of funding from their states that is earmarked for investing in education. Former Secretary of Education Arne Duncan

has acknowledged this, saying, “in far too many places, policies for assigning extra support, resources, and teachers to low-income students in need perpetuated the problem rather than solving it” (Taylor, 2017).

As policies and government decisions haven’t been able to route funding to low-income schools and other places where it is most needed, some schools and nonprofits have turned to crowdfunding to connect teachers who work in low-income, high-need communities with donors able to provide them with the required resources. Sometimes, this works; however, this process has also been used to highlight the fact that, as a nation, we simply don’t allocate education funds remotely equitably (Taylor, 2017).

There have even been studies that have shown the logical rationale for investing more education funds in low-income districts. The National Bureau of Economic Research found in one study that increasing spending in impoverished communities was directly tied to increased student outcomes in many subjects. The students in those communities tended to stay in school longer, even if they had many of the risk factors for dropping out; additionally, many of those students were able to attend college, earn a higher income, and break the cycle of poverty for their particular family (Taylor, 2017).

Unfortunately, even with this success story, most academic funding in America still tends to go toward districts that already have the majority of the resources. This is particularly unfortunate, as there are some education experts and psychologists who believe that the very simple existence of a well-resourced classroom tends to send a positive message to the students who have access to it. If low-income students or members of an under-resourced community walk into a beautiful, well-equipped classroom every day, they are hearing a subliminal message that they are worth those resources - and that their teachers are there for them and have high expectations for their success (Taylor, 2017).

This is not the case; and the students who most need to hear this message often do not.

Factors Other than Money Which Contribute to Under-Resourced Schools and Poor Educational Outcomes for Impoverished Children

Money can solve a world of problems - but many experts believe that while increased funding for low-income schools is indeed crucial the need for improvement goes far beyond an influx of capital in the right places.

Course rigor, teacher quality, and accountability on children to complete homework and participate in their classes are all contributors toward an excellent (and effective)

education. Right now, these types of positive attributes tend to be shunted towards higher-income communities. As many experts have pointed out, this allocates good initiatives and resources to those who already have a head start in education. Low-income students, according to many, need the highest amount of expertise and the most support when completing their education, as they are at the highest risk to drop out or have learning issues (Taylor, 2017).

Resources continue to flow to higher-income schools. The achievement gap continues to widen.

Non-financial initiatives strengthening downstream indicators of positive school environments - high expectations and accountability, course rigor, experienced and enthusiastic teachers - have led to some positive outcomes. One study showed that integrating rigorous coursework early on and, later, implementing programs that specifically readied students for college in low-income schools increased the number of poor students who graduated from both high school and college (Taylor, 2017).

Initiatives targeting an overall improvement in the atmosphere and conditions of low-income schools also see results. As one child education expert pointed out, a school that is set up to be engaging, exciting, and fun will help students be more interested in completing their programs, in excelling, and in continuing their education.

There is no single fix for the current link between poverty, access (or lack thereof) to a good education, and the lopsided funding in American education (Taylor, 2017).

What are ACEs and how can they impact a child as they grow?

ACEs, or Adverse Child Experiences, are any events that a child undergoes which are interpreted or considered to be traumatic. Examples of common ACEs include experiencing the incarceration of a guardian, sibling, or parent; the divorce of their parents, or witnessing (or experiencing) domestic violence. Studies have shown that the more ACEs that children undergo as they develop, the more economic and health problems they will have when they are adults (CDC, 2020).

Unfortunately, the risk factors for many ACEs, including those listed above, tend to stack up when a family has a low or unreliable source of income. Therefore, children who already are disadvantaged due to chronic stress and lower health statistics tend to have even more stressors and traumatizing events to experience - further reinforcing the idea that childhood poverty has long-lasting and, in many cases, irreversible physiological and psychological effects (CDC, 2020).

How does stress impact those who are living in poverty?

Before we discuss the specific ways that impoverished persons respond to high levels of chronic stress, let's talk about the way that stress impacts the human body - regardless of how affluent a person is. Our bodies are equipped to handle short-term stress. When stressors become constant or consistent, however, your body can have serious long-term effects or sicknesses as a result (American Psychological Association, 2018).

The adverse events associated with chronic stress can vary from person to person, but the most typical downstream effects of chronic stress include:

- **Musculoskeletal effects:** When you're stressed, you tense up. Human muscles aren't prepared to be tensed all (or even the majority of) the time; humans are not equipped to be in a state of guardedness twenty-four hours a day. When we are put in that scenario through constant stress, our muscles can be triggered to respond in painful and harmful ways. Headaches and migraines often start in this way, along with joint and muscle pain that can make normal life and regular movement very difficult (American Psychological Association, 2018).
- **Respiratory effects:** A normally-functioning respiratory system supplies necessary oxygen to every cell in the body. It also helps assist with the efficient removal of carbon dioxide from the body. When a person is stressed, breathing can be effected; for example, instead of taking long, slow, deep breaths, a stressed person tends to breathe rapidly and shallowly. This can be very dangerous for people who already have respiratory conditions - which people in low-income communities are predisposed to have - but can also increase the rate at which people experience panic attacks (American Psychological Association, 2018).
- **Cardiovascular effects:** A healthy cardiovascular system brings blood efficiently to all body systems. Stress tends to increase a person's heart rate and elevate a person's blood pressure. When stress is acute and a person's body is allowed to return to normalcy, this isn't harmful. When individuals experience stress constantly, over a long time, forcing the body to be in this elevated state, they become much more at risk for hypertension, heart attacks, or stroke (even at a young age) (American Psychological Association, 2018).
- **Endocrine effects:** The endocrine system refers to the carefully-woven web of hormones that fuels everyday moods, activities, and actions that take place in human bodies. When cortisol, the stress hormone, flushes through a person's body at a higher than normal rate for long periods of time, it can affect virtually

every mechanism in the human body - from the way that humans make energy, the way they store fat, their sleep behaviors and even their sexual maturation. Because of this, if a young person is exposed to more cortisol than is healthy, they can develop myriad conditions such as obesity, insomnia, stunted or delayed puberty, and chronic fatigue (American Psychological Association, 2018).

- **Gastrointestinal effects:** Stress impacts the brain-gut connection in many ways. Chronic stress can trigger discomfort, bloating, pain, and other symptoms that can make it very difficult to concentrate on one's studies - and also make it very difficult to get all of the nutrition that a growing body needs. This can in turn affect a young person's emotions, the ability to concentrate, and other parts of growing that could make the student a target for lower educational outcomes at school (American Psychological Association, 2018).

Evidence is growing that children who are exposed to the effects of poverty from a young age both have more chronic stressors and a reduced capability to manage their stress levels effectively. As a result, they're at a far higher risk for having harmful effects of stress. Neglect and hunger are common stressors that afflict impoverished children. Unfortunately, the downstream effects of these stressors mean that the typical experiences found with childhood poverty can manage to act like viruses or toxins - ultimately hijacking the normal, healthy development of a child's growing brain (American Psychological Association, 2018).

Studies have found that repeated exposure to adverse childhood experiences (or ACEs) can have the capability, even, to rebuild a child's brain, especially in the prefrontal cortex. As the prefrontal cortex is in charge of executive function, the ability to choose between good and bad, and other skills vital to becoming a productive member of society, this can wreak havoc on a young child's ability to be a good student. ACEs can also affect development of a child's hippocampus, which is the part of the brain that handles learning and retention of memories. In short, students who have undergone traumatic childhoods may be less able to retain new information - giving them a crucial handicap at school, in addition to everything else they may be going through (American Psychological Association, 2018).

As if this weren't enough, it turns out that the effects of chronic, toxic stress in poor children can mix or be compounded by other situations and conditions commonly found in low-income households. Stress can interact with air pollution, emotional disorders, and more to create and bolster cognitive deficits in affected children that only

strengthens the disadvantages they bring with them to school each and every day (American Psychological Association, 2018).

Fortunately, children are developmentally and neurologically resilient. Because their brains and bodies are in the process of growing through their teenage years, some studies have found that intervention during these formative years can have an ameliorative effect. However, in order to help the brain fully adapt or 'bounce back' from years of chronic stressors, it's vital to give low-income children as much support as possible, as early in their educations as possible (American Psychological Association, 2018).

As we have seen, this simply isn't happening on any scale that might have a mass positive effect.

What effect does poverty have on childhood cognitive development?

The most important period for normal development for children is early childhood. During this time, a young human's brain is developing very rapidly. If a child is undergoing the conditions of poverty during this time, then there may be significant dramatic effects on the child's cognitive development.

During this formative time, children's physical bodies are developing, but also their social and emotional skills and even their aptitude for language and logical thinking. All of these factors - or lack of them - play a huge role in a child's wellbeing well into their adult lives (Stallen, 2017).

Completely apart from the physical conditions related to poverty, studies also show that simply being stressed can alter the way that a child's brain develops. Stress induced by poverty can lead to permanent changes in the future structure and function of the brain. As a result, a child who is affected in this way will likely experience negative consequences with reduced learning outcomes later in life, as well as health and behavioral issues (Stallen, 2017).

Researchers who have studied the effects of poverty on childhood brain development have found that growing up in poverty tends to be associated with smaller masses of cortical grey and white matter in the brain. Children who grew up in poverty also tended to have smaller volumes in the amygdala and hippocampus. The processes that these brain functions directly influence, such as stress regulation and emotional processing, are worsened as a result (Stallen, 2017).

The long-lasting repercussions of poverty on mental health include later chronic stress disorders, anxiety, impaired memory, and other adverse effects. As a result of the research performed on this phenomenon, analysts found that children who grew up in low-income communities had high amounts of cortisol, the stress hormone, in their systems at 7 and 15 months of age. These are crucial times for brain development; and cortisol's influence makes it much more difficult for young bodies to mature in a way conducive to later thriving (Stallen, 2017).

Children who live below the poverty line often have developmental delays which result in their behaving and performing between two and four years below their grade level. These delays tend to combine and escalate, resulting in uneducated adults who are likely to remain poor for much of their lives. Perhaps due to the difficulties associated with developmental delays, it's been found that nearly 30% of children who grow up in low-income neighborhoods do not graduate from high school (Stallen, 2017).

What effects does poverty have on the overall health of children?

Aside from neurodevelopment effects, poverty does tend to result in adverse events for children's physical health. The effects of poverty on a child's health begin long before a child is born - and they will, most likely, last for the child's entire life.

A baby's environment in utero - before the child is born - affects the individual's future development. This uterine environment is affected by the psyche of the mother - which means that a mother who lives in a low-income or stress-ridden situation can slow her child's growth rate and possibly even increase the likelihood of premature birth. If the mother does not have access to adequate nutrition, the child will, likely, have a low birth weight - which can be associated with poor health outcomes later in life (All4Kids, 2019).

One study analyzed the relationship between low-income families and found that a low socioeconomic status was highly correlated with obesity and other chronic illnesses, such as asthma. The authors of the study theorized that children who grow up in poor communities may have limited opportunities for exercise, less access to healthy food and other options that make living healthily easier and more accessible. The downstream ramifications of poverty, therefore, can coincide with the effects of a poor diet and sedentary lifestyle - which include diabetes, heart disease, hypertension, and more (All4Kids, 2019).

What are the effects of food insecurity on low-income children and their education?

The fact that many children who grow up in poverty do not have steady, reliable access to food inevitably impacts their ability to enjoy an effective education. According to the US Department of Agriculture, 11.8% of American households experienced food insecurity over the course of 2017. Food insecurity may refer to a lack of food altogether or a lack of information or access to the nutritional food necessary for health and proper growth. That percentage translates to over twelve million American children undergoing food insecurity - which results in lower energy and poor developmental outcomes for those experiencing this condition (All4Kids, 2019).

Many of the most expensive and weighty problems that the United States faces today can be linked to the experience of food insecurity. The Food Research & Action Center reported that many conditions - from asthma to low birth weight and even birth defects - tend to happen more often when in families undergoing food insecurity. The report continues to say that children who do not have reliable access to good food are far more likely to have recurring illnesses, require frequent hospitalization, and as a result miss a lot more school than their well-fed classmates (All4Kids, 2019).

Specific deficiencies of key micronutrients conducive to health and growth while a child is still developing can result in many delays in proper maturation. These include reductions in attention spans and motor skills, poor memory abilities, and lower test scores. These are precisely the factors that can result in poor classroom presence and problematic relationships with teachers and classmates when the child is in school - perpetuating a lower-value educational experience for the suffering student (All4Kids, 2019).

If continued, this tendency toward sickness will manifest in adulthood as chronic diseases, such as arthritis, proclivity towards strokes, cancer, and coronary heart disease.

What are the effects of toxic stress on a child's development?

When children live in poverty, they tend to have prolonged exposure to stress - whether it's from physical conditions caused by a lower income or from indirect effects, such as emotional turmoil from a dysfunctional family or constant bullying from peers because the child appears disadvantaged (The Children's Defense Fund, 2020).

Undergoing stress itself can be a harmful experience, but the effects go far further than the timed experience of that stress. If cortisol, the stress hormone, is found in excess in

the body of a developing child, this can make typical, healthy formation of that child's organs (including their heart and brain) very difficult (The Children's Defense Fund, 2020).

Cortisol is typically a very important hormone; it helps regulate a person's flight-or-fight response, and it can even help a person learn how to deal with stress effectively. However, in a young child's body, when a child hasn't learned these management techniques yet, being in a constant state of stress can make it impossible to rest and grow appropriately (The Children's Defense Fund, 2020).

What is the achievement gap between students in low-income schools and high-income schools?

The correlation is unfortunate but clear: Students who grow up in less fortunate socioeconomic areas or under conditions of poverty tend to score lower on tests than their peers who may have more resources at their disposal. The achievement gap, or the metrics that show just how much better high-income students tend to perform when compared to low-income students, is only widening. It's much wider now than it has been in decades past. Now, researchers are beginning to understand that the achievement gap between the poorest students and those who live at the very top of the socioeconomic spectrum is likely far larger than previously estimated - which makes it very difficult to allocate resources for the students who will be most in need of that help (Michelmore and Dynarski, 2017).

One metric used to target these resources is measuring the body of students who are eligible for free or low-priced lunch options. However, this is a very loosely-defined metric; about a quarter of American children live in poverty, but nearly half of American students are eligible for these lower-priced meal options. Within the subset of students that qualify for reduced-price meals, moreover, there is a very wide variation in test scores (another metric that may have questionable merit, but is one of few nationwide metrics that the current education system can provide) (Michelmore and Dynarski, 2017).

What specific issues might an under-resourced school struggle with?

There are many differences between a school in a low-income community and its analog in a more affluent neighborhood. Among these differences are the following:

- **Teacher Issues:** Schools in lower-income communities tend to have issues with teacher consistency, and may even have staffing issues. Over the past years, the

demand for good teachers has increased. Teachers may tend to gravitate toward schools that have more resources (and are able to pay their teachers higher salaries). In addition, the stress of having to support students struggling through poverty can make it difficult for the teachers that do work in lower-income communities to stay year to year, creating a higher turnover rate for poorer schools than wealthier ones. As a result, students in lower-income schools are unable to form long-lasting bonds with teachers and may not be able to find the mentorship, trust, and support that they need (Thompson, 2018).

- **Student Readiness:** Students who live in low-income communities may not be as prepared for school as their wealthier peers. Not only are they more likely to have health issues, they may not have experienced the same level of care as other children or have been exposed to other pre-school enrichment factors (such as being surrounded by books, educational toys, or high-quality childcare). This can mean that low-income students require a higher level of support upon matriculation in kindergarten - support which a teacher may or may not be equipped or able to provide (Thompson, 2018).
- **Lack of Funding:** All public schools should receive equal funding. However, this isn't always the case. In wealthier school districts, parents often take the initiative to organize fundraisers for specific school programs or upgrades - an initiative which parents in lower-income neighborhoods may not be able to take on. In addition, many states may allocate their resources in a lopsided fashion: Studies have shown that poor schools often do receive less money from the government than wealthier ones receive (Thompson, 2018).

Section 2: Summary

When a child struggles with childhood poverty, that child is exposed to multifaceted levels of harm and stress that can last their entire lives. From physiological health issues all the way to downstream psychological effects of trauma from adverse childhood experiences, a systemic and institutional low economic status can affect health and success even years after a child is no longer directly affected by it.

Because this is the case, in order to best support the next generation it is vital that we begin to work toward a more even financial balance in America. While much of the onus of precipitating this change is out of the hands of teachers and parents, there are steps that we can take to help struggling students and their families thrive. In the next section, we'll take a look at these factors.

Section 3: What We Can Do to Help End the Cycle of Poverty

The two-generation approach for eradicating the cycle of poverty requires support for parents as well as their children. One myth often associated with poverty is that the children who grow up affected by it deserve worlds of help - and the parents who 'put them in that condition' should merely be held responsible. As we've seen, the cycle of poverty shows us that many adults who live under the poverty line did absolutely nothing to put themselves there - and are often in this situation despite working very hard to give themselves and their families every possible advantage (Columbia, 2020).

Even if it could be argued that an adult with a child who lives in poverty did do something to worsen their situation, simply placing the blame on the victim would not do anything to solve the problem. For the best outcome for the whole family, including the children who grow up under those conditions, support needs to be there for both parent and child (Columbia, 2020).

There's a scientific basis for the need for multigenerational support, as well. New research out of Columbia is showing that trauma is passed down from parent to child, both socially and through a biological process known as epigenetics. If parents suffer, so do their children; there's no such thing as isolating the youth and investing in their health and happiness. If only that is done, the investment is bound to be futile (Columbia, 2020).

Concrete Steps to Break the Cycle of Poverty

Now that we have thoroughly covered the ways in which poor students suffer disadvantages when compared to their more affluent peers, it's time to get down to business. We've mentioned the two-generation approach that currently is the go-to strategy for breaking the cycle of poverty from an institutional level. However, that isn't nearly enough to ensure that children of all income levels are getting the education they need (Bringle, 2019).

Is there anything that teachers, parents, and other people who do not occupy positions of power within the government can do to help poor children thrive?

As it turns out, there is. In this next section, we'll look at ways to help children who are suffering the effects of poverty do well in school as well as strategies to get their parents more involved in their education, no matter what traumas their families may be

experiencing. These tips can apply whether you're a teacher of struggling students, a parent in this difficult situation, an administrator at a low-income school, or anyone else who would like to do something to work toward ending the cycle of poverty (Bringle, 2019).

- **Education Surrounding the Reality of Financial Situations:** The first step in taking actionable change is making sure that you and your community are aware of the facts. If you believe the current myths surrounding poverty or are unaware that it is an issue, you cannot help. If you're suffering from poverty and don't know the details of your situation or that you can take steps to help your family heal, you won't be able to do anything about it. If you're in danger of slipping into poverty, you need to know what's happening because if you don't pay attention, you are more susceptible to being taken advantage of. Finally, if you know people who are struggling from poverty, you need to make sure that they are aware of the following parts of financial literacy:
 - How credit works
 - Their options regarding financial institutions and their products
 - Their rights when it comes to financial products and banking
 - Basic financial literacy - such as the theories behind annual percentage rates, interest rates, and loan repayment terms

Having this knowledge at your fingertips or enabling persons struggling with financial inequality to have this information can give them the tools they need to make sure that they're not getting taken advantage of by predatory lenders or unstable banks. While this in itself might not be enough to break the cycle of poverty, it could certainly help families understand that making certain choices could worsen or perpetuate their predicament (Bringle, 2019).

- **Changing the Rhetoric and Mindset Surrounding Money:** For many people suffering from poverty, one of the biggest and most crucial changes that must occur isn't necessarily to do with their financial status. One of the most impactful adjustments that must come about in order to break the cycle of poverty (and one of the hardest changes to implement) involves altering the mindset and behavior of those who struggle from poverty. This is not to blame those who are struggling; it's to help them move from survival mode into a place where they are well-equipped to thrive. People who grew up in the cycle of poverty may have

deeply ingrained feelings about money that they inherited from their parents and influenced the behaviors that they now exhibit as adults. In order to question, challenge, or change your relationship with money (or assist someone else in doing so), you should start by asking these questions:

- How did the household in which you were raised handle money?
- How did your parents handle money? Did they pass along any habits to you, healthy or otherwise?
- Think about what happens right before you spend money. What triggers do you have around money (and spending or saving it)?
- Do you have any beliefs surrounding money?
- How many assets do you own? How much money is in the bank? How much do you owe? Is it more or less than what you own?
- Are you aware of any steps that you can take to make any of these beliefs, practices, triggers or habits move in the right direction?

These questions may seem facile, but being able to see your current financial status - or assisting another with this realization - as temporary and changeable can make a world of difference. People suffering from poverty need help; we can't expect them and their children to change the cycle of poverty all by themselves. But helping people in poverty and people close to the situation have the mindset that we can solve this problem if we all think objectively and logically will make a difference in the decisions we collectively make (Bringle, 2019).

- **Knowing How to Leverage Community Resources for the Common Good:** As has been discussed elsewhere, in order to break the cycle of poverty it's clear that we need to do far more than simply have a positive mindset. We also need to be aware of how to take advantage of opportunities that come our way (or come the way of people in need), and how to use those resources as a community so that no child has to experience suffering due to their family's income level. After we establish that we have the information that we need and we've worked to ensure that everyone involved has an optimistic mindset about the change that can happen, we need to be able to realize and utilize community resources to assist those in need. First, it's vital to know what resources are available in our local communities. If you have resident financial experts, tax filers, or other people who understand money well, see if you can get them interested and involved in

assisting those in need in your community or at your school. (A good strategy for doing so will likely involve taking any prospective volunteers through the education and mindset-shift steps outlined above). Some places that you may be able to visit first in order to find people who may be willing and able to help you include:

- Nonprofit organizations
- Public schools and libraries
- Community centers
- Churches

Some of these organizations will have programs in place to teach those in need about taxes, basic financial literacy, and financial products (such as loans) that are not predatory and are geared to help people succeed. Sometimes, institutions like libraries will even have recurring speakers, free courses, and resources to learn further about opportunities like coaching (Bringle, 2019).

- **Learning the Real Ways that People Take Advantage of the Poor - and Establishing Protective Practices in Your Community:** Unfortunately, it's very common for some businesses and financial institutions to have programs and practices that may look like they're helping people when in fact they are geared to take advantage of people who need help. For example, the cycle of payday lending rarely helps anyone other than the person offering the loan. Keeping impoverished people away from these types of so-called financial 'opportunities' can help them refrain from placing themselves in an even more difficult situation. Helping people be aware of predatory practices and making alternative options (such as credit coaching, budgetary resources and classes, and loans that have reasonable interest rates) very clear will help make sure that no one is taking advantage of anyone in your community (Bringle, 2019).
- **Remembering that Credit Counts - and Establishing Systems for Education Regarding Credit that Truly Helps:** If you or anyone you love has ever had bad credit, you know that it can truly take a toll on your financial wellness for a very long time. Helping our community members establish habits and practices that are geared to help their credit scores grow over time will help ensure that, when people want to purchase a home or a car or a loan, they aren't saddled with interest rates that could render those types of projects impossible. Bad credit can

do far more damage than necessarily in a person's financial life, as well - in some states, bad credit can influence the type of jobs that people are able to get. Breaking the cycle of poverty will definitely include thorough responsibility in the way that people manage credit. Connecting people in need to coaches, experts, and other people who can be trusted to assist them with the credit rebuilding process can go a long way toward improving a family's financial situation. It's also important that everyone knows precisely how credit works, how institutions determine one's credit score, and the types of actions that influence a person's credit (Bingle, 2019).

Concrete Steps to Help Impoverished Students

So far, we've focused on general ways to support adults and parents to break the cycle of poverty. This is very important, as it's clear that assisting parents and helping rebuild the financial health of families is a key step toward making sure that America's children have access to a great education, regardless of their financial status.

Now, we turn to specific ways to help students who may be experiencing poverty. Studies indicate that approximately one in five children in America live in poverty - a statistic that has begun to fuel the fire of educational reform. Whether or not this comes to pass on an institutional level anytime soon, it's vital that each member of an academic community feels empowered to assist students directly. Next, we'll go into several concrete ways that you can take action to help students living in poverty:

- **Make sure that you have high expectations for your students who are living in poverty:** If you have an impoverished student, one of your initial reflexes may be to walk on eggshells around that student. You may wish, consciously or otherwise, to shield that student from further hardships in your classroom. You may think that giving these students an easy time in your classroom or cutting them a little slack is one way that you can make their lives a little easier. You'd be right - in the short-term. However, to make sure that your students from a meager financial background have the same skills and opportunities before them as their peers who may have a better home situation, you need to have high expectations of your students from low-income backgrounds as well. To do otherwise would truly be an injustice. As an educator, you will need to find ways to balance your empathy and compassion for what struggles a child may have with your primary job - which is to give them a rigorous, value-based education (Harmon, 2018).

Why is this important? If you, as a teacher, hold your students to high expectations, this teaches your students the ability to work toward reachable goals. It teaches them that success is possible. It helps motivate them to do better. This skill of motivation and goal achievement is more important than any subject you may teach your students in class - and it is impossible to do properly if you do not hold your students to high expectations (Harmon, 2018).

Interested in actionable ways to make this happen - and get your students more involved in the self-motivation process? Here are a few ideas you may wish to try:

- Have your students set their own goals - with input and assistance from you, if necessary. Then, meet with your students periodically to give them the information that they need to achieve those goals on their own!
- On the first day of school, make it very clear what your expectations are for behavior in your classroom and on assignments that you give your students. Make it clear to your students why you have those expectations of them; for example, that friendly, respectful behavior in class is beneficial for the other students, and handing assignments in on time will help your students establish habits of responsibility that will make life after school much easier. Children are practical people; these reasons will help! In addition, follow up with further conversations with students in your classroom if you find that a reminder is necessary.
- Expect nothing other than the best from each student when it comes to the work that they hand in to you. If you know that they're not doing their best, make the effort to call them out on it.
- Hold yourself to high expectations as well! Your students need to see that you're self-motivated so they can mirror that behavior. Share a few goals that you have with your students from time to time, as well as the ideas that you have for making them happen (Harmon, 2018).
- **When possible, help your students realize that there are worlds outside of your classroom.** As aforementioned, children are eminently practical people. If they believe that there's no point to schooling outside of making good grades on tests, they won't care much about doing well. In addition, children who live in poverty may have limited experience viewing and enjoying the world around them - perhaps due to limited resources, perhaps because their parents or caregiver needs to be at work, or for any of many other reasons. As their teacher, you can

open their eyes to what the world has to offer - which can help present motivation for children to do what they can to excel in school. Here are a few ideas to help with this that you may wish to try (Harmon, 2018):

- No matter what your specific subject or expertise is, teach your students about a wide array of career options. If you're a math teacher, you can write word problems about scientists and chefs; if you're a science teacher you can talk about the physics of repairing cars and the chemistry that goes into making medicine.
- If it's an accepted practice in your school, invite experts from other fields to come in and speak to your class. (These can even, simply, be other teachers who work at your school, or parents of children in your class).
- If it's an accepted practice at your school, take your children on a field trip to a local museum, sports center, factory or place of business. If you teach virtually or would rather stay on your school campus with your students, peruse the vast number of free video tours of noted museums on the internet for inspiration!

Whatever you are able to do, make sure that you connect the activity back to your students' real-life experiences. This will help them see what is out there through the lens of what's possible for them (Harmon, 2018)!

- **Build relationships with both your students and their families.** Children living through the trauma of poverty often need more reliability in their lives - particularly adults whom they feel safe around. If you can be a source of consistency for them and their families, they'll appreciate it. Additionally, when you're looking to build a creative, effective, and positive learning environment for students in your classroom, a relationship built on respect and trust can make your job much easier (Harmon, 2018).
- **Teach your students how to learn emotional and social skills and strategies, in addition to your specific subject.** Students who come from underprivileged or low-income backgrounds can often have a difficult time focusing when they're at school because of personal or emotional traumatic events (or ACEs). Further, they may not have the resources available to them at home to learn these social skills, ones that are crucial for building a community and enjoying personal growth. If you're at a loss for specific emotional learning strategies to share, consider beginning with these two:

- **Calming Breathing Techniques:** The way in which you breathe - the depth, the rate, etc - has a large impact on your anxiety and other physiological symptoms of stress. As children who undergo poverty tend to be very sensitive to a variety of stressors, you can teach these students how to manage stress with strategic breathing.
- **A Specific Place to Pursue Calm:** Instead of a punishment corner (or the equivalent) in your classroom, create, if possible a small reading nook with pillows, writing implements, stress balls and other implements that speak to a young student's senses. When it becomes clear that a student does not have a mindset that is conducive to learning, invite the student to go to the corner to use breathing techniques, reading or crafting materials, or any of another variety of activities specifically targeted to regulate their mindset. This will not only likely be a more attractive and peaceful option for your classroom, but it will also help establish in your student's mind that self-soothing is an option (Harmon, 2018).
- **Donate - or manage donations strategically.** If you're a teacher, there's a better-than-likely chance that you're already spending a lot of your own money for classroom supplies at the beginning of each year. Some schools and teachers work to alleviate this load by asking students to bring in classroom supplies in addition to their own personal materials when each semester begins. For some students and families, this isn't a heavy burden to bear. For others, it may be impossible. If you're aware that some students and families in your class may be in a better position to provide classroom supplies than others, work with the higher-income families to source the supplies you need. Don't request more from families already struggling to make ends meet. You could even consider asking higher-income families to donate unused school supplies to your school, for the use of anyone who may need them. This may feel like a humbling request, but it'll be much easier for you as the teacher to realize and act on this need than it is for a struggling student (Nelson, 2017).

Ways to Boost Parental Involvement in Low-Income Families

Aside from ways to support the financial health of families in your community and the specific students in your classroom, you can also work to give the parents of your students the tools they need to be more involved in their students' education.

To that end, let's discuss a few actionable ways that we can help boost parental involvement:

- 1. First, start by examining any of the beliefs you may (even subconsciously) hold regarding parents and poverty.** As teachers, we need to remember that parents trust us with their children - and their children may not be fully healthy, may be sensitive, or may not have had access to an education or other resources prior to your involvement in their lives. For many parents and children, it is a huge exercise in trust, just sending their children to school every day. This flies in the face of a myth that, sadly, is quite popular among some affluent communities: The myth that parents of poor children simply care less than do parents with higher incomes. To help the students in our classroom, no matter what their socioeconomic status may be, we need to realize that all parents likely want to be involved in their child's education - or, if they don't, it's not simply because of their income level. Start with the assumption that the parents do care, always, very much - and work from there (Ferguson, 2017).
- 2. Establish a connection with the parents of your students as soon as possible.** Early in the school year, send over a personalized letter or email, or make a quick phone call. To you, it's an item on your to-do list; to the parents of a struggling child, it may well be a lifeline. Parents, especially parents making surviving on a low income, may be chronically overwhelmed or busy. They may not feel like they're able to initiate that connection or conversation with you. Many education experts strongly suggest that modern schools should rethink the current practices surrounding parental involvement, stating that schools would do better to avoid waiting until disciplinary problems arise to establish contact with the parents of students. Instead, if schools give opportunities for parents to be involved earlier in the academic year, disciplinary problems may never arise - or, more realistically, it'll be easier to manage them if a student's care team has already been established. This doesn't have to be a huge production: a quick note, or a call home when your student does something positive worth sharing is all that will be needed (Ferguson, 2017).
- 3. Brainstorm events and services that will draw parents toward your school.** When parents see your school as something that serves children, they may be disinclined to spend time there themselves - particularly if they're stressed, overworked, or busy. Work with your school to offer workshops and free classes that target topics of interest for adults in your area: whether it be for adult

subject matter (for example, courses about finances, as mentioned above) or for family health, such as on the biology behind child development, family nutrition, or easy ways for parents to help with homework, many parents will use this as a reason to set foot on campus for the first time. If your school has the wherewithal to encourage parental involvement in this way, parents will begin to feel welcomed - and that they can trust you and your school to be a positive influence in their lives (Ferguson, 2017).

4. **Make sure that your school has a very public way to showcase opportunities for parents to volunteer.** Sometimes, parents very much want to be involved in their student's day-to-day life as volunteers, but they don't know where to begin or even how to learn more about what might be expected. If you can completely remove that barrier to involvement, you'll likely see parental participation increase. Make it clear at every turn that your school wants parents to be involved for field trips, at group presentations, and more. One expert recommends putting together a list of different ideas regarding ways that parents can be involved, and then simply reiterating at every turn that your school would love for parents to review and respond to the list. This makes it easy for parents who may be uncertain or timid about what they may be able to offer to do so in a private way. This also makes parental involvement feel significantly less like a chore than, say, a direct call mandating parent volunteers for a specific field trip (Ferguson, 2017).
5. **Finally, ask parents for their ideas about how best to educate their children.** You are the professional, you are the one who knows the ins and outs of modern education and how best to apply them; but parents are the ones who best know their own children. Make sure that your school has a way to include parents simply by asking them, regularly, for feedback about how their children are doing. This will make parents feel valued, and it will also help them feel interested in the process. It will also help parents associate conversations with teachers and administration with optimism, hope, and efficiency instead of frustration and dissatisfaction - emotions that parents all too often connect with education professionals (Ferguson, 2017).

Summary and Conclusion

When we consider childhood poverty, it's easy to assume that it's such an overwhelming and pervasive problem that we, as teachers, simply can't hope to do anything about it.

While it is a chronic and systemic issue, one that will require action at every level of communities and governments, as teachers, we do have the ability to make sure that we're caring for each student as they are, in our classrooms, as best as we possibly can.

To a child from an unstable home or one struggling with the effects of a low-income family, you can be a source of reliability, compassion, empathy, and comfort. You can also provide resources and high expectations so that your students learn to be self-motivated even in the midst of their troubles. As teachers, we have the unique possibility to help children precisely where they are; and, if they're struggling with poverty, there are a few specific ways that we can do just that.

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