

Re-examining Beliefs About **Students in Poverty**

This is a fact: Students whose families are living in poverty do not perform on average as well in school as wealthier students. Perhaps it's unpopular to say, but if we're committed to educational equity for low-income families, we must acknowledge this reality.

The next step is to consider how we interpret it. We might ask ourselves how we would answer this question: Why do students whose families are experiencing poverty not do as well in school on average as their wealthier peers? Obviously, the answer is complex, many factors are in play. But if we get to the root of it, what factors do you believe best explain the disparities in educational outcomes for low-income students?

Equity Literacy

I have spent the past dozen years cultivating in teachers and administrators the skills and knowledge for building equitable learning environments for students in poverty — the knowledge and skills necessary to make every educator a threat to the existence of inequities in their classrooms, schools and districts. Along with my colleague Katy Swalwell, I have come to call this combination of knowledge and skills *equity literacy*. It begins with analyzing our belief systems, our responses to the question I posed above. More on that below.

Briefly, equity literacy consists of four abilities essential to creating equitable schools. When we

**The greatest need, author says,
is to strengthen equity literacy**

BY PAUL C. GORSKI

equip ourselves with these abilities, we become a threat to the existence of inequities in our spheres of influence — our classrooms, schools or districts.

The first is the ability to *recognize* inequity. Do I understand the challenges students experiencing poverty face outside school well enough that I recognize even the subtlest ways in which those challenges are reproduced within schools? Am I capable of recognizing stereotypical depictions of people experiencing poverty when I flip through a textbook under consideration for adoption in my school or district?

The second is the ability to *respond* to inequity in the immediate term. Am I able, for example, to skillfully explain to colleagues why adopting a policy requiring electronic communication with parents could exacerbate gaps in family engagement? Do I know how to respond to colleagues openly and effectively when they stereotype families experiencing poverty? Do I have the ability and the will to challenge increases in extracurricular fees, the under-representation of low-

Our 'Month in Poverty' Inspires Action

BY KYM LEBLANC-ESPARZA

The realities of poverty are clashing with the middle-class culture that governs schools in the small Oregon community where I serve as superintendent.

As recently as 2003, only one in four students was identified as living in poverty. That percentage has grown ever since. Today, 47 percent of our 5,200 students fall below the poverty line, and we are seeing the achievement gap widen.

What this reveals is the uncomfortable fact that students of poverty in Newberg, about a half-hour southwest of Portland, are much less successful than their peers who are not economically disadvantaged.

I was well aware that changing attitudes about learning for all students, especially those in poverty, needed to start with greater awareness and understanding by our educators. Applying that understanding to affect

change in instruction for students would need to come from the ground up, not the top down.

There was no time to waste. It was time for us to make the numbers real.

Students' Stories

At the school year kickoff last September, we launched the school district's All Means All initiative. The school district produced a short documentary video, shown to the entire district staff, highlighting the hopes, dreams and struggles faced by students affected by homelessness, family issues and poverty.

The message really hit home by incorporating the stories and images of six local high school students describing the effects of poverty. None were on track to graduate, but each shared the importance of finishing school.

Their stories delivered a powerful, emotional hook for the new initiative. Principals picked up the discussion in their buildings, connecting it to their school population. Conversations about the impact of poverty on students in their school expanded to parent groups. Meanwhile, I carried the All Means All message to the broader Newberg community. The conversation was starting to change.

But it was something else that really chal-



Six high school students describe the effects of poverty on their lives in a video, "All Means All," shown to staff in Oregon's Newberg School District.

income students in upper-level courses and other practices that disproportionately marginalize the most economically disadvantaged students?

Next is the ability to *redress* inequity in the long term by tending to the conditions that underlie immediate concerns. For example, am I willing to develop policy, however unpopular it might be among wealthier families, to disallow practices that humiliate and disadvantage students experiencing poverty? Can I skillfully exert my influence to lead a reconsideration of fundraising activities that rely on sales competitions among students, book fairs full of resources low-income families could never afford, homework assignments requiring the use of technology to which many economically disadvantaged students do not have access, or first-day-of-school share-outs about what students did on their summer "vacations."

(Of course, if I don't recognize how these prac-

tices and activities can be humiliating, it would never occur to me to redress them.)

The final ability involves *sustaining* equity. Do I know how to sustain equity efforts and do I have the will to withstand the criticism that occurs when I start to redistribute educational opportunity?

Genuine Intentions

The reason I love doing equity literacy work with schools, collaborating with people who have invested their lives in the success of other people's children, is that I know I can assume good intentions among my collaborators. I can't remember ever visiting a school where administrators didn't genuinely want all students to thrive. Only rarely have I visited a school district where leadership wasn't pouring resources into initiatives they believed would improve learning outcomes of low-income students.

lenged our long-held assumptions about the value of education to economically disadvantaged students and their families. It was an opportunity for educators in Newberg to “spend a month in poverty” on a professional development day last November.

Realistic Experience

Using the Missouri Community Action Network poverty simulation, more than 400 Newberg educators, including central-office administrators, experienced what it is like to live without enough money to meet their basic needs. Each participant took on the identity of a family member. Family groups had to provide basic necessities and shelter during four 15-minute “weeks.”

Families faced realistic problems — low wage jobs, unemployment, high utility bills, unreliable transportation, unaffordable medication and incarcerated parents. As participants accessed community resources and services stationed around the room, they faced language barriers, paperwork, frustrating delays and unfamiliar systems.

“It put us through the struggles our families are facing,” said one teacher. “I had no idea.”

Each school community debriefed their



Kym LeBlanc-Esparza

month in poverty. Did they manage to pay the rent? Keep the utilities on? Make loan payments? Look for work? Improve their situation?

“I was so immersed in meeting basic needs, I never even asked about how my child is doing in school,” commented an educator playing the role of a parent.

One of the greatest benefits of the simulation was the involvement of more than 70 local community

leaders who volunteered to staff the simulated businesses and resource centers.

Having the mayor, school board and city council members, university professors, business and civic leaders involved in the experience further expands the awareness and understanding across the community.

Re-examining Barriers

In the months since the poverty simulation, the All Means All initiative has been taking hold throughout the district. The firsthand experience has resonated loudly, and staff are modifying behavior. Some changes are subtle, such as tuning in more carefully to their students’ needs, acting to connect families to resources, lending a hand or simply

thinking differently about the support of at-risk kids.

Newberg’s teachers and administrators are examining barriers, such as technology access or connectivity at home, and homework assignments that require adult participation or costly materials to complete that prevent students from learning. Community leaders who participated in the simulation are discussing ways their organizations can support students and their families.

Other changes are much more visible. Schools are partnering with parents, local businesses and organizations to provide resources to support families with basic necessities such as food, clothing, personal hygiene items and school supplies. A grant to provide kindergarten students with iPads loaded with literacy and numeracy apps during the summer will continue to give low-income students access to learning outside of school.

A new priority in the district’s strategic plan explicitly addresses the needs of students in poverty to eliminate the achievement gap.

I know we have a long way to go to improve outcomes for all students, but the most important stride we have made is openly acknowledging the impact of poverty on our students and realizing we have to do things differently.

KYM LEBLANC-ESPARZA is superintendent of the Newberg School District in Newberg, Ore. E-mail: leblancesparzak@newberg.k12.or.us. Twitter: @leblancesparza

Unfortunately, absent a commitment to equity literacy, good intentions and a willingness to expend resources pose no real threat to inequities. And this, in my experience, is the biggest barrier when it comes to matters of poverty and education: Too many popularly embraced strategies are not based on deep understandings of equity. They are based, instead, on well-meaning misunderstandings and understandably desperate grasps for the kinds of quick fixes that simply do not exist.

This brings me back to my original question: Why do students in poverty not perform as well in school on average as their wealthier peers? The first step toward equity literacy is assessing our existing perceptions. Any time I work with education leaders, helping them evaluate their abilities to lead equity efforts, I begin with this question. Responses cluster around three basic views of poverty, or three poverty ideologies. We start here

because the ideology we embrace determines the way we interpret the problem we’re trying to resolve. The way we interpret the problem drives the solutions we’re capable of imagining to resolve it. I’ll show you what I mean.

A Deficit Ideology

The most common and most dangerous poverty ideology is *deficit* ideology, often perpetuated by training programs that focus on the mythical “culture” or “mindset” of poverty. If I embrace a deficit ideology, my impulse upon reading our question is to point to supposed deficiencies in the values or cultures of families in poverty. *The students are unmotivated*, I might think, or *the parents are irresponsible*. Perhaps, I reason, *poor* people don’t value education.

Here’s a dose of equity literacy. As it turns out, all of these presumptions are false — they are stereotyped misinterpretations that render us a

threat to equity, not to inequity. For example, researchers have found no discernible differences between how people in poverty and wealthier people value education.

When I misinterpret in this way, despite good intentions, I risk investing resources in initiatives designed to solve problems that don't exist. Consider initiatives designed to persuade low-income parents to care more about education. They already care. So now I've wasted resources and alienated the most marginalized families. That's the inverse of equity.

Grit Ideology

The second poverty view is *grit* ideology. If I embrace grit ideology, I might respond to our question lamenting a perceived lack of resilience in low-income students. Perhaps I would acknowledge the barriers they face, such as the lack of access to preventive health care. But rather than developing strategies that are responsive to these barriers, I sidestep equity and opt for initiatives designed to cultivate their grit so they can overcome them.

With equity literacy I understand that, contrary to popular belief, the most marginalized individuals generally already are the grittiest individuals. They are parents who, due to the scarcity of living wage work, juggle two or three jobs and still get their children to school. They are youth who persist despite school practices that sometimes humiliate them.

I understand, as well, that ignoring inequity, instead cultivating grit in students experiencing inequity, leaves us at inequity.

Structural Ideology

When I embrace *structural* ideology, I recognize that there simply is no way to eliminate educational outcome disparities without removing the barriers — the inequities — with which people experiencing poverty contend.

Research consistently shows that these barriers explain the largest portion of outcome disparities. Imagine, for example, how we would shrink disparities if every parent had one living wage job and could spend evenings helping their kids with homework and attending school events instead of working a second job. Imagine the change if every child had the best possible preventive health



Paul Gorski

care. These two changes likely would have the biggest impact on low-income students' performance.

I realize, of course, that these barriers fall outside my sphere of influence. I'm not in a position to promise every family living wage work, preventive healthcare, or a functioning automobile. But I am in a position to shape policy and practice to be responsive to these structural barriers.

Consider family involvement. We know that generally, low-income parents attend

family involvement events at their children's schools less often than wealthier parents. With troubling consistency, I come across well-meaning teachers and administrators who misinterpret this reality through a deficit lens. *If only those parents cared more.* When we misinterpret in this way, we render ourselves equity-illiterate. Equity cannot arise from bias.

A structural view allows me to consider the problem with deeper understanding. I start by wondering about my own complicity. Do I design opportunities for family engagement that are accessible to parents who work multiple jobs often including evening jobs, who don't have paid leave, who may not have transportation, who might struggle to afford child care? Do the policies and practices I support mitigate or exacerbate these inequities? Do they redistribute access or punish people for their lack of access?

Positioning Ourselves

In the end, there is no path to equity not grounded in this structural view. When we strengthen our equity literacy, when we understand that educational outcome disparities can be traced almost entirely to structural barriers in and out of schools rather than to moral deficiencies or grit shortages in families experiencing poverty, we position ourselves to create equitable policy and practice.

Further, we position ourselves, as all education leaders should be positioned, to become a threat to the existence of inequity in our schools and districts. ■

PAUL GORSKI is founder of EdChange and an associate professor of integrative studies at George Mason University in Fairfax, Va. E-mail: gorski@edchange.org. Twitter: @pgorski