

TO HELP DISADVANTAGED CHILDREN LEARN, WE MUST FIRST ACKNOWLEDGE THAT POVERTY HAMPERS EDUCATION

by Helen F. Ladd, Duke University

Children from disadvantaged households often do less well in school than their classmates from more economically comfortable backgrounds. Researchers have documented this repeatedly – in studies of individual children and through comparisons of schools, districts, states, and nations.

One of every five American children lives in poverty – more than in most other developed countries. U.S. educators and policymakers thus have every reason to look closely at the educational difficulties poverty creates – and take active steps to correct the problems. But lately the exact opposite has happened. Disadvantaged schoolchildren are left to fall behind, because reforms like No Child Left Behind pretend that poverty is unimportant.

Why Does “No Child Left Behind” Overlook Poverty?

The most important federal government initiative in education over the past decade has been “No Child Left Behind,” a reform intended to prod schools in every state to boost the achievement of all students. Unfortunately, this policy sets the same goals for all students and overlooks the educational difficulties caused by poverty. Every school is required to meet the same proficiency standards, and progress is defined the same way for a middle-class suburban school, a school in a poor inner-city neighborhood, and a school in a struggling rural community.

Supporters of No Child Left Behind rationalize ignoring economic disparities in a variety of ways. Some point to the American ideal of education as the road to success for disadvantaged groups. Some believe that schools simply must make up for any problems caused by family circumstances. And still others want teachers to hold the same high expectations for all children. In proposing this reform, President George W. Bush stressed avoiding “the soft bigotry of low expectations.” But laudable as it may be to hold all schools and teachers accountable for getting good results no matter what, simply wanting something to be possible does not make it possible.

Those who downplay poverty often point to a few specific schools that have “beaten the odds.” Operating within the network of the “Knowledge is Power Program,” for example, some charter schools have managed to boost achievement for disadvantaged students. But we cannot assume that if some schools have succeeded, all others can do equally well. Some charter schools have attracted highly motivated students and families from the ranks of the poor, or have enrolled disadvantaged children of higher ability. Moreover, such schools often get extra funding from foundations and employ unusually hardworking teachers. There is no evidence that a few success stories can be scaled up to meet the needs of large numbers of disadvantaged students.

The Cost of Denial

Ignoring the ill effects of poverty on student learning comes at a price. As we are now seeing in states around the country, requiring all schools to meet the same standards for all of their students regardless of family background inevitably leads to shortfalls and undesirable outcomes.

- When family backgrounds are ignored, many schools fail to meet the testing standards of No Child Left Behind. Pushed to meet unrealistic goals, teachers may narrow their curricula and focus only on subjects that are tested – which hurts education overall. Or teachers may become discouraged, or look for ways to get around the tests.
- In many states, large numbers of schools with needy students have ended up labeled as “failing” under No Child Left Behind. State officials may respond to their apparent failure by cutting resources for public schools. Or officials may simply lower standards for all schools in the state. Both outcomes end up discrediting the public education system and lending support to critics who are looking for reasons to make huge changes – such as privatizing public education altogether.

What Can and Should be Done?

The most productive step the federal government could take would be to replace No Child Left Behind with new reforms aimed at addressing the barriers that often make it difficult for disadvantaged children to succeed in school. Researchers have identified a number of educational challenges worsened by poverty and have proposed ways to address them:

- Disadvantaged children often suffer from poor health and nutrition – which can be corrected by high-quality early childhood and preschool programs. School-based clinics, nurses, and mental health counselors can also help older children.
- Early exposure to rich language boosts cognitive development, so we need to help poor parents and other caregivers read to children and engage them in conversations.
- Poor families cannot give children the enrichment experiences privileged families routinely provide. Public after-school and summer programs matter most for the poor.

To say that educators need to address the context in which their students live does not “let schools off the hook,” as some have argued. We need to set high performance standards for all schools – and in fact we should ask schools serving impoverished children to do more, not less. Those schools must have the most effective teachers and offer additional supportive services because, to be successful, education in impoverished areas must deliver to disadvantaged students the supports and experiences middle-class children usually get at home.

The bottom line is that U.S. school reforms cannot work if they ignore the special challenges of educating underprivileged children. Reformers must provide teachers and school administrators with the extra knowledge and support they need to counter the impediments to learning that, through no fault of their own, many disadvantaged children bring to school.

Read more in Helen F. Ladd, “[Education and Poverty: Confronting the Evidence](#),” *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management* 31, no. 2 (2012): 203-227.