

# MOVING FORWARD

News and information about the education of special  
needs students for teachers and parents

Winter 2017

## THE EFFECTS OF POVERTY AND HOMELESSNESS ON EDUCATION

It is sometimes hard to believe that a country as rich and developed as the United States would have such staggering amounts of children who are suffering from poverty and homelessness.

*There are nearly 72 million children under age 18 years in the United States. 31.4 million live in low-income families (National Center for Children in Poverty, 2014). An estimated 1.4 million students will experience homelessness (Child Trends, 2013-2014).*

Believe it. **Poverty** is the silent undertow of education. When basic everyday needs are not being met, children go into survival mode, which means that learning becomes secondary. “How do you learn to read when you are hungry? How do you solve complex math lessons when you don’t sleep? How do you maintain motivation when the distractions of just living outweigh the desire to excel in the classroom?”

It’s also the uncertainty of poverty and homelessness that make it so frightening. “Where is the next meal coming from? Will we be safe spending the night with strangers? What happens if we can’t pay the rent?”



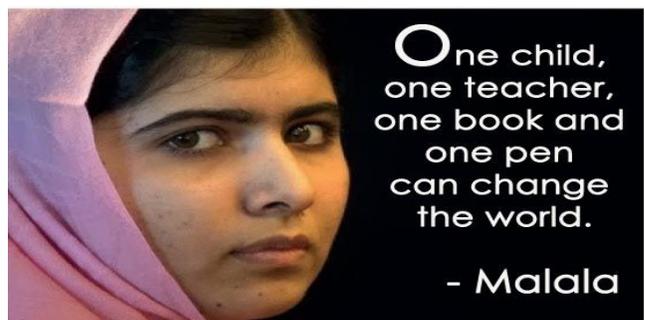
Teachers have to keep in mind that the children who appear tired or unengaged in classroom activities may be preoccupied by the trauma of their circumstances. Children may react to the challenges of day-to-day survival with anger or with a profound sense of hopelessness. All too often, teachers target underachievement or poor behavior, while failing to acknowledge the real source of the problem.

The message in this newsletter is “**don’t give up on ANY child.**” Don’t judge by the appearance of their clothing, poor manners, quick triggers, or trust issues that these children cannot learn. They may need a push or some kind words of encouragement, but not sympathy. Feeling sorry for a person in poverty isn’t going to empower them. They need unconditional support and a connection to someone who sincerely believes in them.

One of the most coveted rewards in education comes from lifting up a struggling student to overcome the many obstacles in their path. Although overall success may be defined in smaller increments, it is no less significant. Many children have no idea what the real world has to offer. Education provides options in life. More importantly, education provides hope.

### IN THIS ISSUE:

The Effects of Poverty	1
Homeless Act	2
Strategies for Low Income Students	2
How Poverty Affects Our Students	3
A Prayer for the Children	3
School and Community Assistance	4
Disabilities and Poverty	4



## McKinney-Vento Homeless Education Assistance Act



The McKinney-Vento Assistance Act is designed to address the problems that homeless children have faced in enrolling, attending, and succeeding in school. Under this program, state educational agencies must ensure that each homeless child has equal access to the same free, appropriate public education as other children. School responsibilities include:

- Designating a homeless liaison in each school district.
- Immediate enrollment for any homeless child (through grade 12), even without academic or medical records.
- Keeping children in their school of origin for the duration of their homelessness.
- Informing parents/guardians of the educational rights of their children.
- Providing transportation, at the request of the parent, to the school of origin.
- Ensuring that no barriers exist (residency requirements, lack of transportation or school fees) for full educational participation.
- Developing partnerships with community agencies to identify and assist with basic services for homeless children and their families.

• Ensuring that homeless students are not segregated. **The McKinney-Vento Act defines homeless children as individuals who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence.** The term also includes:

- Children who have a primary nighttime residence that is a public or private place not designed for, or ordinarily used as, a regular sleeping accommodation.
- Children who are living in cars, parks, public spaces, abandoned buildings, substandard housing, bus or train stations, or similar settings.
- Migratory children who qualify as homeless because they are living in circumstances described above.
- Sharing housing with other persons due to economic hardship; living in motels, trailer parks or campgrounds due to a lack of adequate housing; living in emergency shelters or abandoned in hospitals.

**NOTES:** The McKinney-Vento Act no longer includes children who are awaiting foster care placement in the definition of homeless. Also, schools cannot separate or deny an education to a student in a homeless or a domestic abuse shelter.

**Sources:** No Child Left Behind Act (2001); Every Student Succeeds Act (Revised 2016)

## STRATEGIES FOR DEALING WITH LOW INCOME STUDENTS

Children who are homeless or financially deprived often have a very difficult time in school. As educators, it is important to pay attention to your own biases in effort to stay free from judgment. Your body language, with or without your intent, will sometimes communicate a subtle intolerance or frustration in dealing with students whose needs are often greater than what time can afford.

The best strategy to deal with low income students is to simply listen. Listening communicates a critical sense of respect and boosts self-esteem by sending a strong message that what they have to say matters.

Keep in mind that being poor does not translate into ignorance. Many poverty families are afraid to speak up because they are often intimidated by those who may be more educated. But don't ever underestimate the heart and determination of those less fortunate, for they can surprise you.



Despite their misfortune, there is often a lot of pride with families who are coming from poverty. To give a child a coat or a food basket may sound like a noble gesture, but parents may perceive the handouts as an embarrassment. Be cognizant about allowing students and their families the opportunity to preserve their dignity. For example, make the gift a reward to several students based on behavior or academic progress.

Also be aware that requiring costly supplies or field trips may be a real burden to families who struggle to make ends meet. Dress codes can also be an issue. If the washing machine is not accessible, clothes may not always match the expectations of the school. Try to find the middle ground in these situations and use common sense. There is a big difference between making an intentional choice versus what is done out of sheer necessity.

# HOW POVERTY AFFECTS OUR STUDENTS

The question as to whether poverty affects a student's ability to learn has only one resounding answer: **YES!** Here are some critical factors that have a direct influence on classroom performance.

## Health and Nutrition

Students from poverty tend to eat foods that are lower in nutritional value. Meals may be skipped, or the amount of food on the table may not be sufficient for the number of people that are consuming it.

Lack of money or inadequate transportation may obstruct a parent from seeking medical assistance for themselves or their children. Basic necessities such as eyeglasses, treating ear infections or obtaining vaccines can be a problem.

## Language

Research indicates that a general lack of exposure to language in lower socioeconomic homes means that children begin school with **half the number** of vocabulary words than their middle-class peers. This means that the start of school may involve trying to catching up.

## Motivation

Teachers may think that lower income students are **"lazy, just like their nonworking parents."** The truth is, every ounce of their energy may be spent worrying about things critical to survival. Motivation stems from the desire to get

ahead. When the challenges of survival constantly loom overhead, it may be enough to just get through the day.

## Expectations

Teachers may unknowingly be promoting a self-fulfilling prophecy with their students. If the expectations are low, most likely the outcome will be minimal as well. Children who come from poverty may not believe they have the power to succeed, and teachers have to be the cheerleaders that show them the alternative.

## Relationships

Research states that three-quarters of all children from poverty have a single parent caregiver, which puts financial and emotional stress on a family. When the home is chaotic, and the adults are dealing with their own struggles, there is not much time and attention left to give their children.

Sometimes the children bare the brunt of turmoil, and the family becomes closed off to hide the shame of failure. Children are not allowed to talk to adults about home, making them feel more alone and frightened. Children become more skeptical of the adults as trust issues become more apparent. Due to a lack of interactions with others, social skills tend to be poor, and this can often be mistaken for disrespect or deliberate noncompliance.

**Research Source: Educational Leadership (May 2013)**

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## A PRAYER FOR THE CHILDREN Author Unknown

(In memory of the children and teacher killed in a 1998 shooting in Jonesboro, Arkansas)



We pray for the children who sneak popsicles before supper, who erase holes in math workbooks, who can never find their shoes.

And we pray for those who stare at photographers from behind barbed wire, who can't bound down the street

in a new pair of sneakers, who never "counted potatoes, who are born in places where we wouldn't be caught dead, who never go to the circus, who live in an X-rated world.

We pray for the children who bring us sticky kisses and fistfuls of dandelions, who hug us in a hurry and forget their lunch money.

And we pray for those who never get dessert, who have no safe blanket to drag behind them, who watch their parents watch them die, who can't find any bread to steal, who don't have any

rooms to clean up, whose picture aren't on anybody's dresser, whose monsters are real.

We pray for children who spend all their allowance before Tuesday, who throw tantrums in the grocery store and pick at their food, who like ghost stories, who shove dirty clothes under the bed, who never rinse out the tub, who get visits from the tooth fairy, who don't like to be kissed in front of the car pool, who squirm in church and scream in the phone, whose tears we sometimes laugh at and whose smiles can make us cry.

And we pray for those whose nightmares come in the daytime, who will eat anything, who have never seen a dentist, who aren't spoiled by anybody, who go to bed hungry and cry themselves to sleep, who live and move, but have no being.

We pray for the children who want to be carried and for those who must, who we never give up on and for those who will grab the hand of anybody kind enough to offer it.

# Current School and Community Assistance For Low Income Families

**Northwest Indiana Community Action Corporation** 1-800-826-7871-A non-profit community agency that is dedicated to fighting poverty.

**Indiana Salvation Army** (219) 882-9377-Disaster relief and food assistance.

**Hammond Housing Authority** (219) 989-3265-A HUD approved housing-foreclosure counseling agency.

**Catholic Charities** (219) 844-4883-Emergency assistance information and shelters.

**Southlake County Community Services** (219) 663-0627 Receive foreclosure counseling, mortgage assistance, and help for utility bills.

**Greater Hammond Community Services** (219) 933-3445-All types of social services for low income families.



**Lake County Township Trustee, Hammond** (219) 932-2530-Utilities help, rental assistance, and food vouchers.

**Lake Area United Way** (219) 923-2302 Ext. 311-Targeted programs that help families with education, health, securing the necessities, and achieving financial stability.

### Other School and Community Resources:

Dropout prevention and alternative education programs and staff

School Runaway and Homeless Youth Act providers

Nonprofit businesses and faith-based community groups that volunteer money, staff, and facilities

Migrant programs and youth shelters

## DISABILITIES AND POVERTY

Nearly 28 percent of those with disabilities, ages 18 to 64, were in poverty in 2010, according to statistics from the U.S. Census Bureau. Meanwhile, the poverty rate for their peers in the general population reached 12.5 percent.



### Moving Forward

Written By Barb Butcher

Edited by Susan Quinn

School Psychologists

**School City of Hammond**

Dr. J. Watkins, Superintendent

Connie Manous, Executive Director of

Special Education/Support Services

Heather Paskis, Special Education Director

#### **School Board Members**

Deborah White

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