Disrupting Poverty

Turning High Poverty Schools Into High Performing Schools

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As we stood in the basement of the K-8 school looking at a sea of shrink-wrapped pallets containing unused workbooks, the principal explained, “Our central office continues to send them year after year. They know we use an alternative curriculum, but they still send them.”

Consistently outperforming the district and state on standardized tests, the school, located in Queens, N.Y., uses a comprehensive reform model as its core curriculum — and has done so for nearly 10 years.

We are visiting this particular school of about 1,300 to interview teachers and administrators about their remarkable success. When we asked how the central administration has supported the improvement efforts, the principal had escorted us to the basement to make the point. As we gazed at the stacks of unused workbooks, she described the laborious process she went through in the early years to return the workbooks. Now, she just stores them.

Ninety-seven percent of the students in this school are eligible for free or reduced-price meals, and nearly 100 percent are children of color. Part of a large urban system, the school is not unlike many high-poverty, high-performing schools that continue to beat the odds against student learning despite bureaucratic barriers and what might be considered benign neglect on the part of district leaders.

District Obstructions
When studying schools like these, nearly half of the principals we interviewed told us the schools’ accomplishments were achieved in spite of multiple challenges presented by their districts. Benign neglect was not the only form of the problem. It was not uncommon to hear principals describe how “staff churn” caused by
personnel transfer policies or reduction-in-force policies worked against their efforts to maintain the staff in which they had heavily invested.

In several cases that we heard, superintendents and other central-office personnel actively undermined principals’ work to lead turnaround efforts. At times, professional jealousy from the public attention that had come to the school (and the principal) appeared to drive their actions. In other cases, district leaders appeared to resent the pressure they received from school boards to “fix” the other schools in the district.

Sometimes other principals coerced district leaders to pressure the outlier school “to get back in line” because it made their efforts look bad in comparison. In a few circumstances, the situation was complicated by what appeared to be discrimination or prejudice toward the principal on the basis of race or gender.

In too many school districts, high-performing, high-poverty schools present the “threat of a good example.” They rock the boat of mediocrity and challenge the stereotypes of people who live in poverty, stereotypes deeply entrenched in our schools and the broader society. A few principals stick it out in unsupportive places, but many leave to find a district that will not only support the work they want to do serving the needs of students who live in poverty but also champion it.

**Sink or Swim**

In too many districts, high-poverty schools are left to sink or swim in an organizational culture of systemic blame. Superintendents and central-office personnel blame ineffective principals for their lack of leadership, principals blame ineffective teachers for not reaching and teaching all students, and educators in these contexts blame students and their families for students’ failure to learn.

Supporting high-poverty schools requires a commitment to equity.

It is not uncommon to find strong reluctance from district leaders unwilling to risk losing the support of the middle-class stakeholder base by, for example, redistributing resources equitably based on student need (rather than equally) among schools. And in some districts, leaders continue to believe not much can be expected from “those kids” in the poorest schools, so why invest a lot of time and effort on them, particularly if their parents and caregivers have little agency to challenge the status quo.

Nonetheless, there are many district leaders who do support these schools and many more who would be willing to support the high-poverty schools in their districts. They just aren’t sure how best to do so.

**Working Smarter**

In the past decade, research has begun to provide insight into the district’s role in supporting high performance throughout the entire school system. In our book *Turning High-Poverty Schools into High-Performing Schools*, we take an inside-out look at effective practices at the school level that have implications for leadership at the district level.

We present a framework for providing guidance and support to leaders from various vantage points in the system. Leaders in these schools develop the leadership capacity to foster a healthy, safe and supportive learning environment and to support a relentless focus on learning — not only student learning but also school professionals’ learning and the school itself getting smarter about the way it does business (system learning). District leaders can support this work in many and varied ways.

Consider the examples found in Pass Christian, Miss., and Jennings, Mo. Although both districts are small in comparison to most urban districts, they are larger or comparable in size to more than 70 percent of the school districts nationwide.

Beth John, superintendent of the 2,000-student Pass Christian School
of the school district to alleviate barriers poverty creates.” Of the district’s 3,000 students, 90 percent of whom are eligible for free or reduced-price meals. Although the district was at risk of losing accreditation when she arrived, meeting only 57 percent of the state’s standards, in 2015, the district met 81 percent and is now fully accredited.

District leaders have fostered a healthy, safe, and supportive learning culture by operating a food bank; remodeling a district building to provide a homeless shelter (Hope House) for students; opening a clothing boutique to provide free coats, socks, underwear, and other necessities; offering classes for parents and caregivers; and installing washers and dryers in each of the district’s eight schools. Families are welcome to use the washers and dryers in exchange for one hour of volunteer work in the school. A pediatrician also is available to provide medical care at the schools.

Jennings has accomplished all of this by re-prioritizing their expenditures, such as closing two low-enrollment schools and cutting administrative positions. In addition, they have formed strategic partnerships, obtained grant funding and received philanthropic contributions.

**Exercise of Authority**

Those who lead from the vantage point of the district office can provide a critically needed source of support. District leaders often have authority to remove bureaucratic barriers that many, if not most, principals do not. They are in a better position to form partnerships with external stakeholders to leverage resources to provide seamless systems of support for students and families who live in poverty.

Moreover, it is within the power of system leaders to redesign the role of the district office first and foremost to be of service to their schools. This is best addressed by developing instructional leadership capacity in principals and teacher leaders. This vantage point is an “advantage” that all district leaders should deploy to disrupt poverty’s adverse impact on learning.

District-level leaders who take advantage of their vantage point to support high-poverty schools join those schools in owning the challenges. They share responsibility for improving teaching and learning by holding themselves accountable for increasing principals’ instructional leadership skills, committing to equity in policy and practice, and considering the budget a moral document reflective of their mission to ensure better outcomes for all of their students.

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16 Strategies
Foster Healthy, Supportive, Safe Learning Environments

1. Eliminate Blame
2. Establish A Safe Environment
3. Develop an Understanding of Poverty
4. Level The Playing Field
5. Use Structures/Processes that Promote Relationships
6. Engage Parents/Families As Partners
Focus on Learning

1. Challenge the Pedagogy of Poverty: Develop a Common Instructional Framework
2. Teach Every Student to Read Proficiently
3. Confront & Eliminate Tracking/Ability Grouping
4. Provide Additional Quality Instructional Time
5. Promote Engagement and Ownership
6. Offer Job-embedded Professional Learning
Build Leadership Capacity

1. Go Back... Find The Time
2. Use Effective Hiring/Retention Practices
3. Confront & Eliminate Low Expectations
4. Consider Your Budget A Moral Document
In high-poverty schools, leaders can find the right answers to raising student achievement—when they start with the right questions.

"It's cool to do well at Granger," exclaimed a 16-year-old we interviewed during a break in her daily advisory meeting. "It didn't used to be that way here, my sister told me ... but that's all different now. I'm hoping to go to the university in two years!"

Located in Washington State's rural Yakima Valley, Granger High School serves 388 mostly Hispanic students, 89 percent of whom qualify for free or reduced-price lunch. Over the past eight years, the school's 10th grade reading performance has steadily climbed from fewer than 20 percent of students meeting Washington state standards to nearly 80 percent. Parent attendance at student conferences has grown from a dismal 10 percent to almost 100 percent, and the graduation rate has soared to over 89 percent. As the staff's expectations of and relationships with students have grown, everything about the school has improved.

Two thousand miles to the east, in Saint Paul, Minnesota, 341 elementary students parade through the impoverished neighborhood surrounding Dayton's Bluff Elementary School. They're celebrating having accomplished their goal of reading a million words in the past year. "Twenty-five books read this year by each of our students, and we're letting our community know about it!" proudly proclaims Principal Andrew Collins, who leads the K–6 march with a bullhorn, while the students follow with noisemakers and banners.

Dayton's Bluff has risen from being the lowest-performing elementary school in Saint Paul—and one of the lowest-performing in Minnesota—to becoming a school in which nearly 70 percent of students meet or surpass state standards in reading and 75 percent meet or surpass state standards in math.

From Low- to High-Performing

These schools demonstrate that it's possible not only to reverse historic trends of underachievement but also to sustain their gains. So how did they do it?

Leaders in schools like Granger and Dayton's Bluff began their remarkable turnarounds by making tough calls—and many of those decisions were about how to use resources. The budget in a high-performing, high-poverty school is a moral document, reflective of the school's beliefs about the conditions necessary to sustain success for all students and the adults who serve them. As budgets constrict, school leaders maintain their success by working collaboratively with staff to stay focused on the priorities that guide their work. They know that cuts in critical resources can jeopardize their hard-won gains. Countering these challenges becomes their top leadership priority.

On the basis of a growing body of knowledge that has emerged from the research on school effects (Teddlie & Stringfield, 1993), coupled with more recent analyses of strategies that have guided hundreds of schools in their successful efforts to reverse historic trends of underachievement (Barr & Parrett, 2006; Calkins, Guenther, Belfiore, & Lash, 2007; Chenowith, 2007; Duke, 2007), we initiated a study seeking to understand how school leaders' actions influence a turnaround in low-performing schools.

In addition to Granger High and Dayton's Bluff, we visited four other high-performing/high-poverty schools: Taft Elementary in Boise, Idaho; P.S./M.S. 124, an elementary school in Queens, New York; Lapwai Elementary on the Nez Perce Reservation in northern Idaho; and Port Chester Middle School in Port Chester, New York. Despite high levels of poverty in their communities, these schools have sustained improvements on multiple measures of student success (achievement test scores, graduation rates, attendance rates, and behavior measures); and national and state organizations have recognized and honored them for their achievements.

An important message reverberates from these successes: A school can indeed overcome the powerful and pervasive effects of poverty on a student's learning. Sustained improvements usually began with an individual or a small group of leaders committed to equity and the goal of successfully teaching every student.
Asking the Right Questions

The economic downturn and the recent passage of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act confront many district and school leaders with the confounding paradox of managing both recession-driven budget cuts and new stimulus funding intended to improve the achievement of underserved students.

Leaders in high-performing/high-poverty schools begin by asking questions. The questions leaders ask fall into three interrelated domains: (1) building the necessary leadership capacity; (2) focusing the staff's everyday core work on student, professional, and system learning; and (3) creating and fostering a safe, healthy, and supportive learning environment for all. In tough times like these, their questions may provide valuable guidance for other school leaders facing their own challenges and opportunities.

Questions About Leadership

Do we have a data system that works for classroom and school leaders?
All schools in the study have implemented data systems to guide their work. In fact, using data-based decision making was one of the two most common explanations offered for the schools' success. (The other was fostering caring relationships.)

Professional development in using data-based decision making, coupled with establishing measurable goals and developing aggressive time lines to achieve them, is vital to sustaining Lapwai Elementary's success. Concerned about the quality and level of teacher-parent communications, Lapwai staff members decided to set a schoolwide goal to have weekly contacts with families. They held themselves accountable by reporting their contacts to the principal, Teri Wagner, who shared the data at the district's board of trustees meetings.

Are we eliminating policies and practices that manufacture low achievement?
Research on the negative effects of low expectations, inequitable funding, retention, tracking, and mis-assignment to special education are well documented. All the schools studied confronted such policies and practices.

When Richard Esparza came to Granger High as principal 10 years ago, changing beliefs about students' potential was foundational to all the other actions he took. He began by modeling his belief in students' ability to meet high academic standards and by stating that he expected the faculty to believe the same thing. He worked with teachers to eliminate a bell-curve mentality—a ccepting that some students will fail—and a policy of one-chance testing. Instead, students who fall below a C in their coursework are now required to get extra help, and they can retake tests until they earn a C or better.

Have we extended learning time for underachieving students?
Underachieving students living in poverty require more instructional time to catch up to their higher-achieving peers. All high-performing/high-poverty schools find a way to extend learning time for students who need it. The schools offer a blend of before- and after-school tutoring, weekend and vacation catch-up sessions, summer school and full-day kindergarten, and sheltered classroom support. At Queens's P.S./M.S. 124, for example, school is in session "pretty much five and a half days per week," according to principal Valarie Lewis. On Saturday mornings, middle school students who need to catch up attend small learning academies.

Have we reorganized time to better support professional learning?
Eighty percent of a district's or school's budget is typically allocated toward personnel; becoming a high-performing school therefore requires making significant investments in people. Schools must find their own ways to reorganize time to support the development of communities of practice (Wenger, 1998). They can repurpose time traditionally set aside for faculty meetings, reorganize the schedule to accommodate common planning time, bank time for professional development, or locate funds for ongoing release time.

At Dayton's Bluff Elementary, grade-level teams of teachers use release time to review classroom-based assessment data, discuss instructional strategies, and plan for each upcoming six-week period. As teachers discuss individual students' performance and specific teaching strategies, the school's literacy coach and a district-level instructional coach look on and take part. By participating in collaborative planning sessions, coaches are better able to provide just-in-time support.

Questions About Learning

Does our instructional framework guide curriculum, teaching, assessment, and the learning climate?
Leaders in the schools we studied credit much of their success to a high level of instructional program coherence. Several of the schools began their improvement efforts by adopting a comprehensive school reform model. For example, P.S./M.S. 124 selected Core Knowledge, whose framework emphasizes building students’ knowledge base in world history, geography, civics, literature, science, art, and music. Schools customized the reform models to better fit their needs. Finding the content to be "too Eurocentric," teachers at P.S./M.S. 124 have added content relating to Africa, Latin America, and Asia. In addition, they have incorporated knowledge about the various ethnicities and cultures represented in their student body.

**Do we have common assessments, and do we embrace assessment literacy?**

High-performing/high-poverty schools establish clear learning targets and engage their students in activities that help them acquire assessment literacy. These activities include selecting individual learning benchmarks, compiling portfolios, making public presentations of work, completing reflective revisions, and participating in student-led conferences.

Leaders in the Lapwai School District use professional learning time to focus on developing assessment literacy and common classroom-based assessments. At Granger High, the initiation of student-led conferences not only improved students’ understanding of their own learning, but also significantly improved parents’ attendance rates at their child's conferences.

**Are all students proficient in reading?**

Second only to safety, ensuring that all students develop literacy skills became a priority in most of the schools we studied. Designing a comprehensive approach to reading improvement may entail conducting an analysis of students’ unique needs (for example, those of English language learners); developing an understanding of the influence of poverty on reading achievement (Neuman, 2008); and examining the research base, especially concerning adolescent literacy (see Slavin, Cheung, Groff, & Lake, 2008).

All teachers at Port Chester Middle School consider themselves to be English language arts teachers. To sell this idea, school leaders began by helping teachers understand that students’ inability to read proficiently was a significant barrier to learning the content the teachers were attempting to teach. Now all teachers teach 24 bundled key reading and writing skills.

**Do we provide targeted interventions?**

The schools we studied use data to identify students who need before-, during-, and after-school small-group and individual tutoring; self-paced interventions using technology; one-on-one academic advising and coaching; homework support; or additional assessment time.

Taft Elementary in Idaho focuses on developing literacy skills early. The school offers full-day kindergarten and keeps class sizes small. In addition to the district-adopted reading program, Taft assesses the proficiency of all students and, if necessary, assigns students to one of three different reading interventions that provide different approaches to literacy learning.

**Questions About the Learning Environment**

**Is our school safe?**

In all the schools studied, particularly the secondary schools, leaders emphasized safety for students and staff as a prerequisite for learning. At Port Chester Middle School, principal Carmen Macchia explained, "In the beginning … kids would hold their bladders all day out of fear of what might happen to them in the bathrooms." The school established structures, such as the frequent presence of school staff in bathrooms and hallways, to help students become accountable for their actions. The staff's expectations and modeling of appropriate behavior and other good citizenship practices encouraged students to help promote school safety, which authentically contributed to changing students' perspectives from one of "ratting out" their friends to one of civic responsibility to their school.

**Do we understand the influence of poverty on student learning?**

Although the concept of a culture of poverty has been refuted (Gorski, 2008), too many educators continue to believe that people who live in poverty share a common set of beliefs, values, attitudes, and behaviors (such as a poor work ethic, alcohol or drug abuse, and apathy toward school). To counter these myths, leaders in the schools we studied use data and research to support high expectations of students. An ethos of professional accountability for learning is tangible in all the participating schools, in contrast to schools that blame students and families for poor achievement.
When Taft Elementary School welcomed more than 60 refugee students one year from 16 different countries, principal Susan Williamson knew the importance of developing an understanding of the cultural and socioeconomic characteristics of the refugee students' families (Budge & Parrett, 2009). Enlisting the help of a former refugee whom the refugee community trusted, Susan and a small team of teacher leaders conducted multiple visits to each student's home. Although the purpose of these visits was to invite students to a two-week summer camp designed to familiarize the students with Taft and foster friendships, the visits also helped teachers gain a much better understanding of the cultural and socioeconomic influences on these students' lives.

**Have we fostered a bond between students and school?**

The high-performing/high-poverty schools we studied provided "protective factors" that help build a bond between students and school. Paramount among these factors is promoting caring relationships between adults and students as well as among peers.

Although Granger is a small high school serving only 388 students, many students felt disconnected from school. Former principal Esparza's focus on personalization led the staff to reorganize the school day to include a well-designed advisory program. All professional staff members, including the principal, advise a small group of 18–20 students four days each week and stay with those students for four years, navigating their path toward graduation and beyond. The advisory teacher regularly reviews each student's progress through school-generated biweekly reports, holding students accountable for staying on track. Advisors identify any student who falls behind and work with the student's teachers to intervene. "It's all about relationships with the kids," explained current principal Paul Chartrand, "and the advisory program is key to our continued success."

Other high-performing/high-poverty schools provide additional protective factors, such as restructuring into small learning communities and removing economic barriers to participation in various extracurricular activities. Some schools work to counter the adverse effects of student mobility by dedicating staff to the task of welcoming and placing new students.

**Do we engage parents, families, and the community?**

High-performing/high-poverty schools do not go it alone. Instead, they build positive and productive relationships with students' families and the broader neighborhood and community. In partnership with the city of Saint Paul and the Amherst H. Wilder Foundation, Dayton's Bluff Elementary provides students and families with a recreational facility and the services of a nurse-practitioner, dentist, and social worker at the school.

Leaders in the schools we studied engage stakeholders in various ways—for example, hiring a school/family/community liaison, offering adult mentoring and community service learning programs, ensuring two-way communication between the school and the family, and using the school as a community center.

**Tough Decisions, Tough Times**

Leaders in the six schools we studied expressed confidence that the processes they had in place would guide their decisions regarding the use of possible stimulus funding. The principals voiced concern for two top priorities: (1) maintaining and perhaps adding staff, because keeping personnel is key to a low student-teacher ratio and caring relationships in school; and (2) providing targeted support to the students who need it most. "Target the lowest-performing kids," cautioned one principal, "even if the stimulus money doesn't last forever."

Leaders in high-performing/high-poverty schools recognize their efforts and successes as a continuing journey. Whether surviving budget cuts, carefully targeting new stimulus funding, or both, leaders in all schools may benefit from reflecting on the questions leaders ask in high-performing/high-poverty schools to support and sustain student success.

**References**


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Is Your School Asking the Right Questions About Poverty?

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Editor’s note: This piece was adapted from Turning High-Poverty Schools into High-Performing Schools by William H. Parrett and Kathleen M. Budge.

Devon dropped out of school at age 13. No one knows where he is today. Most likely, he’s not in school. Devon was going to be retained to spend another year in the sixth grade as a 13-year-old. He was embarrassed and felt alone. He didn’t want to be with a new group of kids who were younger. Truth was, Devon had been passed along with low reading skills for years. Now, in the beginning of his adolescent years, he was told he was going back. He gave the class a try for three weeks and then disappeared. With good intentions, Devon’s teachers had recommended an intervention -- retention -- that resulted in the opposite effect of what they had hoped.
Retention as an intervention for underachievement does not work. Sixty years of research bear out this conclusion. Thus, we view it as the poster child for the many entrenched mindsets, policies, structures, and practices that are commonly employed in schools to “allow a student to catch up” and, at times, as a punishment for not keeping up.

High-performing, high-poverty schools endeavor to build leadership capacity to better meet the needs of students like Devon. As part of committing to that work, leaders aggressively confront entrenched, counterproductive strategies and beliefs. They are relentless in this effort. They know that inaction perpetuates low achievement and undermines other effective practices. But where do they begin?

To guide learning and to help in reflecting on the current situation in your school, use the "Are We Perpetuating Underachievement? What Have We Eliminated?" rubric (click image to download), which isolates seven specific mind-sets, policies, structures, and practices that high-performing, high-poverty schools have helped to identify as barriers to building leadership capacity and improving achievement.

Asking the Right Questions and Finding the Leverage Points
Because high-performing, high-poverty schools are places of reflection and inquiry, leaders’ work in these schools is better characterized in the form of questions than in formulaic lists of strategies. If a school's primary goal is to
significantly improve achievement, particularly of low-income children, these questions should provide valuable, insightful direction:

1. Are we deploying financial, material, and human resources effectively?
2. Are we optimizing time, extending it for underachieving students, and reorganizing it to better support professional learning?
3. Do we have a data system that works for classroom and school leaders?

Are We Deploying Resources Effectively?
Principals in high-performing, high-poverty schools ensure that the necessary financial, material, and human resources are available for students and adults to succeed (Ball, 2001; Leader, 2010). Leaders in the schools that we studied began their remarkable turnarounds by making tough calls -- and many of those decisions were about how to use resources. They not only used the school's existing resources innovatively, but also often secured additional funding from the district office and capitalized on relationships with external stakeholders to garner support for the school.

Approximately 70 to 80% of a typical school's budget is dedicated to personnel, so it stands to reason that recruitment and retention of talented staff is a top resource-management priority. When decision making about resources, chiefly personnel, is decentralized to the school level, the principal and other site-based leaders can further their improvement efforts by hiring teachers and staff with qualifications that match the school's needs.

In tough economic times, effective resource management becomes increasingly important. Principals sustain the school's success by working collaboratively with staff to stay focused on the priorities that guide their work. They know that cuts in critical resources can jeopardize their hard-won gains. Countering these challenges becomes their top leadership priority -- particularly as they work to recruit and retain talented staff.

Are We Optimizing Time?
The manner in which time is used is closely linked to retention of high-quality staff. All students are likely to benefit from improving the quality of academic learning time, and those who live in poverty may require additional high-quality time. Teachers also need time to learn, especially when they're learning collaboratively with others. Teacher learning and student learning are two sides of the same coin. When teachers are afforded time to learn collaboratively, they can in turn optimize academic learning time within the school day and best plan for student learning outside the school day.
Extending academic learning time can occur in at least two ways -- literally extending the available time for students to learn, or better using the time within the traditional school day. High-performing, high-poverty schools do both. Underachieving students living in poverty often require more instructional time to catch up to their higher-achieving peers. Schools can offer a blend of before- and after-school tutoring, weekend and vacation catch-up sessions, summer school, full-day kindergarten, and sheltered classroom support.

Summer instruction in particular may be as important as any extended time intervention, as it serves to maintain continuous learning, counters the loss of achievement gains caused by long gaps in school, and provides needed nutrition and other auxiliary supports (Borman & Dowling, 2006).

Do We Have a Data System That Works for Classroom and School Leaders?
Effectively managing resources (money, people, time) requires accurate information. All schools in our study implemented data systems to guide their decision making. In fact, using data-based decision making was one of the two most common explanations offered for the schools' success (the other was fostering caring relationships).

Constructing and implementing a data system is an essential function that moves a school toward addressing the underachievement of students living in poverty. In HP/HP schools, leaders facilitate an ongoing, courageous look in the mirror. These schools have access to accurate, timely data that allow school and classroom leaders to set goals and benchmarks, monitor progress, make midcourse corrections, and perhaps most important, design and successfully implement needs-driven instruction and interventions.

Victoria Bernhardt (2005), a nationally respected authority on data use in schools, suggests four different types of data that should be accessible:

1. Data related to student learning (for example, classroom-based assessments, standardized test data, teacher observations)
2. Data related to perceptions held by stakeholders about the learning environment, as well as values, beliefs, and attitudes
3. Data related to school and student demographics (for example, attendance, graduation rate, race/ethnicity, class, gender, level of teaching experience, level of teachers' education)
4. Data related to structures, processes, programs, and policies (for example, after-school tutoring programs, RTI Tier 2 intervention programs, summer schools)
Action Advice

• **Consider your school's budget.** Do you consider your budget a moral document? Does it reflect your values, goals, and priorities as a school?
• **Evaluate your current hiring practices.** Do they result in hiring personnel who match the needs of your school?
• **Take action to retain talented personnel.** Have you taken stock of the ways in which your school encourages talented people to stay?
• **Hold high expectations.** Have you evaluated current practices ensuring that all teachers hold high expectations for their students and themselves?
• **Provide extended learning time.** Have you explored ways to extend learning time for underachieving students?
• **Analyze your school calendar.** Is it learning centered and focused on the needs of underachieving students?
• **Provide time for professional learning.** Have you reorganized the schedule and calendar to provide job-embedded professional learning opportunities?
• **Analyze the way decisions are made.** Are multiple forms of data used to make instructional decisions in the classroom and systemic decisions schoolwide?
• **Conduct an equity audit.** Have you assessed how equitably your school is meeting all students' needs?

We encourage you to share any questions or additional action advice you may have found for turning high-poverty schools into high-performing ones.
Leaders in high-performing, high-poverty (HP/HP) schools know that success requires more than just high-quality teaching and learning. The entire school, as a system, should work together to develop a common instructional framework that provides a vision of what success looks like. When a ship loses its compass, getting to port becomes a game of chance. It’s no different for a school. When a school, particularly one characterized by high poverty and low performance, lacks an instructional plan or framework, progress will be anything but systematic, and more than likely patterns of low performance will continue.

Through the collaborative efforts of the leaders and staff, HP/HP schools focus on three kinds of learning: student, professional, and system. These learning agendas influence each other, and leaders in HP/HP schools make the most of this connection to facilitate sustainable improvements in teaching and learning. Professional learning is the adult learning that takes place within a school, while system learning conveys how the school as a whole learns to be more effective. In other words, as people within the school learn, the system learns.
Supporting the Learning Agendas

## Focusing on Student, Professional, & System-Level Learning

*Turning High-Poverty Schools Into High-Performing Schools*

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*Click image to download (PDF).*

Image credit: ASCD, courtesy of William Parrett and Kathleen Budge.

Is your school focusing on all three kinds of learning? Are you making the most of the links between the three? Use the "Focusing on Student, Professional, and System-Level Learning" rubric (right) to guide your reading and to help you reflect on the current situation in your school. The following five questions can help support leaders as they make the three learning agendas the focus of their actions:

**Question 1: Does our instructional framework guide curricula, teaching, assessment, and the learning environment?**

What is an instructional framework? In the broadest sense, it consists of the theories, policies, structures, processes, and practices used in a school to guide what happens in the classroom. A well-designed instructional framework helps provide a common vision of what excellent (or powerful) teaching looks like.

Leaders in HP/HP schools credit much of their success to a high level of coherence in the instructional program. Several of the schools that we studied began their improvement efforts by adopting a Comprehensive School Reform model, but later customized that model to better fit their needs. Schools also used a homegrown approach that emphasized higher-order questioning, development of academic vocabulary, reading across the curriculum, and common classroom-based assessments. Whether using an established model or a homegrown approach, schools commonly developed communities of practice (Wenger, 1998), groups of people who work...
together over a period of time. These groups are neither teams nor task forces -- they are peers held together by a common sense of purpose and a real need to know what one another knows. This collaborative structure enabled schools to create, implement, continuously improve, and sustain a coherent instructional framework.

Too often, schools continue to use "a pedagogy of poverty" (Haberman, 1991; Padrón, Waxman, & Rivera, 2002): ineffective practices characterized as an overuse of teacher-controlled discussions and decision making, lecture, drill and decontextualized practice, and worksheets. Rather than a pedagogy of poverty, what students who live in poverty need is powerful pedagogy: powerful instruction resulting in powerful (or deep) learning. Such pedagogy is:

- Consistent with a large body of research related to how people learn (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 2002) and is relevant to the learner (Brandt, 1998)
- Meaning centered (Knapp & Adelman, 1995)
- Supporting the development of various kinds of understanding (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005)
- Accelerated, strength-based, and empowering (Levin, 1989)
- Encompassing higher-order thinking, deep knowledge, and connections beyond classrooms (Newman et al., 1996)

Finally, the school-related factor that makes the most difference in the lives of students who live in poverty (or all students, for that matter) is the quality of teaching that occurs in the classroom. Effective teachers:

1. Have caring relationships with students
2. Set high standards and help students reach them
3. Connect the curriculum to students' lives
4. Participate in ongoing professional development (Fry & DeWit, 2010)

**Question 2: Do we provide targeted interventions for students who need them?**

Even with the development of a comprehensive instructional framework that leads to improvement in the quality of classroom teaching and learning, underachieving students who live in poverty may need additional support. Catching up often means more time and specific strategies aimed at the unique needs of individual students. Too often, for too many students in poverty, the need for additional support has resulted in referral and placement in special education programs (Howard, Dresser, & Dunklee, 2009). With the advent of Response to Intervention (RTI), however, many schools have been able to meet students' needs by restructuring the instructional day to provide them with additional time and support.

High-performing, high-poverty schools have long been systematically providing targeted support for students within and outside the traditional school day, week, or year. All HP/HP schools constantly review data to identify students who need:

- Before-, during-, and after-school small-group and individual tutoring
- Self-paced interventions using technology
- One-on-one academic advising and coaching
- Homework support
Question 3: Are all students proficient in reading?

Second only to safety, ensuring that all students develop literacy skills reflects a core priority in high-performing, high-poverty schools. As a principal at a middle school in the South put it, "We start with reading and end with reading. There's a lot of content and important stuff in between, but if our kids can't read at grade level, they'll never do as well as they could or should with the rest." Designing a comprehensive approach to reading improvement entails:

- Conducting an analysis of students' unique needs (e.g., those of English-language learners)
- Developing an understanding of the influence of poverty on reading achievement (Neuman, 2008)
- Examining the research base, especially concerning adolescent literacy (see Slavin, Cheung, Groff, & Lake, 2008)

When students do not learn to read by third grade or develop reading difficulties after third grade, as is disproportionately the case for students living in poverty (Kieffer, 2010), it is critically important that an emphasis on learning to read remain an instructional priority in upper-elementary classrooms as well as in middle and high schools. At the secondary level, this often requires supplanting an elective in a student's schedule to provide explicit reading instruction, which can present a dilemma for middle and high school leaders and teachers.

Reading, like any other skill, requires practice to improve. Although it's not an easy undertaking, HP/HP schools find ways to motivate students to read. After students have read one million words at Dayton's Bluff, the entire school celebrates. Former Principal Andrew Collins explains: "We kick off our Million Word Campaign in the fall. Students pledge to read one million words, and when we've reached the goal, all 400 kids with noisemakers, staff, and community partners parade through the streets."

Question 4: Are we using research-based models for professional learning and encouraging reflective practice?

Leaders in high-performing, high-poverty schools hold a view similar to this one expressed by a superintendent in a Northwest school district: "There is a bright red thread running from every student-learning problem to a problem of practice for teachers, and finally to a problem of practice for leaders." Professional learning and student learning are two sides of the same coin -- they cannot be separated. Many HP/HP schools, including those we studied, are either engaged in the process of developing common assessments or have begun using them within the context of a community of practice. During this work, as students' needs are identified, so too are the learning needs of the adults in the school.

Most of the HP/HP schools were also supporting professional learning through various types of walk-through processes. At Osmond A. Church, principals and teachers were engaged in conducting instructional rounds. The school's principal used a modified version of the model described in *Instructional Rounds in Education: A Networking Approach to Improving Teaching and Learning* (City, Elmore, Fiarman, & Teitel, 2009) to meet the teachers' needs.
In addition to the approaches described here, several other structures and processes are effective in supporting professional learning and promoting reflective practices. These include:

- Action research
- Lesson study
- Case-based learning
- Networks
- Journaling
- Portfolio development
- Tuning protocols

High-performing, high-poverty schools constantly endeavor to enhance professional capacity to better meet the needs of their students. The adults in these schools take their own learning as seriously as their students' learning, understanding they are truly two sides of the same coin. As one teacher explained, "When I learn to do something better, it helps a lot of my kids. We all know this and continually work to find the time it takes."

**Question 5: Are we engaging in continuous data-based inquiry as a school?**

All high-performing, high-poverty schools engage in some form of data-based decision making at the school level. This process typically involves:

- Identification of a problem
- Data gathering and analysis
- Goal setting
- Strategy selection and implementation
- Evaluation

Although this form of planning is likely to be used in many schools, what distinguishes HP/HP schools from others is the manner in which such a cycle of inquiry has become the norm. Second only to the development of caring relationships in the schools that we studied, the use of data was credited for much of their success. These schools are places where people tend to be very curious about their practice and are eager to innovate. They continuously seek or create solutions to the challenges posed by poverty and are encouraged to take risks. Principals of these schools play a key role in driving this work.

**Action Advice**

- **Create coherence in the instructional program.** Is your curriculum aligned to state and district standards? Have you articulated the curriculum across subjects and grade levels? Have you identified benchmark standards?
- **Employ a powerful pedagogy.** Are students primarily engaged in meaning making, developing various kinds of understanding, problem solving, reasoning, inquiry, and critical/creative thinking?
• **Develop a shared vision of what good teaching looks like.** Can all teachers describe a community-held understanding of good teaching? Can they list a core set of indications related to what teachers do and what students do when good teaching happens?

• **Use research-based teaching strategies that specifically address the needs of students living in poverty.** Do teachers know which instructional strategies have a solid research base? Do teachers have the required expertise to employ research-based strategies?

• **Develop assessment literacy.** Do teachers understand and employ sound assessment practices? Do principals have the competencies necessary to improve assessment practices schoolwide?

• **Involve students in assessing their learning.** Are students engaged in activities that help them assess and monitor their own learning?

• **Develop and use common formative and summative assessments.** Have benchmark standards been identified? Have teachers been provided collaboration opportunities to both develop assessments and use the information gained to inform instruction?

• **Ensure that teachers develop and demonstrate attributes and functions leading to success with students living in poverty.** Do teachers know which teacher attributes and functions lead to success? Do teachers possess these attributes and fulfill such functions?

• **Provide targeted interventions when needed.** Does your school use data to identify students who need additional support? Has time been scheduled during, before, or after the school day to provide extra help for students?

• **Develop reading proficiency in all students.** How many students are not proficient in reading by fourth grade? Is reading taught when needed after the elementary years?

• **Link professional learning to student learning and employ research-based models.** Do students' learning needs drive the content for professional development? Do professional development models support the development of communities of practice, prompting reflection and inquiry?

• **Engage in continuous data-based inquiry.** Is inquiry embedded in how the school does business? Are people curious, eager to innovate, and encouraged to take risks?

**Notes**


What Educators Need to Understand About Poverty

December 3, 2015

Editor's note: This piece was adapted from Turning High-Poverty Schools into High-Performing Schools by William H. Parrett and Kathleen M. Budge.

Children who live in poverty are as worthy of attending good schools as their more affluent counterparts, and much is known about what it takes to transform schools into places that better meet their needs. Improving such schools begins with leaders who are unequivocally committed to equity. This commitment starts with a better understanding of the meaning and influence of poverty in the lives of the students they serve.

Poverty in America is not easily defined, nor can its causes be simplistically explained. It can be experienced by anyone -- male and female, as well as people of all ages, racial or ethnic groups, and immigration status.

How Is Poverty Defined?

In the United States, the federal government defines poverty as a certain level of income relative to family size. For example, in 2014, the poverty threshold ranged from $12,071 for a single person to $24,230 for a family of four. Originally coined the "thrifty food plan," the formula used to
establish the poverty line was created by federal statisticians who based it upon what was determined to be three times the annual cost of food for a family of three in 1963. Although the basic formula for defining who lives in poverty is viewed as excessively conservative and controversial, it continues to be used as the official measure. In 2007, the U.S. Census Bureau released 12 alternatives to the current formula, all but one of which set the official poverty rate at a higher level (Neuman, 2008). According to Sarah Fass (2009) with the National Center for Children in Poverty (NCCP), the current income threshold is inadequate for even the bare necessities, and in some areas of the country it is grossly inadequate. For instance, Fass estimates a family of four living in a lower-cost region of the country needs between $37,000 and $41,000 to meet its basic needs; in locations where the cost of living is higher, the same family needs $52,000 to $67,000.

What Do We Mean by Poverty in the Context of Schools?

It is important to be aware of the ways in which we, as educators, define and discuss poverty in schools. When we define poverty in schools, we primarily mean the percentage of students who are eligible for the free and reduced-price meal program. For the 2015-16 school year, income eligibility for reduced-price meals was 185 percent of the federal poverty line and 130 percent for free meals. In less complex terms, a family of four with a gross income of $40,793 was eligible for reduced-price meals; and if they earned less than $28,665, they could receive free meals. Although schools are sometimes criticized for using this criterion for describing the percentage of students living in poverty, clearly these income levels fall at or far below the needed income level estimated by the NCCP for basic necessities. These families face significant challenges, and the schools that serve them do as well.

How Do We Talk About Poverty in Schools?

In practice, educators use many terms or labels to discuss children and families who live in poverty. Gloria Rodriguez and James Fabionar (2010) assert that the many terms we use should serve "as a reminder of how often we are called on in education to talk about -- but not necessarily to" -- our students and their families who live with low incomes (p. 64). They claim these terms are not uniformly understood and reveal varying understandings of poverty in the context of school that are largely influenced by thinking about children and families who live in poverty as a "deficit." They identify the following commonly used terms or labels, together with their purposes in schools:

- **Low Income:** Typically describes a family-level measure indexed against a certain average or range. It can be assigned to students and their families by determining their eligibility for specially funded programs that rely on a particular income cutoff to select program participants.
- **Free or Reduced-Price Lunch Eligible:** Using the poverty threshold established by the U.S. government for low-income students, eligibility is determined for meal programs offered by the U.S. Department of Agriculture based on income.
• **Title I Eligible**: Individual eligibility is based on a combined consideration of academic performance and income eligibility using similar guidelines as those used to determine eligibility for free or reduced-price meals.

• **Economically Disadvantaged**: Lower economic status creates a disadvantage in securing full educational benefits that in turn might guarantee certain economic benefits. Accountability systems that require disaggregation of data by certain student subgroups typically include the category of "economically disadvantaged" students. Application of this label can vary, but it is often equated with eligibility for free or reduced-price meals.

• **Low Socioeconomic Status (Low SES)**: The term identifies students who are low income and identified according to certain social background characteristics that are believed to operate in tandem with economic status to facilitate or impede social mobility. Within schools, "low SES" is often used as shorthand for many status definitions or social processes. (Adapted from Rodriguez & Fabionar, 2010, p. 65)

As children we may have been taught that "sticks and stones can break our bones, but names can never hurt us." Unfortunately, that is simply not true. Children who live in poverty, like all children, deserve to be treated with respect and in a manner that preserves their dignity. The words we use to describe and label children do matter. Educators must reflect upon the many labels used to describe children (and their families) who live in poverty, and critique their own use of such terms, to become attuned to the many ways that schools unwittingly limit students' self-determination.

As educators, we must be sensitive to the effects of poverty on our students' state of mind and ensure that we separate their developing sense of self from their living conditions. As a starting point, we must be extremely careful how we talk about children who live in poverty. For example, describing these students as living in homes with a low income or with low SES (socioeconomic status) is very different, and more accurate, than calling them "low-income students," "low-SES students," or "high-poverty kids." This distinction may seem like splitting hairs, but it is important.

Notes


Road Tested / Three Ways to Engage Parents in High-Poverty Settings

Tiffany Anderson

All parents want to see their children succeed. Low parental involvement is generally not an indicator of low interest, but rather of community barriers that prevent schools from effectively engaging parents. As a school leader who has served in several high-poverty environments, I have found that it is possible to remove many of these barriers and engage families in meaningful ways.

Make Allies and Ask Questions

To begin building a positive rapport with your families, identify parents who have relationships across the community. Express how valuable their input is to your school's success and ask them to participate in a focus group. It is often hard for parents to explain why other parents are not involved, but asking specific questions can help identify barriers to engagement:

- What are the challenges you face daily? (Our parents have expressed concerns about finding jobs, feeding their families, and even washing laundry.)
- What is the most common complaint you hear from other parents about the community or its schools?
- Are you active in any community events or organizations? If so, what are they and why are you involved?
- Is the school or district a welcoming place?
- What are the top three neighborhood issues that parents face in the district?
- Where do you get information about the neighborhood?
- What businesses do most families in the community frequent?

Gathering feedback and discussing solutions with these parents has helped our district generate further questions, conversations, and surveys to extend to all of our families. The more information our schools have, the more strategic we can be in providing families direct assistance through resources, education, and employment.

Creatively Publicize Information

If your families do not often read the newspaper, have access to the Internet, or read materials that come home, consider advertising school events in other venues. In addition to using traditional methods of communication, our district places flyers at the local chop suey restaurant and in our community grocery stores. We also notify families of upcoming events through
text messages, automated phone calls, and public service announcements on local radio stations.

Become a Vehicle for the Community

When concerns about crime in our community were increasing, our district decided to sponsor a town hall meeting. We leveraged the opportunity to not only address the issue of crime, but to also engage families in sessions on achievement, community services, and school volunteerism. There are many ways to foster parental engagement, but we have been especially successful through events like these and by providing our families with basic resources.

To make your schools a true vehicle for the community, consider offering the following services:

- Host job fairs and workshops for parents on topics such as computer literacy, job placement, healthy cooking and eating, and earning a GED. These workshops, led by volunteer staff and community members, can be offered at PTA meetings or during school hours (which has the added bonus of increasing family visibility within the school). Schools can waive admission fees for workshops in exchange for school volunteer hours.
- Provide bus passes for students and parents to ride to school together, or provide bus passes or cabs for parents to attend school events.
- Allow parents to wash clothing with supplies provided by the school in exchange for volunteering (one load of laundry equals one hour of volunteering in the school).
- Offer employment when possible to families within the community.
- Collaborate with community agencies such as the YMCA, neighborhood watch, local library, and recreation center—and offer to host events sponsored by these groups.
- Partner with a local thrift store or food pantry—or open one in your school—to supply families with clothing and regular access to groceries. Our district operates a school-based pantry that is run by students and staff members and stocked by the St. Louis Area Foodbank.
- In addition to providing a full meal at parent activities (workshops, parent-teacher conferences, book clubs, etc.), provide a bag of groceries to parents in attendance. We offer groceries to the first 30 families who show up at an event, and we always have more parents in attendance than groceries. Most of our elementary schools receive more than 100 families at these activities.
- Help build home libraries by providing a book to families at every parent function or every time a parent volunteers at the school. We prioritize funding for this initiative in our school operating budget, and also through donations and grants.
- Partner with social services to provide resources to families within the school such as family counseling services, mental health supports, and welfare services.

The key to high parental involvement is removing barriers by building genuine relationships that result in a culture of understanding, support, and collaboration. As our district has discovered, when we support our families, our families have been instrumental in supporting our schools.

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**KEYWORDS**

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Would You Step Through

W

hen I was growing up, my teachers never would have stepped through my front door. Not that I was a bad, unlikable kid—I was well-behaved in school. My mom had no issues with teachers or schools. But the abyss between the school’s clean desks and bright lights and the government housing I grew up in was great, and it would have been too embarrassing to allow any teacher to cross it. Even if a teacher had tried to visit my family, it would have been impossible. For as long as I can remember, my single mom juggled two or more jobs.

So, as a teacher in an urban, high-poverty school, I get it when I make my annual phone calls to my students’ families and they balk at my suggestion of a home visit. I empathize with the embarrassed sighs and even the defensive, “What do you mean you want to come to my place? Can’t we just talk at the conference later?” But I persist because I know that these same parents will probably be unable or unwilling to show up for parent–teacher conferences in a few months.

I wish I could reassure parents by saying, “I’m not checking the legality of your residency or counting how many people live in your apartment.” Instead, I say something like, “The school is always asking parents to enter our world—to come to conferences or family night or volunteer in classrooms. I want to return the favor and go into your world. Maybe hear about what your typical day is like instead of walking you through our class schedule—or play a card game in your living room instead of explaining our flash cards.”

Inviting parents into school and discussing things like class schedules are important. But why do teachers judge parents for not setting foot on our campus when we make no attempt to set foot on their front porch?

Bonds of Trust

Home visits are especially essential in areas characterized by poverty and diversity. Most teachers come from a middle-class background and have never experienced the realities of low-income students’ lives. It’s my responsibility to experience and embrace that reality, even if just for 30 minutes in a student’s living room. Tish Howard, author of Poverty is NOT a Learning Disability, believes that “the first step in developing effective lines of school–home communication is making it easy for parents to get to know, like, trust, and respect us—to see us as their peers, not their superiors” (p. 67).

I can’t think of an easier way to begin building mutual liking and respect than to give parents a home-court advantage. Bonds of trust begin to build the moment I walk into a parent’s home and compliment his or her hard work in raising an amazing child. As I tell families something of how I grew up, any assumptions that I’m superior to them—or think I am— disappear. We discuss childhood chores, local events, and, eventually, their hopes for their child’s education. The relationship starts when I take that first step toward the family instead of hiding behind my classroom door.

Teaching in high-poverty schools during the past four years, I’ve conducted more than 80 home visits. After these visits, not one of the families missed a parent–teacher conference or failed to return a phone call. I can’t express how beneficial these home visits have been in terms of understanding my students. But I can provide a glimpse by walking you through one recent visit, to the home of children I’ll call Gabby and Davon.

Glimpsing Their Hidden Strengths

Gabby was a 4th grader who came to our school in January. Her older brother Davon had been expelled from their former school. Gabby’s mom—a...
supportive, yet extremely busy parent—wanted a fresh start for her children. She expressed reluctance the first few times I tried to set up a home visit. But as I built a relationship with Gabby, she began to pester her mom into letting me come. Gabby heard about my visits with other classmates and saw the books and school supplies I'd brought them. Finally, Ms. Ross allowed Davon’s teacher and me to come one day after school.

As the four of us walked to Gabby and Davon’s home, I was amazed at these children’s critical-thinking skills. Gabby explained the purpose of their path at every turn: “We don’t go down that street, Mrs. Smith. Even though it’s quicker, the man living on the right looks at us funny.” “Stay on this side so that stray dog doesn’t notice you.”

I can’t think of an easier way to begin building mutual respect than to give the parents a home court advantage.
“In the morning, we can walk through this alley, but not after school. The guys hanging out are up to no good.” I made a mental note that I would use her obvious critical-thinking skills in the next day’s math lesson on multiple strategies for solving two-step word problems. Home visits often shed light on strengths that don’t show up on standardized tests.

When we reached the house, Gabby explained that we’d walked a little too fast. Her mom wouldn’t be back from picking up their little sister for another 10 minutes. A light bulb went off as I recalled the numerous times I or other staff members had chastised Davon for hanging out too long after school. What we saw as loafing was a time-management strategy. When I asked Davon about this, he responded shyly, “Yeah, I’d rather my sister wait around at school than on our street.” His protectiveness impressed me.

When Ms. Ross pulled up, I smiled as I watched Davon and Gabby snap straight to work getting their little sister out of the car seat, bringing in bags from the car, and asking their mom about her day. They certainly weren’t fitting the stereotypes of “lazy and apathetic” that many people hold about students from poor families. They cared deeply for their mother and sister and wanted to help in any way possible.

At first, Ms. Ross was full of apologies. Sorry for being late, sorry for the messy house, sorry for the dark living room (they try to keep the electric bill down), sorry for not having much food or drink to offer, sorry Gabby didn’t always get her homework done correctly (she didn’t have time to check it every night). But once I began commenting on the family photos covering the living room walls, Ms. Ross lit up with pride and love. For the next 20 minutes, we laughed while she told hilarious stories about various photos. Gabby and Davon jumped in with their perspectives. With her home-court advantage, Ms. Ross became open and comfortable. I became simply an eager listener, sharing my own family stories along the way.

. . . And Struggles

When it came time to wrap things up, I asked Gabby if there was anything else she wanted to show me. She walked me to the bedroom where she did her homework and reading. I stood at the doorway of the smallest bedroom I’d ever seen (and I grew up in government housing). Inside were two sets of bunk beds. Gabby explained each bed’s occupant. This was her bed, this was Davon’s, and the other two were for her little sister or for her cousins when they visited.

I recalled the frequent arguments over space that erupted at Gabby’s work table. Gabby regularly complained about her neighbor taking too much space, taking her pencil, moving her book, and so on. Right then and there, Gabby’s need for more personal space made sense. The next day in class, Gabby and I set aside a special spot on the floor to which she could take her work whenever she felt crowded. Such collaboration to accommodate a student’s particular needs becomes more likely when a teacher sees the conditions of that learner’s life firsthand.

As we said our good-byes, Gabby and Davon insisted they should walk us back to school, while Ms. Ross was adamant about giving us a ride. I reassured them that we could walk back with no trouble. Walking back, my colleague and I debriefed about the insights we’d gained in the last 30 minutes. We had seen glimmers of pride in our students’ eyes and noted skills they possessed that we could accentuate in class. Misconceptions we’d had about Ms. Ross and her involvement in her children’s education had been shattered.

Perhaps we could have had a relationship-building conversation like this with Ms. Ross after a parent–teacher conference or at a family literacy night. But that assumes that Ms. Ross would have taken the first step by coming to our campus. Instead, I’d taken the first step. I had seen firsthand what living in poverty was like for her and gained valuable insights.

As embarrassed as I was by my own childhood home, I can’t help but wonder how things would have been different if a teacher had visited my house. That teacher might have seen my brother’s hilarious sense of humor and my mom’s sheer determination to make her children’s lives better than her own—and seen more clearly why I was so shy and lacking in confidence.

The paradigm needs to shift in schools that serve poor students. Teachers need to spend less energy complaining about parents’ lack of involvement—or even brainstorming how we can get parents to step through the school doors. Instead, teachers need to ask themselves when they are going to step through students’ front doors. This shift can make all the difference—to students, families, and school culture.


Stephanie Smith (stephanie-smith@sac-city.k12.ca.us) teaches 3rd grade at Oak Ridge Elementary School in Sacramento, California.
Dialing up some creative engagement ideas positions schools for better partnerships with low-income families.

Many mornings, a 9th grader in Philadelphia gets dressed, leaves her house, and never arrives at school. Her home phone is more likely to be answered by a disconnect message than by her parent. So, as is the case with many families in poverty, it would seem engagement efforts meet economic realities in a dead end.

"For a lot of these families, you can't pick up the phone and expect that the number you called two weeks ago is still a working number. But you can't use that as an excuse not to engage," explains Allison Rodman, an assistant principal in northeast Philadelphia. In fact, this truant teen's dad is very involved in his daughter's education; he just needs
educators to be willing to pursue creative strategies for contacting him. He and Rodman have worked out a system where, if she needs to get in touch with him, she calls a neighbor who takes the phone to him.

**Attitudinal Hang-Ups**

Families in poverty experience barriers to school engagement that often manifest in logistical ways, like the disconnected phone. They may work evening shifts at hourly wage jobs where taking time off for school meetings, or getting child care and transportation that allow them to attend those meetings, is prohibitive. The tendency, says author and community activist Paul Gorski, is for the school to misinterpret the symptoms of these barriers. In other words, they assume that if parents don't show up, they must not care.

Addressing this prejudice requires a major shift in thinking—from "how do we fix families in poverty to how do we fix the conditions that make engagement less accessible to families in poverty?" says Gorski. The problem is not that these families don't care; it's that they have less access to paid leave, transportation, and child care, and they are more likely to experience the school as a hostile environment because of discrimination they faced as students.

"A lot of schools think that if we just do these five strategies, everything will be OK," Gorski relates. That's premature if educators don't first address implicit beliefs about low-income parents. "Teachers know what it's like to be the target of a deficit view that says there's something wrong with you, and that's why kids aren't doing well in school," Gorski observes. He uses this as a common starting point to persuade teachers not to pass that deficit view down to students or their families.

Harvard Family Research Project (HFRP) offers a tool for constructively confronting biases: a set of teaching cases that present dilemmas in school-to-family relations, especially among low-income and culturally diverse families. These case studies provide a neutral space for educators to think about their role in parent outreach, how bias affects situations, and what they could do to improve school-to-home connections, says Margaret Caspe, HFRP senior research analyst.
"All families want their child to succeed," adds M. Elena Lopez, HFRP associate director. We have to confront the ways our system privileges the middle and upper classes and challenge our beliefs about families in poverty, she notes.

Where They Are

Gorski says research dating back to the mid-70s shows there's no difference in how parents of different income levels value education: "Low-income parents have the exact same ideals as wealthier families." Although jobs and child care responsibilities might prevent them from sitting with their children as they do homework, they still recognize the value of completing homework and encourage their children to do so, he asserts.

Rodman agrees that parent engagement can be very strong; it just might happen in different ways. "As teachers and school leaders, we have a responsibility to shake out the notion of what traditional parent engagement looks like. We need to be creative and persistent." For example, Rodman's school struggled with low attendance at back-to-school nights and other on-site events. So they surveyed families about what they like to do in their free time and discovered that families enjoyed making and sharing food with one another. Now, the school lets parents take the lead on providing food at events, which has resulted in greater parent turnout. Rodman suggests we reflect on whether we are designing engagement around the way we experienced school or considering what our community truly values.

Flexible timing, on-hand translators, and parent leadership can make school events more accessible. But Rodman and others also employ responsive practices that meet parents where they are—in their homes or even a public library. "Schools must prioritize offering support to parents and their families at home, including home visits, providing support to have computers and Internet access, and providing books for pleasure reading," insists parent engagement author Larry Ferlazzo.

Maine's Comienza en Casa (It Starts at Home) program is an example of one such effort. In partnership with area kindergarten teachers, this program provides
iPads, loaded with educational games and materials, for migrant families to support their young children as they transition to school.

**Community Strengths**

Outreach from schools to families in poverty often extends across race and class borders. In urban schools, especially, there tends to be a mismatch between predominately white middle-class educators and the low-income communities of color they serve. It is "our responsibility to connect with community organizations that are going to keep us in touch with what our community values and what important events are happening," Rodman explains of her school, where the staff is mostly white and the students are black and Latino.

For instance, "a lot of our families love to participate in the Puerto Rican Day parade," says Rodman. So her school has intentionally partnered with several Latino groups tied to the event, bringing the school and community together. These Latino organizations now use the school as a site for after-school tutoring and other activities.

Social workers, parents as board members, and family liaisons also help schools forge authentic connections to families in poverty. "You want to be someone they can trust enough to see the school as a point of contact with the community," says Carmelita Naves, a community schools coordinator in Washington, D.C. "The school can't provide housing, but we can connect them with the right organizations that can make that process easier." Naves works directly with the Mary Center, a social service agency that provides a range of supports, such as housing, job skills, food, and health care.

Family liaisons like Naves make the school a welcoming, trustworthy environment for low-income families. Without relational trust, research shows schools have a one in seven chance of making significant improvements in school achievement (read "Trust in Schools: A Core Resource for School Reform" in *Educational Leadership*).

A 2014 evaluative study of the family liaison role in a high-poverty, urban district illuminates ways that schools might make this lever for family engagement even
more effective. Researchers Beverly Dretzke and Susan Rickers report that liaisons wanted the flexibility to connect with families outside of school contract hours, limited nonessential duties (i.e., lunch duty) to maximize time for one-on-one engagement, and opportunities to professionalize their job.

"Many people are hired as family liaisons because of their community connections and networking skills," says Rickers, who teaches at Bemidji State University. "We found they were also really interested in professional development to help them develop best practices in the work they were doing."

**Systemic, Not Random**

Schools that make positive links to families in poverty see responsive, ongoing engagement as part of their DNA. They're willing to keep asking the tough questions, says poverty expert Bill Parrett. They build systems, not just what Caspe and Lopez call a "random acts" style of engagement.

Creighton School District, a small urban community in Arizona with approximately 7,200 students, of whom 85 percent are Hispanic and 90 percent qualify for free and reduced-price lunch, made such a commitment. The district initially practiced a "random acts" approach, with school events here and there and little parent engagement as a result. So school administrator Maria Paredes surveyed families in the district to see which events they valued, and she found that academically focused events rose to the fore. Based on this community feedback, she offered parents the option to streamline their on-site engagement into quarterly conferences focused on student data. In these meetings, parents and teachers discuss student achievement, set goals, and identify ways to track and support those goals. With more focused, purposeful reasons to meet, parent engagement increased in the district.

Across the United States, systemic approaches to family engagement are taking hold. In some states—Nevada and Massachusetts, for example—family engagement is part of the accountability metric for school leaders. They are held accountable for their outreach efforts and are provided rubrics to shape and grow these efforts. Likewise, the Flamboyan Foundation, an educational nonprofit in both Washington, D.C., and Puerto Rico, created a rubric for classroom teachers
to self-assess their family engagement skills. It's divided into three sections that address mindset, trust, and collaboration on academic goals. Caspe and Lopez also highlight California for recently releasing a framework for parent engagement that links state and Title I requirements. And many are familiar with Joyce Epstein's well-established framework for six types of parental involvement in schools, which encompasses challenges and accommodations for a variety of community needs.

“If you’re a teacher asking parents to come into your classroom, what conversely can you do to go out into the community?”

Creative and Persistent

Frameworks and rubrics shouldn't diminish the personal agency and creativity that educators bring to this work. Author Kathleen Budge relates that one school simply held itself accountable for communicating something positive to parents at least once a week. They tracked this data with the principal and school board and found that parents were more receptive and communicative as a result.

Caspe says teachers can continually reflect on what outreach looks like in their classrooms by thinking about how they share data with families. Simply establishing several points of communication—print or e-mail newsletters, phone calls, and tweets or text messages—can shore up home connections. "And if you're a teacher asking parents to come into your classroom, what conversely can you do to go out into the community?" she asks.

Families in poverty show up for their kids in all sorts of ways—it just might not be at an after-school event. These families need educators who are committed to challenging biases toward people in poverty and who are creative and persistent in their strategies for removing economic barriers to school engagement. Educators must continually ask themselves whose reality they are basing their engagement strategies on and remind themselves that, even if the first call doesn't go through, there's always someone on the other end of the line who cares.
How Can High-Poverty Schools Engage Families and the Community?

MAY 18, 2016

"I was headed to the home of one of my second graders to let the parents know that Luis was coming to after-school tutoring on time and doing well. When I knocked on the door, Grandma and Dad greeted me warmly in Spanish, inviting me in. Luis' mom was preparing dinner. Dad asked me to come directly to the kitchen to show me what Luis had begun doing at
home since he started the tutoring program. On the cupboards were taped a mishmash of cereal boxes, pasta containers, dairy product holders, and simple drawings. All were in English. Dad smiled and explained, 'He's teaching all of us to read English! We learn five, maybe ten words every day!'” (Elementary teacher, high-performing, high-poverty school in the Northwest)

The story of Luis is a good example of the benefits of engaging parents and families. A simple home visit by the teacher revealed how, previously unbeknownst to the school, a young ESL student was connecting his tutoring and schoolwork with his family. In turn, Luis' family was most appreciative of their son's progress in school and welcomed his newly gained English skills that were helping them learn.

Families living in poverty often work multiple jobs, may have limited English language skills, and in some cases may have had few positive experiences with their children's teachers or schools. These factors frequently work against a school's attempts to form relationships with families living in poverty and authentically engage them in their children's education. Even in high-performing schools, this problem is an ongoing concern. Leaders in high-performing, high-poverty (HP/HP) schools continually look for ways to provide opportunities for involvement and to gain back their trust.

The Critical Importance of Trust

In a recent study of public schools in Chicago, Anthony Bryk, president of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, and his colleagues concluded, "Relationships are the lifeblood of activity in a school community" (Bryk, Bender Sebring, Allensworth, Luppescu, & Easton, 2010, p.137). In one high-poverty elementary school, a teacher remarked, "Without a trusting environment in our classroom and with the families of my kids, it's all uphill. We never make the progress we could...we never can 'click.' Trust is what makes it all happen for us." The development of trusting relationships lies at the heart of successfully engaging parents, families, and the community.

Here are seven strategies and practices to build trust between schools, students, and families.

Create Full-Service Schools and Safety Nets
Many HP/HP schools connect vital social and medical services with their students. These **full-service schools** typically provide services such as social workers, physicians, dentists, vision and hearing specialists, grief counselors, and family counselors on site. Some schools provide a childcare center, a family resource center, or hunger/homelessness support to assist families in meeting their basic needs. Research shows that when a full-service school works well, student achievement increases, attendance rates go up, suspensions drop, and special education placements decrease (Dryfoos, 1994; Dryfoos & Maguire, 2002).

### Create Links Between School and Home

Strengthening the family's ability to support their children's academic achievement and other forms of success in school is a priority in HP/HP schools. One school organizes a learning academy on Saturday mornings to assist families of refugee students. Other schools employ school-family liaisons who connect families with schools in a variety of ways. Sadowski (2004) identifies six activities that a school might consider to establish linkages between students' homes and school:

1. Dual-language classes for students
2. English as a second language, GED, and parenting classes
3. Home-school liaisons (with fluency in the home language)
4. Preschool and early literacy programs
5. Early assessment
6. Community and school activities and events

### Offer Mentoring to Students

Most educators have long known that a meaningful relationship with an adult is what kids want and need most. Mentors provide such a relationship. The National Dropout Prevention Center identifies mentoring as one of the most effective strategies to keep kids engaged and in school. The Western Regional Center for Drug-Free Schools and Communities identifies five positive outcomes of mentoring programs (Jackson, 2002):

1. Personalized attention and care
2. Access to resources
3. Positive/high expectations for staff and students
4. Reciprocity and active youth participation
5. Commitment
6
Many HP/HP schools operate their own programs with local staff and volunteers; others access the help of Big Brother/Big Sister programs, local YMCA/YWCA services, and a host of other community-affiliated programs that offer adult mentoring.

Provide Opportunity for Community-Based and Service Learning

“Our kids actively work to support their community. Through clubs and classes, they raise money for families in need, work on a 'coats for kids' project, plant trees, build park benches, help with efforts of the Northwest Blood Center, Children’s Miracle Network, American Cancer Society, March of Dimes, Red Cross, and many others. They rake leaves in our parks and do yard work for our elderly folks in need. Our students feel better because of these efforts, and our community values the extra help that the school gives back to them. When everyone is supporting one another, it makes Tekoa a great place to live and raise children.” (Wayne Roellich, principal, Tekoa High School)

Noted for connecting academic learning to real-world problems beyond school, community-based learning, particularly service learning, has become common in HP/HP schools. Many benefits accrue from service learning (Billig, 2000a, 2000b):

- Enhanced academic achievement
- Increased school attendance
- Improved student motivation to learn
- Decreased risky behaviors
- Increased interpersonal development and student ability to relate to culturally diverse groups
- Improved school image and public perception

Community-based learning also provides an excellent means to initiate career exploration, internships, shadowing, and jobs.

Conduct Home Visits

Many HP/HP schools encourage and conduct some form of home visits. Fourteen years ago, test scores in the Mason County School District ranked in the lowest quartile of all districts in Kentucky. Inspired by the idea of building closer connections to students' home lives, the district, with a cadre of volunteer teachers, embarked on a goal of visiting every home of the 2,800 kids enrolled. Maintaining this commitment over the years,
together with positive administrative and collegial support and the requisite professional development, has resulted in every family receiving at least one home visit annually from their child's teacher. The district has experienced consecutive years of student achievement growth and a 50-percent drop in discipline referrals, as well as reduced achievement gaps and increased attendance.

Ensure Effective Two-Way Communication

We know that a "whatever it takes" attitude prevails in HP/HP schools. This is especially true in their efforts to communicate with the parents and families. Despite often-limited resources, educators in these schools make it a priority to develop authentic connections with students' parents and families. The goal of fostering two-way communication between school and home requires school leaders to be relentless in their insistence that communications be respectful, honest, and timely.

Use the School as a Community Center

Many HP/HP schools engage parents, families, and other community members by opening their doors and expanding their schedules to offer clubs, parent support and education, early childhood activities, GED programs, advisory groups, community education classes, and a host of other events and activities of interest to the community. These HP/HP schools partner with community or city organizations, local foundations, state and municipal agencies, service clubs, universities, and businesses to host these valued endeavors in their buildings, as well as offer services at times that better fit families' work schedules.

The Principal's Role

Principals, working with teacher-leaders and staff leaders from various vantage points within the school, are positioned to address the wide spectrum of environmental needs that confront high-poverty schools. HP/HP school principals can take a variety of actions (PDF) that will surround every student with the positive supports and scaffolds necessary to ensure his or her individual success.

High-performing, high-poverty schools don't go it alone -- and they don't reinvent the wheel. They access support, resources, and guidance whenever and wherever they can to foster a healthy, safe, and supportive
learning environment. The resources and organizations listed below can guide a school's efforts to build strong relationships with parents and families:

- Boys and Girls Clubs of America
- Coalition for Community Schools
- Communities in Schools
- National Network of Partnership Schools
- YMCA and YWCA Programs

Action Advice

- **Monitor data to ensure a safe learning environment.** Are we making sure that every student is always safe?
- **Build a common understanding of how poverty impacts learning.** Do we all understand how living in poverty may negatively influence the ability of our underachieving students to catch up?
- **Plan for mobility.** Are we ready for mobile students' arrival -- providing welcome packets, diagnostic testing, and appropriate placements? Do we develop "catch-up" plans if needed? Do we provide built-in opportunities for new friendships with peers? Do we make it a practice to communicate with parents during the first six weeks after enrollment? Do we address transportation issues if a student is mobile within our district?
- **Make sure that all students are connected to a caring adult.** Do we know which students come to school without the support of a caring adult?
- **Start student advisories.** Is every secondary student connected to an adult at school who regularly monitors his or her progress?
- **Personalize relationships through small learning environments.** Is the size of our school presenting problems for some students and preventing us from forming caring relationships?
- **Provide opportunities for all students to participate in extracurricular activities.** Do our students have an equitable opportunity to participate?
- **Work to engage every family with school.** Do we have a plan in place for guiding our efforts to build trust and connect with our families?
- **Personalize the connection between school and the student's home.** Who among our staff visits the homes of our kids?
- **Initiate an effective mentoring program.** How are we connecting students with caring adults and positive role models?
- **Offer community-based learning and service-learning opportunities**
to all students. Are we connecting students with the community? Are we teaching students about the value of giving back? Are we providing opportunities for students to explore career options in the local community?

• **Visit every student’s home.** Do we have a plan in place to guide us in conducting productive home visits?

• **Ensure two-way communication between homes and school.** This includes:
  - Language-appropriate written and verbal contacts
  - Translation assistance when needed
  - Respectful and clear communications
  - Frequent contact through the most effective mode
  - Authentic requests for feedback or response
  - Willingness to help with requests and family needs
  - Personal invitations to participate in school conferences
  - Timely invitations to activities and events

• **Open the school to the community.** Have we created a plan to provide welcome and needed services to our community?

• **Join a network to enhance school, family, and community relationships.** Can we improve our connections with our families and communities?

Notes


