



Reducing Student Poverty in the Classroom

School-Based Antipoverty Strategies the Federal Government Can Learn From and Act On

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Introduction and summary

Since the time when the most pressing problem facing educators was pigtailed boys being dunked in inkwells, the American school house has maintained a tradition of delivering the 3 Rs—reading, 'riting, and 'rithmetic. Those halcyon days, if they ever existed, are long past. Today's educators face a myriad of concerns including the high concentrations of poverty that limit opportunities for young Americans to succeed in too many of our schools. That's why the American school house must play a critical role in addressing at least one more R—reducing the negative consequences of poverty by becoming a central component of federal, state and local antipoverty strategies.

Schools that are educating high numbers of disadvantaged students must employ innovative strategies to promote academic achievement. Many of these strategies are what we believe have a direct impact on student learning, such as offering incentives to recruit and retain highly effective teachers, implementing challenging yet accessible curriculum, and providing additional learning opportunities beyond the traditional school day. Yet it is just as important to address outside-school influences, specifically poverty that can also significantly impact student achievement and success.

Factors from inadequate housing, food instability, and financial insecurity place stresses on young people that distract them from their studies and can cause them to disengage from school entirely. When poverty intersects with poor performing schools the outcome for low-income students can be devastating, from dramatically lower test scores as compared to their higher-income peers, to staggering dropout rates.

Further, there are a number of government programs that help address the basic needs of school-age children but families often face barriers to participating in these programs. Some of these barriers include:

- Lack of outreach and accessible information about the programs
- Transportation challenges of visiting and signing up for these programs at different (and sometimes remote) locations
- Burdensome application requirements, such as unnecessary repeat visits to program offices and unnecessary document requests
- The stigma associated with applying for programs

These problems are multiplied and made more complicated for those families that qualify for more than one public-benefits program.

Communities across the country are finding that pairing antipoverty strategies with schools result in positive student outcomes as well as improve the delivery of public benefits. Although these are not traditional relationships, schools can play a pivotal role in providing the important economic services that stabilize families—services that can also eliminate some the challenges that undermine student academic achievement. Already school-based antipoverty initiatives in places such as New York City, Michigan, San Diego, and New Mexico highlight the success students can realize, not only in the classroom but also as it concerns their overall sense of well-being, when the traditional role of the school is expanded to include services targeting poverty.

For a number of years the city of San Diego had one of the nation's lowest rates of participation in the federal SNAP/Food Stamp program (about 35 percent of eligible residents). The low participation rate was pegged to a number of factors, from inconvenient and hard-to-reach enrollment locations, to lack of assistance to help families fill out cumbersome and confusing forms.

To boost participation in the program, county officials enlisted the help of the San Diego School board, which in turn agreed to allow four of its schools located in high-poverty neighborhoods to serve as food stamp screening centers. This school-based program has been able to remove a number of enrollment barriers, including easing the sense of anxiety experienced by many families, by providing locations with which they are familiar and comfortable. While advocates are still working to help increase participation rates, more than 600 San Diego families have been counseled on eligibility requirements through the school-based initiative.

The SNAP/Food Stamp program is just one of the many federal, state, and local government programs and services available to low-income students and their

families. Unfortunately, families who can benefit most from these programs often encounter challenges and barriers to participation that are similar to those that existed for San Diego's SNAP program. Dealing with multiple agencies in different locations, requiring different application processes can be overwhelming for many families. Streamlining the process by allowing for central connection points for services will maximize outcomes.

Schools are ideal locations because they have unparalleled access to poor students and their families—they are located in the neighborhoods in which families live, are recognized and familiar community institutions, and have established relationships with low-income students and their families. In short, schools are ideally positioned to become effective central connection points for a broad range of social welfare services.

Consequently, in this paper, we urge:

- Congress, with its current concerns about reducing costs, to attach to an appropriations bill (or other vehicle) a requirement that relevant federal administrative agencies produce a report to Congress that outlines a plan for expanding the use of central connection points and simplifying and consolidating public benefit application requirements. These efforts should include advancing school-based antipoverty strategies.
- The White House Domestic Policy Council and the White House Office of Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships to get involved in efforts to develop a plan, and take a leadership role to help spur Congress to action.
- Congress to invest in community school models and to create a new innovation fund designed to explore the potential benefits of delivering public benefits through schools.
- State and local governments to establish interagency committees to replicate and expand upon existing school-based antipoverty models and maintain new modes of providing services through schools.

We're confident that after reading our analysis and recommendations policymakers in Congress and the Obama administration will realize the positive impact that school-based antipoverty programs could have on the education and well being of low-income children across our country.

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