



Leadership That Makes a Difference

Students living in poverty are least likely to become educated. Deep inside, we know our classrooms, curriculum, teaching and learning strategies, community partnerships, and leadership in our schools struggle to serve students who live in the crisis of poverty. We cannot keep doing what we have always done and expect different results. Now is the time for action. "An effective leader does not deny crisis, they illuminate it so real solutions can be found" (Sharif Abdullah, *The Power of One*).

Top Ten Strategies For Educating Students Who Live In Poverty

- 1. Use Your Power:** Power and Responsibility are connected. If you do not personally take responsibility for educating students in poverty, you cannot have the power to close the achievement gap. It is in your hands. As Harry Truman said, "The buck stops here."
- 2. Foster Unity:** Your interests are connected to the interests of students and families in poverty. Understand students and families in poverty are not "other." They are people living in the context of poverty.
- 3. Consider Perspectives:** When making leadership decisions, think about what is best for students and families in poverty from their perspectives.
- 4. Believe in the Good of People:** See students and families in poverty as people who want to learn and have quality lives, but may not know how or have the supports to make that happen.
- 5. Believe in the Unknown Potential:** If a leader can justify writing off one student, we all lose. We can make a difference, but only when we believe in the unknown potential of all students. Our actions show our beliefs.
- 6. Support Your Staff with Partnerships:** Ensure knowledge and partnerships are available to keep staff from being overwhelmed by the impacts of poverty on learning.
- 7. Lead by Action:** Illuminate for staff how inaction or status quo heightens the challenges for educating students who live in poverty.
- 8. Lead by Example:** Leaders must walk the walk to create a school culture committed to educating students in poverty. Actions speak louder than words. What behaviors do you exhibit that says every child can learn and every student will have the educational supports to reach their highest potential? Do you visit classrooms? Do you conduct home visits? Do you select students for special jobs? Do you regularly review data that often reflects the struggles and successes of students living in poverty?
- 9. Challenge Your Staff:** Call upon staff to examine their comfort zones and to implement new ways of reaching out and educating students who live in poverty. If an educator believes a student cannot learn because of the impacts of poverty, the educator creates barriers for the student to succeed.
- 10. Set Effective Policies:** Policy is designed to serve, not punish. Examine policy and school rules to ensure students are not being punished for poverty conditions.

Build a Poverty Competent Staff

Simply learning about “those people in poverty” is not enough. For school staff members to be effective in educating students in poverty, they should be proficient in three levels of skills and knowledge.

Conceptual: Increase awareness of the root problem. If staff do not fully understand the problem, they cannot implement workable solutions. Do staff members understand the impacts of poverty? Do they understand how poverty affects problem solving skills of students and parents and how poverty impacts the daily routines of family life? Are teachers implementing policies that have been developed with considerations of the impacts of poverty on people? Are they aware of how students in poverty impact the performance levels? Do they have skills and strategies for making a difference for students in poverty?

Dialectical: Poverty is dynamic and impacts people and organizations in multiple ways. However, professionals are often trained to operate on a “right or wrong,” “black or white,” perspective. This approach is ineffective when working with people in poverty because it does not consider the forces that are pulling people in poverty in multiple directions. Staff members can be much more effective if they approach people and solutions with a “both/and” perspective. Flexibility is more effective than rigidity.

Collaboration: The external environment impacts education, and currently our country is experiencing a Great Recession resulting in multiple funding cuts to social services. Teachers must understand that they cannot teach students who do not have their basic needs met. Furthermore teachers who are acting as social workers outside of their teaching job should not be acting alone. It has never been more important for staff to come together and make a concerted effort to foster partnerships outside of the school and effectively integrate resources. Some say this is more work, but doing so eases the burden of teachers and makes their job easier, not harder.

Strategies of Effective Leaders

There is no one blueprint for change that works across the board for all schools. Each school and community is unique in its own characteristics, demographics, resources and needs. However, research on leaders who have turned failing schools around and made them successful in educating students from poverty show the following common strategies.

Effective Policies: Establish policies that serve rather than punish. For example, what is your homework policy for homeless students? Find alternatives for youth who have no hope getting homework completed.

Relationships: Build empathy and awareness among staff and encourage them to find ways to personally connect with students and families. Provide opportunities for mentoring and building networks of support.

Whole-Family Approach: Create ways that staff can connect with families on a regular basis to build relationships over time. Parents in poverty know their kids best and can provide keys to educating them. Encourage home visits by staff.

Change: Create a system that supports implementation of new teaching and learning strategies, including a feedback loop, partnerships, resources and accountability.

Team Effort: Encourage staff to connect, share and support each other with solutions and strategies. Target three staff leaders to participate in leading poverty training; recruit them to help with the process of educating other staff members.

Tips for Creating a School that Works for Students Living in Poverty

Below are ideas for ensuring that students in poverty are supported. Remember, you and your school staff members are the experts. Build on this list by asking staff for their ideas and collaborate with other school districts to share ideas.

- Change tardy slips to “We are glad you are here!” and provide food when they arrive late.
- Develop a “new student” orientation program with student leaders as mentors (peer-mentoring).
- Maximize opportunities for students to be successful. Examine what time of the day most students are getting referrals and provide extra mentoring and support activities during those times.
- Create a “new student” parent-interview process that asks parents information about their child.
- Address the issue of transportation. Find community volunteers (keeping in mind insurance and board policy).
- Implement student-led conferences.
- Compile a list of help needed at school (publish on web site) and recruit volunteers from the community and people from poverty to help.
- Create a data bank on students at-risk and share with staff (recognizing confidentiality issues).
- Revisit eligibility for activities and athletics and provide support rather than discipline.
- Recruit police, fire, and security to work with students on tutoring for basic skills.
- Develop a “buddy” phone call system. When a friend is not at school, a student can call the home of the absent student from the office and update the student on assignments.
- Sponsor a community night with food and daycare provided. Involve parents in the planning.
- Expose students to people who have benefitted from education; make connections to people in the community.
- Have the school nurse, or community agencies, develop a program to focus on health issues.
- Provide snacks and water before assessment sessions.
- Use Title II money to support for staff training.
- Be creative: use local (including businesses), state and federal resources to build supports and programs such as tutoring, before and after school programs, and other creative programs.

