

RAVITCH: 'POVERTY CLEARLY AFFECTS CHILDREN'S READINESS'



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By Sherry Posnick-Goodwin

Diane Ravitch, author of numerous books on education including *The Death and Life of the Great American School System: How Testing and Choice are Undermining Education*, and research professor of education at New York University, shares her views with the *Educator* on the impact of poverty on education.

How do you see poverty impacting students and how does poverty, in general, affect learning?

Poverty clearly affects children's readiness to learn and their success on standardized tests. We know this because the achievement gap exists before children enter school. Some children have consistent access to good nutrition, good medical care, educated parents, safe and healthy neighborhoods —and some don't. All of this affects children's readiness to learn. We know that economic conditions affect test scores because every testing program shows differential success in relation to family income: Children from affluent families have the highest scores, and children whose families have the least income have the lowest scores. This reflects different experiences and different access to opportunity.

Why is overcoming poverty never talked about as a way to improve student achievement?

It was talked about for many years, but in the present climate the school "reform" narrative is led by millionaires and billionaires who believe that schools can eliminate poverty by privatizing management, giving more tests, merit pay, closing schools and other carrots and sticks. The free market works for them, so they want to bring the free market to education. They don't seem to realize that the free market has many losers — like the millions now in poverty — and they don't want to talk about growing income inequality. They prefer to steer the national conversation to teacher evaluation and charter schools. One does not hear them complain about massive budget cuts to education or their negative consequences for children in poverty and our education system. The very things that these children need most are now out of reach, and the corporate reformers are silent about that.

How should schools teach students who are poor?

Schools that have students who are poor need smaller classes, intensive tutoring for those who require it, science projects, up-to-date technology, opportunities to write, guidance for students and parents (social workers), and classes in the arts to enrich children's lives. The school and campus should be physically

beautiful, sending a message that they are valued and respected. They should have experienced teachers who are kind, compassionate, and ready to help them maneuver personal and social crises.

What about teaching students who are homeless?

Every child has basic needs that must be met, whatever their home circumstances. Some children face greater obstacles, and the school must be prepared to help every child succeed — not focusing on test scores, but focusing on helping them develop resilience and coping skills, and also nurturing hope for the future, understanding that their schooling can be a powerful tool to transform their lives. Every teacher should cherish the dream of being an inspiration to his/her students.

What is it like for students who are poor? What kinds of challenges do they face in school?

Many students are burdened with going to economically segregated schools, where almost every student is poor. This depresses their motivation, since they are surrounded by a community that has been left behind. Children need hope and dreams and the belief that their lives will be, can be much better. Can teachers support and build those dreams?

What about students who are newly poor due to the housing crisis and joblessness? How will they impact schools?

Every child needs an education that is rich and balanced — one with plenty of time for the activities that students love, especially in the arts and in the imaginative uses of technology. Like other children, these children need to find interests and passion. They need to experience the wider world through history, literature, science and technology. They need hope for the future and the tools to continue their education.

What programs are making a difference in helping students living in poverty?

Reducing class size; the arts; parent involvement and education; organizing parents to help their children and help the school. There must be recognition that the community must engage in supporting the schools and collaboration between parents and teachers with mutual respect. The school alone can't do it. It needs the active support of parents and community.

What should our government be doing to help students and their families living in poverty?

Creating jobs. Funding schools to reduce class size, to supply technology to every classroom, to make sure that every school has a library and librarian, nurse, social worker, and access to a health clinic.

Are we becoming a Third World state in California or the U.S.?

We are growing more unequal, with affluent sections flourishing, middle-income Americans struggling to hold on, and poor areas approaching near Third World living conditions. Restaurants in affluent areas are booming, while other Americans struggle to put food on the table. According to the most recent census data, poverty is growing. Nearly one-quarter of our nation's children live in poverty. Among the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development nations, our child poverty levels are far larger than most other developed nations in Europe and Asia. The only OECD nations with more child poverty than us are Poland, Turkey and Mexico. This should be a national scandal, but no one talks about it.