



ca
sis
les
sel
By
ov
Re
to
to
th

A
Th
wl
is
lo
sc

Students Facing **POVERTY** The New Majority

More than half of K–12 public school students in the United States now come from low-income households. Will we choose to provide what these students need?

Steve Suitts

2013 was a watershed moment in the United States: For the first time in recent history, a majority of children attending our K–12 public schools come from low-income families. By the latest reliable data, 52 percent of students across the nation’s public schools are eligible to receive free or reduced-price lunch. Today, low-income students are the majority in 21 states; in 19 other states, they constitute between 40 and 49 percent of the states’ public school enrollment. Within this national pattern, southern states continue to have the highest rates of low-income students, with Mississippi leading the nation (Suitts, 2015).

This watershed in U.S. public education reflects a trend that has persisted over several decades. In 1989, less than 32 percent of U.S. public school students were low-income. By 2000, that rate had increased to over 38 percent, and after the Great Recession of 2008, the rate climbed to 48 percent (in 2011), and finally to today's 52 percent. Poor students are the new majority (Suitts, 2013).

A High-Stakes Mismatch

These trends have emerged at a time when state funding of public schools is lagging. Since 2001, the number of low-income students in U.S. public schools has grown by more than one-

third across the states. During this same period, the nation's per-pupil expenditure (adjusted for inflation) in public schools increased by barely more than 14 percent—less than half the rate of growth in the numbers of poor students. Clearly, growth in the number of low-income students has far out-stripped growth in per-pupil spending (Suitts, 2007, 2013).

This mismatch has profound consequences. Low-income children are the students who need the most assistance in and out of school. They are generally more likely to have developmental issues and to score low on school tests, fall behind in school, get entangled with the criminal justice

system, and fail to graduate from high school or attain a college degree (Suitts, 2013; Tough, 2016). Little wonder, therefore, that the learning gap for low-income students across the nation, as measured by the National Assessment of Educational Progress, has remained virtually stagnant since the turn of the century.

If these trends in student enrollment and school spending persist, there's no reason to expect that the learning gap will close. This pattern will not only continue to undercut the American promise of fairness and equity for children in low-income households, but also threaten the United States' overall gains in educa-

© SUGIE FITZHUGH



...the number of
...of children
attending U.S.
K-12 public schools
come from low-
income families

tional achievement because learning gaps for low-income students reflect the problems a majority of U.S. public schoolchildren face.

In fact, little or nothing will change for the better if schools and communities postpone addressing the primary choice in U.S. education today: Will we do what needs to be done to give low-income students a chance to succeed in schools? Or will we continue with half measures?

We Know What to Do, But . . .

We already know, mostly, what needs to be done. It begins with the schools—although it doesn't end there. Public schools must ensure that they have the resources to help low-income students reduce school absences, avoid school suspensions, and improve both their mastery of subjects and their persistence and grit. Schools must aim those resources carefully to be effective, through offering effective individual

If these trends in student enrollment and school spending persist, there's no reason to expect that the learning gap will close.

instruction, tutoring and mentoring, and better student counseling. We need to extend impoverished students' fruitful learning time, by extending the school day or by helping them enjoy meaningful extracurricular activities so their education can be "not the filling of a pail, but the lighting of a fire" (as W.B. Yeats supposedly said).

These needs exist at all grade levels. Many low-income students arrive on their first day of kindergarten not completely healthy or "school-ready." They have preventable health problems and already lag behind other students in their basic well-being and their learning skills. They need more preventive health care as well as high-

quality preschool learning, either in their homes or in prekindergarten programs.

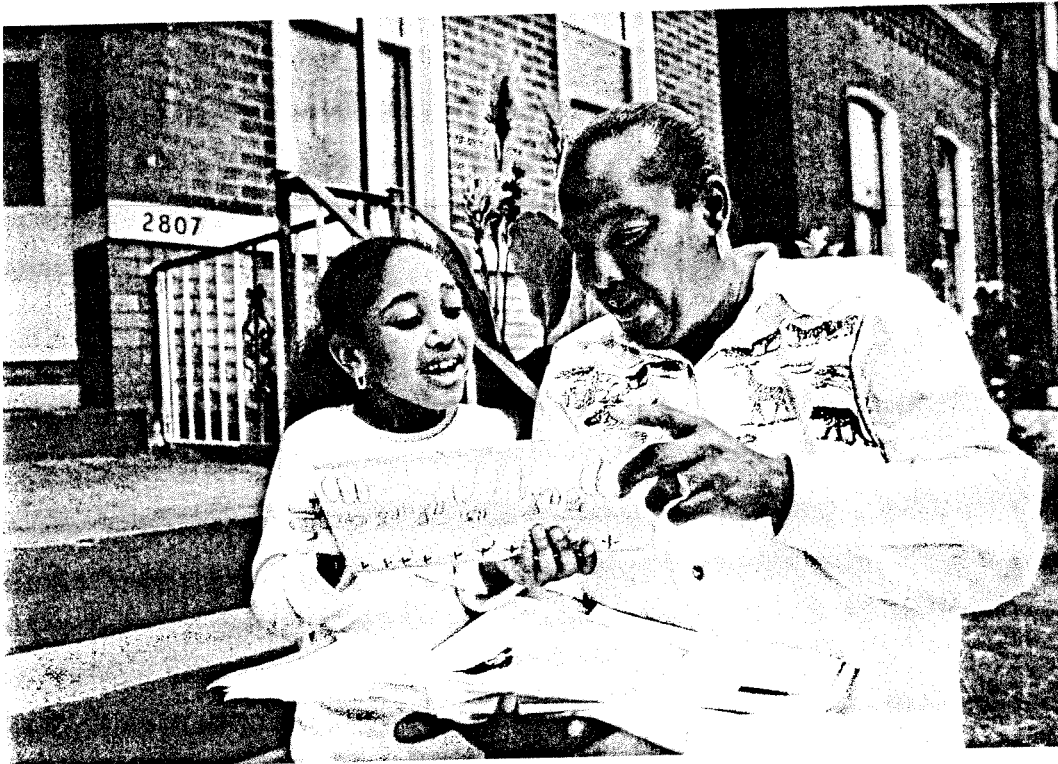
At the other end of the spectrum, we need to help many more low-income students receive college degrees. A student from a U.S. family in the top quartile of income is seven times more likely to graduate from college than is a U.S. student in the bottom income quartile (Mortenson, 2014). Although improving low-income students' preK–12 education will probably increase their high school graduation rates, this alone won't improve their chances of finishing college and earning a decent income.

Too many states provide inadequate financial aid for low-income students to afford college. Too few colleges offer the supports that give low-income students a good chance to persist and matriculate.

So we know what we should provide. Yet, because most states operate with financing systems in which the students with the most needs receive the least support, schools lack the funds and capacity to take these steps.

The Problem with Piecemeal

These suggestions for improving the success of a majority of our schoolchildren are nothing new. Some have been undertaken with good results in the past, and many



© SUSIE FITZGIBBON

are being implemented today in various U.S. communities. But it's rare that a state or district employs most of these strategies simultaneously for the same students.

It's not difficult nowadays to find an excellent preschool program or local "healthy start" program that shows strong results with low-income children. Some public schools have successfully tackled the problems of school absences and suspensions, and many have found the means to provide tutoring or extend learning time. A growing number of communities now promise local high school graduates "last-dollar scholarships" to enable them to go to college by supplementing federal Pell grants, state need-based financial aid (where it exists), and other assistance.

Yet, no school districts, towns, cities, or states have mounted the public will and resources to try to address the full gamut of needs that, in combination, stand between most low-income students and school success. Clearly, not all low-income students in all communities will have the same needs during the two decades or so they spend pursuing an education. But an approach that addresses only one or two of the obstacles common to students facing poverty won't offer most of these kids a chance to thrive in school—or life.

Nor have policymakers at the local or state level been willing to learn from highly visible pilot projects that have successfully addressed the range of obstacles that low-income students face. For instance, the Harlem Children's Zone (Tough, 2008) has been widely praised for its comprehensive approach to student success—attempting much of what James Comer (2009) had previously shown was most helpful. But no state or local government in the United States has



© SUSIE FITZUGH

adopted this project's "whole child" approach to educating poor students. In fact, most privately funded pilot projects that have tackled the challenges facing low-income students—whether addressing single or multiple problems—have been remarkably uninformative in shaping local, state, or federal policy in education.

Some approaches in the public debate over school reform suggest more than a piecemeal approach. The Network for Public Education, the Coalition for Community Schools, and the Center for Popular Democracy, among others, recommend P-12

community schools with a multi-tiered approach to learning that draws on community and school assets. A new public-private venture, Achieve Atlanta, is building a comprehensive approach to college access and completion for Atlanta Public Schools' low-income students. Other programs and examples of advocacy point in the right direction. But we aren't following.

**The Key Question:
Do We Have the Will?**

Perhaps the largest obstacle to the adoption of sustained, comprehensive strategies at the state and local levels

has been the same problem currently besetting public education in general: lack of adequate funds. "A comprehensive approach is too costly," we're told. "It would require substantial new funding and an increase in taxes. Other needs are of equal or greater importance."

Indeed, providing the instruction and school- and life-related services low-income kids need would require more funding—or at least require valuing the education our students receive as much as (or more than) other areas of current spending. U.S. states spend roughly \$80 billion per year providing tax subsidies for corporations to keep or move their operations from one state to another (Story, 2012). These expenditures add little or nothing to the United States' wealth or human capital; they merely shift jobs. Since 1980, the states' spending on jails, prisons, and corrections has risen by 324 percent, whereas the states' funding for public education has risen by only 107 percent (Stullich, Morgan, & Schak, 2016). Every state had a lower growth rate for spending on K–12 education than for spending on corrections. In most states, the rate of increase for corrections was more than 100 percentage points higher.

These expenditures aren't the only possible sources of state and federal revenue we might use to comprehensively provide what our low-income students need. But they illustrate the fact that the United States is capable of finding the necessary funds if and when we believe it's important, or when constituents insist that their elected representatives honor the imperative for fairness and our national interest by providing low-income students with the support to succeed in school.

So, it's not so much a problem of money as it is a lack of public will, the

Learning gaps now reflect the problems a majority of U.S. public schoolchildren face.

will to organize, choose, demand, and support a public education system that provides each student equal opportunity for education—and, in so doing, ensures that the United States will have the human capital necessary to prosper. Paul Tough (2016), author of *Helping Children Succeed*, says we must change policy, practice, and our thinking about education. All of these changes must be preceded by amassing a concerted public will.

Without such an organized effort of will, the trends of recent decades will continue. The ill effects of these trends will ricochet across all aspects of American society for generations to come. There is only one important choice in K–12 education today. If we fail to give a majority of our students a strong chance, we'll be choosing to create and enlarge economic and social inequality in ways that will harm our society more than almost any other policy choice. ■

For a discussion of attendance and low-income students, see the online article "Boosting Student Attendance: Beyond Stickers, Stars, and Candy Bars" by Vicky Dill, Patrick Lopez, Tim Stahlke, and Jeanne Stamp at www.ascd.org/el1116dill.

References

- Comer, J. P. (2009). *What I learned in school: Reflections on race, child development, and school reform*. New York: Jossey-Bass.
- Dynarski, M. (2016, May 26). On negative effects of vouchers. *Evidence Speaks Reports*, 1(18). Brookings Institution.
- Frankl, E. (2016). *Community schools: Transforming struggling schools into thriving schools*. Washington, DC: Center for Popular Democracy.
- Mortenson, T. (2014, September). *Unequal family income and unequal higher education opportunity, 1970 to 2013. (Post-secondary educational opportunity, no. 267)*. Washington, DC: Pell Institute for the Study of Opportunity in Higher Education.
- Story, L. (2012, December 1). As companies seek tax deals, governments pay high price. *New York Times*. Retrieved from www.nytimes.com/2012/12/02/us/how-local-taxpayers-bankroll-corporations.html
- Stullich, S., Morgan, I., & Schak, O. (2016, July). *State and local expenditures on corrections and education*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education.
- Suits, S. (2015). *A new majority research bulletin: Low income students now a majority in the nation's public schools*. Atlanta: Southern Education Foundation.
- Suits, S. (2013). *Update: A new majority: Low income students in the south and nation*. Atlanta: Southern Education Foundation.
- Suits, S. (2007). *A new majority: Low income students in the south's public schools*. Atlanta: Southern Education Foundation.
- Tough, P. (2016). *Helping children succeed: What works and why*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.
- Tough, P. (2008). *Whatever it takes: Geoffrey Canada's quest to change Harlem and America*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.

Copyright © 2016 Steve Suits

Steve Suits (ssuits@emory.edu), an adjunct lecturer at Emory University, served for almost 20 years in positions of leadership at the Southern Education Foundation in Atlanta.
