

Poverty Issues Get Short Shrift in Today's Education Debate

By Gerald Bracey

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Presidential candidate Bill Bradley has put forth a plan to deal with child poverty, an issue that previously no politician had touched. Even the educators and governors at the recent National Education Summit were silent on the problem.

Faced with the chronically low performance of poverty-ridden schools, some people -- even some educators -- say, "poverty is not an excuse" and point to a few exceptional kids and a few exceptional schools as proof.

But these few children are not proof, precisely because they are exceptions. Poverty is not an excuse. It is a condition that affects virtually everything.

Poor children get off to a bad start before they're born. Their mothers are likely to get prenatal care late, if at all, which can impair later intellectual functioning. They are more than three times as likely as nonpoor children to have stunted growth. They are about twice as likely to have physical and mental disabilities, and are seven times more likely to be abused or neglected. And they are more than three times more likely to die.

What these kids need are high standards, right?

Grades vs. achievement

Poverty stifles school performance. Researchers once examined the achievement of students in high- and low-poverty schools. High-poverty schools were those with more than 75% of the students eligible for free and reduced-price lunch. Low-poverty schools had 0-20% eligibility.

The researchers first categorized the kids in terms of the dominant

letter grade on their report cards, then looked to see how the various categories fared on standardized tests of reading and math. On such tests, average is the 50th percentile. Students in low-poverty schools who took home "A's" scored at the 81st percentile in reading and 87th percentile in math. Students in high-poverty schools whose report cards said "A" did not reach even the 40th-percentile average on either test.

Nothing new

These research findings just put numbers on descriptions of poverty-ridden schools that have been around for a long time. Thirty years ago, the education crisis of children in poverty was described in books -- written by teachers -- such as *Death at an Early Age*, *36 Children* and *The Way It Spozed To Be*. At that time, people hoped that Head Start and Title I would cure the problem. Jonathan Kozol, author of *Death at an Early Age*, returned in 1991 with *Savage Inequalities* to tell us they haven't.

Researchers analyzing one international study concluded that if the U.S. sample had been made up only of affluent school districts, the United States would have placed second in math, the subject in which we are such putative dolts. If the American sample had come from poor districts, however, we would have landed at the bottom, near Nigeria and Swaziland.

These same researchers found that, among industrialized nations, the United States has by far the highest incidence of child poverty, 21.5% at the time, falling to "just" 20% currently. No one else even came close. Australia had the second-highest poverty rate at 14%.

Not on anyone's agenda

Given the devastating impact of poverty on school performance and given the importance of schooling, one would think that a rich country such as this one would make the elimination of poverty a high priority.

But it isn't on anyone's agenda. The affluent eye is watching the Dow Jones, not the poverty rate.

Instead of facing the problem head-on, people are creating a smoke screen, arguing that to cure the problems of poor schools we need vouchers that will permit poor kids to attend private schools.

This is absurd. Most private schools are not about to accept large numbers of students who score as low as the lowest nations, just as they do not accept students with limited English proficiency or students requiring special education services.

And, even under the most optimistic of assumptions, private schools could accommodate no more than 4% of the students currently enrolled in public schools.

So, unless we face the problem directly, it won't disappear. But should Mr. Bradley become president, he will have to deal with it using animals currently in short supply: politicians with spines.

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