

We think sometimes that poverty is only being hungry, naked and homeless. The poverty of being unwanted, unloved and uncared for is the greatest poverty. We must start in our own homes to remedy this kind of poverty.

-Mother Teresa

I hope everyone enjoyed the Thanksgiving break; it hard to believe we are already a few weeks into the month of December. Three days before the break, two teams from Malden spent Monday and Tuesday working at a DESE conference. The timing of the conference was tough, the two days before the break are busy for teachers and administrators, so I really appreciated that staff members were willing to be there and participate.

The theme of the conference was teaching and dealing with student poverty. The keynote speaker, Eric Jensen, spoke to the staff about the effects of poverty on not only the social/emotional aspects of students' learning, but how poverty is also affecting the brains of our students. I didn't attend the conference, but I did read Jensen's book and would like to share some of the points that stood out for me.

Author Eric Jensen defines poverty as "a chronic and debilitating condition that results from multiple adverse synergistic risk factors and affects the mind, body, and soul." He continues to explain that poverty is complex and impacts people differently. The author highlights six types of poverty which may impact students as they enter our schools and classrooms. He starts with *Situational poverty* which is caused by sudden crisis or loss and is temporary. *Generational poverty* is at least two generations being born into poverty; many of these families lack the tools to move out of their situations. *Absolute poverty* means the lack of necessities such as food, shelter, and running water, which he points out is rarely seen in our country. *Relative poverty* is based on a family's whole income being insufficient to meets society's average standard of living. *Urban poverty* is associated with areas consisting of a population of 50,000 or more, and urban poor deal with a complex aggregate of chronic and acute stressors. The sixth and final definition of poverty is *Rural poverty* which is associated with areas of a population of 50,000 or less. Being rural poor is associated with have more single family households, less access to services for disabilities, and lack of quality educational opportunities. Until I read this book I always thought of poverty in two categories, rural and urban. By expanding the definition of poverty, I was able to rethink about our homeless students (using the lens of *situational* poverty); when speaking about families struggling to make ends meet I can now use the term *relative* poverty, and as we struggle with some families who have a long history of issues we can recognize the impacts of *generational* poverty. By naming and defining the multiple dimension of poverty, I believe we can build better methods to support our students and parents in our district who are struggling with one form of poverty or another.

Beyond the definitions, the author writes in detail about the impact of poverty on a child's development. Brain research is beginning to associate poverty, along with the stressors associated with being poor, as having a negative impact on a child's brain development. There is a growing body of research linking poverty to impeded development in various areas of a child's brain which then affects her/his ability to regulate gratification, create plans, make decisions, process explicit learning, acquire language, process spatial organization, and engage in emotional processing. These stressors by definition can manifest themselves as poor nutrition, living in over-crowded spaces, social exclusion, constant criticism, lack of enrichment, drug use, exposure to toxins, abuse, and trauma. The author tell us that being exposed to acute and chronic stress over a long period of time is changing the development of the brain at a genetic level. After reading this book I came to one major conclusion: poverty is changing the way our children's brains are being wired. Poverty over time is creating negative change at cellular level - a scary thought for me because it forced me to think about how I have dealt with students of poverty over my career.

For most of my educational life I worked in high poverty areas and believed that poverty was something we could 'fix' with more funding. We could help by giving free and reduced breakfast and lunch in schools. If a student lacked the basics with regards to clothing, school supplies, and other materials, we would find a way to provide items to them. I guess I believed that if we as a school district could supply the food, clothing, and basic material needs for a student living in poverty, then we were doing our job. Those measures go a long way, but as I am reading more about the effects of poverty, it appears we need to go deeper and do more to intervene at the cellular level and help to rebuild the damage being done.

After reading this book and other articles on poverty's genetic influences on the developing child, I'm not sure more funding alone can help. Whether we are looking rural poverty, situational poverty, or generational poverty, it is becoming more apparent that poverty has a negative impact on a child's life right down to the cells in her/his body. Poverty affects a child's social/emotional development, it creates health safety issues, and enhances cognitive lags in school. So what can we do?

We need to learn and deepen our understanding of poverty. Throughout the book author stresses the need for developing a better understanding of poverty and the need to teach with the stressors that play a role in a child's life clear in our minds. The more we read, discuss, and expose ourselves to the concept of poverty, the barriers associated with it, and the effects it has on children, the better we can educate and support students. Too often in education we look to funding to fix our problems, but I don't believe our first step to dealing with poverty as a district is money. Empathy costs us nothing but can go a long way in understanding the students and parents we deal with daily. Respect is free, yet why at times is it so hard to give? Building a belief system in oneself doesn't require a purchase requisition. Forming positive relationships doesn't require a line item in a budget. Acts of kindness don't cost us anything. We can undo the long term effects of poverty by simply adjusting our school environments.

In closing, the author states that children are hardwired for six emotions; joy, anger, surprise, disgust, sadness, and fear. In a world influenced by the chronic stressor of poverty, who will teach them cooperation, patience, gratitude, embarrassment, forgiveness, sympathy, and empathy? These emotions are just a few of the building blocks of a humanistic society, a work place, and a classroom that foster social/emotional growth. I believe we have an obligation to teach, model, and lead with a constant eye on the social/emotional growth of our students, staff, and community.

Dave