

“An imbalance between rich and poor is the oldest and most fatal ailment of all republics.”
– Plutarch

In my opinion, March Madness has little to do with basketball. March for me has always been a crazy month. Maybe it is because the month was named for the god of war, or it might be the fact there are no scheduled school days off. Maybe it's the unpredictable weather, maybe we are anxious for spring, or maybe it has to do with Caesar and the Ides of March. No matter how I look at it, March tends to be wrapped in madness - which is why this is a March/April newsletter.

On March 17th we invited Senator Lewis, Representatives Ultrino, Brodeur, and Donato to the district to discuss the social-emotional and physical well-being of our students and community at large. Also in attendance were members of our staff, Housing Families staff, the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, and members from the Department of Mental Health. The meeting went well with the dialogue being rich and focused on the topic. By the end of the meeting, the Senator and Representatives were thankful for the presentation and the chance to speak with 'people on the ground' who are dealing with these issues.

The discussion in the room highlighted the growing need to address the social-emotional health needs of people across socio-economic lines, racial demographics, and zip codes. Those attending the meeting also agreed that people living in poverty struggle at a higher rate in the areas of social-emotional and physical well-being. Since the Coleman Report that was released in the late 1960s to present day, the research continues to support that social emotional health and physical well-being are affected by poverty at a higher rate than people living comfortably above the poverty rate. As a district we have spent the better part of this school year drawing attention to these topics in the community, in our buildings, and in our classrooms.

Currently, there are over 45.3 million people in this country living in poverty. Hidden within that large number are 14.7 million children and 4.2 million senior citizens. With poverty comes inadequate housing, poor nutrition, more dysfunction within families, and a general lack of physical and mental health services. Poverty matters!

A *Boston Globe* article written in March addressed the growing divide in Boston neighborhoods based on economic earnings. Since 1970 there has been a significant shift in low, middle, and high income families in the Boston area. In 1970, 14.8 % of the families were classified as low income. In 2014, 27.5% of the families were categorized as low income. This trend plays out across middle income as well - in 1970, 70.5% of the families were categorized as middle class; in 2014, that percentage dropped to 43.7%. High-income numbers also saw a shift, in 1970, 14.6% of the families made up the high class, and in 2014 that percentage rose to 28.9%.

In Massachusetts, our poorer communities have witnessed a spike in the percentage of low-income rising from 8% in 1970 to 20% in 2014. In the Worcester area, poverty rates have grown from 2% to 24%; in the New Bedford/Fall River area, from 5% to 30%, and Essex County has witnessed a spike from 7% to 36%. As a state we have also seen an increase in our wealthier communities from 6% in 1970 to 16% in 2014. This shifting demographic between low and high-income numbers is having a negative impact on the middle-income earners. In a relatively short time period of less than 50 years, we are witnessing the collapse of the middle class. With the vanishing middle class, I'm not sure what the impact will be on our communities.

The divide between the rich and poor is never easy to understand. Understanding poverty and wealth has been the topic of research papers and high-level discussions which will continue long after my newsletters come to end. Being the oldest of three boys, I grew up with grandparents and parents who instilled in me a 'blue collar' work ethic that basically stated, "If you want something bad enough, go out and work for it." So I did. I watched the work ethic message shift with my young brothers and it wasn't the same message by the time they entered their teens. It appeared to me they worked less and got more. At the time I didn't understand it, but in retrospect, my dad was making more money by that point in time, my grandparents were older, and things seemed to be more relaxed economically in the DeRuosi household. All I knew at the time was that the message of, "Go out and work for it" was a bit watered down for my brothers.

Within our culture today I believe we are struggling with the concept of rich and poor. Each day a new media story will surface either blaming the poor in some capacity for being poor or blaming the successful for being successful. As a nation, we are cutting funds to programs which would support our neediest populations and debating the idea of paying student loans for young adults who have accrued debt. We condemn the poor for not helping themselves, and in the next breath condemn the successful for their earnings. As political leaders continue the debate on who is to blame, one thing is true: the divide between rich and poor continues to grow.

I have no answers to the dilemma of rich and poor. I have no great insight on what makes a person successful in life. Here is what I've learned from my own experiences: hard work, perseverance, a desire to want more, a stable family, education, and a focus to succeed helped me. I was never afraid to try something new, because I never thought failure was the end of the game. I made several mistakes on this journey, but I took ownership for them, made changes, and moved on. I recognized early on the difficulty in being 'your own' man, but I also had ethics and standards I could not back down from. Perhaps success is being ready to take advantage of situations, and make the most out of opportunities when they appear.

While as a nation we will continue to struggle with concepts of poverty and wealth, the Red Sox have a third base man making 17 million dollars a year who showed up to spring training overweight and ended up benched for opening day. Truly, March Madness at its best.

Dave