Poverty Affects Education—And Our Systems Perpetuate It

It’s hard to argue that poverty does not affect education. It’s hard to argue that children who come from homes where they may be wanting—wanting for food, for time, or for resources—don’t enter the school door with a little less than others. And it’s hard to argue that children living in poverty and attending schools that are underfunded, underresourced, and understaffed are not literally up against the system.

We have established a system where those who are poor are more likely to stay poor, and lately we have seen a sharp increase in those considered poor. In fact, a recent research bulletin from the Southern Education Foundation highlights that, as of this year, the majority of public school children come from poverty. According to the bulletin, “The latest data collected from the states by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), show that 51 percent of the students across the nation’s public schools were low income in 2013”.

In 40 of the 50 states, low income students comprised no less than 40% of all public schoolchildren. In 21 states, children eligible for free or reduced-price lunches were a majority of the students in 2013.

51 percent of our children across the country now live in poverty, and the numbers appear to be growing.

Coincidentally, it has also been 51 years since we, as a nation, declared poverty unacceptable. It has been 51 years since President Lyndon B. Johnson launched the War on Poverty in his 1964 State of the Union Address.

This administration today, here and now, declares unconditional war on poverty in America. I urge this Congress and all Americans to join with me in that effort. It will not be a short or easy struggle, no single weapon or strategy will suffice, but we shall not rest until that war is won. The richest Nation on earth can afford to win it. We cannot afford to lose it. One thousand dollars invested in salvaging an unemployable youth today can return $40,000 or more in his lifetime.

During this address, Johnson also acknowledged that “many Americans live on the outskirts of hope—some because of their poverty, and some because of their color, and all too many because of both.” Poverty, Johnson said, was a “national problem,” one that required a collective response across all levels of government and society. His address singled out every American to do his part.

Fifty-one years later, however, we have established systems that perpetuate and even accentuate poverty. Schools in low socioeconomic areas are underfunded when compared to higher socioeconomic neighborhoods. They tackle chronic issues with a chronic lack of resources. While those who work in these schools may be passionate, hard-working, and motivated educators, they frequently lack experience, support services, and political power.

Thus, the message becomes clear—if you are born into poverty, you are likely to stay in poverty. As a country, we have deep-rooted negative stereotypes about people living in poverty, despite the fact that people who live in poverty are as diverse in their norms, beliefs, and behaviors as people who live in any other socioeconomic stratum.

Poverty spans geographical and ethnic boundaries, from urban cities to rural towns. There are many communities that have battled poverty for decades and many where poverty has arrived recently, unexpectedly, and in a rush. Poverty is neither fair nor equitable, and it is not productive for society. If we ignore, as Charles Blow called it, the “corrosive effects of poverty” on our nation’s children, it will come back to haunt us. And as Steve Suitts, author of the Southern Education Foundation research bulletin, said, “It’s a matter of our national future, because when one group becomes the majority of our students, they define what that future is going to be in education more than any other group.”

So what do we do? Rather than just get angry, we must get active.

We can and should commit to addressing poverty via intersectoral alignment, change the formula by which we fund our schools, and ensure that inequities are at the heart of all policy discussions. […] Poverty affects our education, our economy, and our future. It is becoming the norm, and we appear reluctant to address it. What was once a local, regional, or state concern is now a national issue and will affect our national progress. But we have the steps in place to change it—and we’ve had these steps for over half a century. What has been waning is our will to act and our determination to succeed. […]