

# BUILDING *the* RESILIENT SCHOOL

OVERCOMING THE EFFECTS OF POVERTY  
WITH A CULTURE OF HOPE

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**Hawker Brownlow**  
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## Introduction

# Poverty: Our Greatest Challenge

*In 1964, President Lyndon B. Johnson declared “unconditional war on poverty in America.” . . . Fast-forward 51 years: That same number (51) now comes to signify the percentage of public school students who live in poverty.*

—Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development

The United States faces a great challenge in the poverty epidemic. While the issues of poverty may in many cases fail to gain significant traction in the halls of Congress, we teachers, leaders, and administrators cannot overlook the calamitous issues of poverty at the local level—at the level of our public schools and surrounding communities. As citizens and community members, what do we do about homelessness? How do we deal with the crushing costs of health care for the uninsured and the insured? How do we find sufficient resources to provide food for the hungry? What do we do about the overwhelming issues of drug and alcohol addiction? And of course, as educators, how can we provide high-quality education for our neediest students? Poverty is surely the single greatest challenge confronting our communities and public schools.

In 2013, the United States reached a new milestone, but not one to brag about: for the first time, a majority—51 percent—of K–12 students enrolled in public schools lived in poverty, as measured by qualification for the free and reduced-price lunch program (Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development [ASCD], 2015; Suitts, 2015). In one of the wealthiest countries on earth (Sauter & Stebbins, 2020), poverty is widespread and insidious, an economic cancer eating away at our strength and stability as a people. Poverty touches practically every community and every neighborhood. In areas of high poverty, families’ needs all but swamp the county, city, state, and federal governments’ abilities to respond. The hope for a better future represents a monstrous challenge facing every community—none is immune. A future without devastating destitution can only become a reality if communities across the United States mobilize and demand that the three branches of the federal government as well as local and state entities make a widespread concerted effort to address the sources and effects of poverty. To wage a successful new war on poverty will demand sweeping changes and will surely include public sectors beyond



education. In the 21st-century political climate, equitably expanding opportunities to all citizens may be a far and fleeting dream, but it is worth fighting for. In fact, providing an equal, high-quality education for all students surely must be the great civil rights battle of our time.

No longer can schools focus simply on teaching academics, for poverty has engulfed schools with a set of new and complicated responsibilities for meeting students' social-emotional, mental health, and basic human needs of food, clothing, and resources. School districts almost everywhere have concluded that they cannot ignore the basic survival needs of students and families living in poverty if they are to achieve high levels of student learning. According to researcher Steve Suitts (2013):

*No longer can we consider the problems and needs of low income students simply a matter of fairness. . . . Their success or failure in the public schools will determine the entire body of human capital and educational potential that the [United States] will possess in the future. Without improving the educational support that the nation provides its low income students—students with the largest needs and usually with the least support—the trends of the last decade will be prologue for a nation not at risk, but a nation in decline. (p. 13)*

In answer to this challenge, some schools have coupled local innovation and bold creativity with the best research from various fields to provide a new vision for public education in the United States. These schools are confronting poverty head-on and rallying entire communities to help families build new futures for themselves. These schools are emerging as poverty's first responders and helping transform the lives of our poorest students. These schools are not just focusing on students' academic needs; rather, they have embraced a *whole child* approach to schooling that addresses students' social-emotional needs as well as basic human needs. They are helping students succeed in school, stay in school, graduate, and go on to postsecondary training and education. They are helping students find pathways to a better life. We believe that these schools represent a new concept of schooling in the United States, one that can be applied to any school or district facing these issues throughout the world—the *resilient school*.

Within this watershed concept of public education, two fronts of activity have come together, coursing a mighty river of possibility: on one front, educators have been creating more effective ways to address students' real needs, while on the other front, researchers have been documenting emerging understandings about poverty's impacts on learning and effective responses. This has resulted in a vision—the resilient school—of how schools are becoming first responders to the outcomes of poverty, standing as the primary line of defense for children and families. When schools focus on addressing the effects of poverty head-on, they switch from a fixed, reactionary frame to a growth, prevention frame. In essence, they become *resilient* because they are able to bounce back and effectively respond to adversity. In fact,

schools provide one of the few doors of opportunity available to students living in poverty, one of the few pathways students can travel to break out of poverty and find a better life. The path to a new American dream surely goes through our public schools.

In fact, a growing number of high-performing, high-poverty schools are already doing many things to alleviate the effects of poverty on students right now. This book attempts to capture the best of how high-poverty, high-performing schools are becoming resilient schools, providing a safety net for students and families, a pathway out of poverty, and hope for a better life.

“ ” Poverty really is the lack of possibility.

—Mentor, *A Little Creative Class*, Troy, New York

## Poverty: An Ever-Growing Epidemic

The collateral damage of poverty threatens to undermine and overwhelm communities. Children who grow up in persistent poverty are more likely to (Hoynes, 2012; Ratcliffe & McKernan, 2010):

- Have no preschool
- Perform worse in school
- Drop out of high school
- Have lower educational attainment
- Become a teen parent
- Be incarcerated
- Live in poverty as adults
- Be homeless
- Struggle with addiction
- Access social safety net services
- Be served by the child welfare system
- Have poor health
- Live shorter lives

According to Jonah Edelman, cofounder and chief executive officer of Stand for Children:

*The impact of poverty on a child's academic achievement is significant and starts early. Young children growing up in poverty face challenges with cognitive and literary ability and [often] begin school both academically and socioeconomically behind their peers from higher-income backgrounds. (as cited in Taylor, 2017)*

These and other negative effects of poverty represent a plague of physical, mental, economic, and social difficulties.

A U.S. Census Bureau report shows 11.8 percent of people in the United States, or nearly thirty-nine million people, lived in poverty in 2018 (Semega, Kollar, Creamer, & Mohanty, 2019). For many, the American dream has become an American nightmare. Many Americans seem to have given up and accepted that their life in poverty is the status quo—an unchanging, permanent state extending into the future. They

have accepted that they will live out their lives unemployed, underemployed, or unemployable and that they will pass on that legacy of poverty to their children. In so many communities, despair often overwhelms hope and optimism for the future.

However, this potential outcome does not have to be an inevitability. Research shows that it is possible to break the cycle of poverty and alleviate its effects on children—and that, although the challenge of helping students break out of poverty represents a long and difficult road, schools can effect such change—primarily through the teaching of executive function skills and reducing the effects of trauma for students (Babcock, 2014b). This provides great hope and agency for those who work in schools: we can make a difference with the cornerstones of the resilient school (see chapters 5–8, page 95–191). In our opinion, based on the work of multiple pioneering schools and districts we have witnessed in person as well as the schools and districts described in the research literature, schools can best begin to provide hope to students, staff, and communities dealing with poverty by focusing on the principle of *resilience*.

### Field Note



Poverty is hating weekends because you only have breakfast or lunch at school. Poverty is having adults at home who do shift work and are unavailable to help with homework or help structure the evenings. Poverty is an emotional distraction that makes it hard to focus on everyday things. Poverty is always there like a toothache or a headache, pulsing in the background. Poverty is just the way things are. You get used to it. —Emily Gibson

## Resilience: The Antidote to Despair

In our experience, any effort to develop students' *resilience*, or their ability to bounce back from challenges or adversities, and ensure such resilience is sustainable must have trauma research as a foundation. The reasons that hope, optimism, and engagement are such powerful tools against the effects of poverty lie in the nature of trauma, and the internal and environmental protective factors that lead to resilience.

As anyone who works in high-poverty schools can attest, students living in poverty can bring a wave of trauma and stress in through the classroom doors each day, enormously impacting their own and their peers' ability to participate in and learn in school (Burns, 2016). Research shows that trauma can lead to biological changes, eventually hardwiring the brain to react in fight-flight-freeze mode (Perry, 2002). This often damages students' learning and social relationships in school. Fortunately, while it was once thought that resilience was a fixed asset that students either had