



Poverty and Potential: Out-of-School Factors and School Success

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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The U.S. has set as a national goal the narrowing of the achievement gap between lower income and middle-class students, and that between racial and ethnic groups. This is a key purpose of the No Child Left Behind act, which relies primarily on assessment to promote changes within schools to accomplish that goal. However, out-of-school factors (OSFs) play a powerful role in generating existing achievement gaps, and if these factors are not attended to with equal vigor, our national aspirations will be thwarted.

This brief details six OSFs common among the poor that significantly affect the health and learning opportunities of children, and accordingly limit what schools can accomplish *on their own*: (1) low birth-weight and non-genetic prenatal influences on children; (2) inadequate medical, dental, and vision care, often a result of inadequate or no medical insurance; (3) food insecurity; (4) environmental pollutants; (5) family relations and family stress; and (6) neighborhood characteristics. These OSFs are related to a host of poverty-induced physical, sociological, and psychological problems that children often bring to school, ranging from neurological damage and attention disorders to excessive absenteeism, linguistic underdevelopment, and oppositional behavior.

Also discussed is a seventh OSF, extended learning opportunities, such as pre-school, after school, and summer school programs that can help to mitigate some of the harm caused by the first six factors.

Because America's schools are so highly segregated by income, race, and ethnicity, problems related to poverty occur simultaneously, with greater frequency, and act cumulatively in schools serving disadvantaged communities. These schools therefore face significantly greater challenges than schools serving wealthier children, and their limited resources are often overwhelmed. Efforts to improve educational outcomes in these schools, attempting to drive change through test-based accountability, are thus unlikely to succeed unless accompanied by policies to address the OSFs that negatively affect large numbers of our nation's students. Poverty limits student potential; inputs to schools affect outputs from them.

Therefore, it is recommended that efforts be made to:

- Reduce the rate of low birth weight children among African Americans,
- Reduce drug and alcohol abuse,
- Reduce pollutants in our cities and move people away from toxic sites,
- Provide universal and free medical care for all citizens,
- Insure that no one suffers from food insecurity,
- Reduce the rates of family violence in low-income households,
- Improve mental health services among the poor,
- More equitably distribute low-income housing throughout communities,
- Reduce both the mobility and absenteeism rates of children,
- Provide high-quality preschools for all children, and
- Provide summer programs for the poor to reduce summer losses in their academic achievement.