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issue: *A View of Elementary School Problems in Poor Neighborhoods by Three Elementary School Principals*

Ron Cross, Jeff Dosier, and Mattie Tyson

- *Schools in low-income neighborhoods confront inadequate and unstable community and family conditions every day.*
- *Principals in poverty neighborhoods must seek housing, jobs, and support for families victimized by violence.*
- *Students who are victims of abuse, neglect, and alcoholism too often do not qualify for the help of school social workers.*
- *Simply put, parents must be held accountable for the behavior of their children.*
- *Children in poor neighborhoods will benefit tremendously from an extension of the school day later in the afternoon.*
- *Our schools have been successful because we have protected sustained time for language arts.*
- *School should not be financially punished for doing a good job with students.*
- *We are willing to be held accountable if we are given financial support commensurate with our needs in low-income neighborhoods.*

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Editor's Note: This is the third in a series of *Policy Profiles* dealing with the on-going policy debate about reform in public education. That debate contains a cacophony of many voices: political leaders, education researchers, school superintendents, teachers unions, PTA leaders. Voices seldom heard are those of school principals—the professionals who manage educational policy regarding pupil achievement by confronting the needs of individual children in a local school. This issue of *Policy Profiles* gives voice to the views of three elementary school principals, each of whom works in a school serving children who live in a low-income neighborhood in a different part of Illinois. Each also provides leadership to a school that has achieved a high level of success in graduating students well prepared to continue their education at higher levels.

Educators always list a lack of adequate funding as the primary cause of the problems so widely discussed in American public school education, and financial problems are certainly a major constraint with which school principals, particularly principals in schools serving low-income neighborhoods, must cope. *But while a shortage of money may be the primary problem facing our educational efforts, it is by no means the only problem keeping us from the kind of educational outcomes we strive so hard to achieve.*

In point of fact, the shortage of money is the most pressing short-range problem in our daily work, but it is one we can do very little to rectify. We try to adjust to the funding level we have and do the best we can with it. It is the problems we can—and must—try to rectify (The problems) that make our job toughest on a routine level, and that cause us sleeplessness at night; these are problems related to poverty and the resulting difficulties our students constantly confront in their homes and neighborhoods; problems caused by the inadequate number of hours we have in a year to work with our students; problems caused by the lack of public trust in, and respect for, the educational system; problems emanating from parents' inability or refusal to take sufficient responsibility for their children's education; and problems of teacher staffing.

More money would help us resolve, or at least alleviate, most of these problems, but even without more money we have to deal with these issues. They simply are major hurdles that make it difficult to do a better job of educating our students.

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What, specifically, is the educational problem in low-income neighborhoods?

Schools in low-income neighborhoods need to make special efforts to overcome inadequate and unstable community and family conditions that have faced them since birth and which continue to confront them every day. Far too many children enter kindergarten without proper nurturing or nutrition, and without adequate vocabulary, sound symbol relationships, or mental concepts. They may not know both their first and last names and may not know simple concepts or words. Because of these language deficiencies, most children of poverty enter schools well behind their more advantaged peers, and they often never catch up. For them, school is a struggle every day.

In addition, the challenges of poverty facing them on a daily basis in their homes and neighborhoods distract them from learning. Unsafe streets, routine violence, minimal access to quality print material, broken and dysfunctional families, unstable home environments, and a too present subculture offering ready access to alcohol and drugs are but a few examples of these ever present challenges.

These problems are found in all neighborhoods and schools, but they are both more prevalent and more clustered in the lives of individual children when linked to poverty. Certainly, in our experience, their affect on children is terribly destructive. The issues related to

poverty are a part of the daily life of the good students—even the “A” students—as well as the marginal, struggling students. All children of poverty have to confront these issues daily; all have their learning potential and achievement impeded by such problems.

When confronted with a cluster of these problems, the ability of impoverished children to learn will be limited. Ensuring that they master learning standards requires the best efforts of our best teachers, strategic use of additional funds on practices and programs that work, aggressive parent education, and extensive local, state, and federal support services beyond the school year and school day.

Do principals serving poor neighborhoods face unique problems?

School principals do face unique challenges. For instance, we frequently seek housing, jobs, and support for families victimized by violence, and special help for children abused by adults and neighborhood influences. Comforting and counseling suffering children is a daily responsibility, as many children have little or no support at home.

Even in middle schools, children become parents or parent surrogates responsible for caring for younger siblings. Even the school’s support staff, who work with the children’s problems first hand and are often both teachers and *de facto* parents, have significant challenges. The work

load of principals in high poverty schools is far more stressful and requires far more hours than most educators and taxpayers can imagine. It is a difficult and demanding job and quite different from the job of principals in more affluent schools.

Don’t the schools have social workers to deal with these issues?

Our schools have psychiatrists, counselors, or social workers to help individual students with their problems, but these professionals are able to deal with only the most severe cases. Further, these professionals are not even in the school on most days. In Chicago, for instance, schools in low-income neighborhoods have a team of professionals to address such individual student problems, but the team is available to the school only one day out of each week. On the other four days, principals and teachers must try to cope without any such help.

Schools also can call upon local social service agencies for help with student problems, but, typically when called by the school, such agencies will respond that they can send help in a day or two. Such responses are of limited use in a school setting where a child has endured a trauma needing an immediate response.

Remember, too, when dealing with young children, problems deferred are frequently problems left either unresolved or ineffectually resolved. For children with a problem, some kind of help must be immediately available.

Further, while the professionals try to help, their resources allow them to deal only with the most severe cases. The principals and their teachers, again, are left to work with students in need of special services but who are not easily classified into a particular problem category. And it is just these students—victims of abuse, neglect, alcoholism—who have bundles of problems rather than a major severe problem, and whose problems interfere with their learning ability, who too often do not get the help of trained professionals. It is left to the schools to cope as best they can.

How could social services be improved?

So many of the children in our schools are victims of multiple problems that “wrap around services” are needed. That is, services are needed which treat “bundles of problems” simultaneously rather than treating specific problems separately and that “wrap around” the existing school day. Social services need to be delivered immediately, services which include assistance for both children and their families simultaneously, and need to be provided on-site in the school, but not during the school day. There have been pilot programs which provide such wrap-around servicing concepts and they are getting good results. These programs should be extended to all schools.

What about parental support?

Many students’ parents are unwilling or unable to support their children’s educational efforts. Often, these parents had negative experiences with schools when they were growing up and quite simply do not trust schools, the principals, or the teachers. Many do not understand the extraordinary importance of nutrition, and of nurturing—in terms of cuddling and conversation—much less support for homework.

In addition, lack of support for school discipline is a problem that grows daily. Our teachers find themselves in trouble—being accused of improper behavior—when they break up fights in the school corridors or try to otherwise keep order in the school. There is a vicious circle: parents want their children to learn; learning requires discipline; parents don’t support school discipline; learning is compromised.

Simply put, parents must be held accountable for the behavior of their children. Parenting can be taught, and improving parent literacy is of premium importance. This is society’s task, but the schools can help. Our schools have found unique ways to use limited resources to teach parents how to help their children learn and be responsible. Schools try to reach out to parents, to foster a relationship with them, and to get parents more involved. They try to involve parents in the classroom, in food service, and at student performances. They hold parent meetings, sometimes in housing project recreation where they can meet parents in familiar

surroundings. They sponsor family reading nights and grandparent days. Some teachers hold parent conferences in the children’s homes and principals also conduct home visits.

But all of this is ineffectual in reaching parents who work late afternoon and evening jobs as is so common in poorer neighborhoods. There is also a limit on the pressure schools can put on parents to be concerned. *Parental responsibility for children must be stressed by society as a whole.*

Why do you need more time with students?

For impoverished students, far more learning takes place when there is face-to-face contact between teacher and student than outside of school. Homework is of limited value when parents are not home or lack the educational background or the appreciation of education needed to supervise children’s learning at home.

To effectively compensate for inadequate early literacy, to diminish the impact of an adverse environment, and to provide the programs and services students need to master learning standards, schools need more academic learning time for children, especially in reading and writing. *Our schools have been successful in helping low-income students achieve because we have carved out and protected sustained time for language arts, especially in the primary grades.* Moreover, those students who are non-readers or

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struggling readers receive additional support each day. *Time for literacy is critical to each child's success.*

Where should more time come from?

Our school's need for more classroom time can—and should—be met three ways. First, our students desperately need a full afternoon of academic, extracurricular, exploratory, and physical activity. We can't speak for other neighborhoods, but children in poor neighborhoods, where parents can not afford special after-school programs, will benefit tremendously—academically, socially, and emotionally—from an extension of the school day later into the afternoon.

Second, more concern has to be given to protecting the school day from non-educational activities that reduce time spent in educational activities. Time that the teaching staff must spend performing non-educational functions, like monitoring child health requirements, managing student fund raising programs, and administering lunch programs, is time that is not spent helping children learn. From the individual child's standpoint, the number of classroom days canceled to provide time for the teachers' professional development is also learning time lost. Professional development is of paramount importance, but it is most effective when provided after school and during the summer.

Third, our students would learn more if the school year were longer. In our schools, 100 percent of the student body would benefit significantly from a summer school program. Yet, despite the need for such programs, the limited special funding that is given for them is taken away when the schools produce good test scores in the state's standardized testing system. In other words, the schools that are successful are punished for their success by having their summer program funding canceled. Our schools have found ways to provide summer educational experiences for a significant number of our students by utilizing help from neighborhood associations, partnerships with colleges, or use of limited local funds, but *state funding for summer programs should not be denied to schools that serve a high percentage of students from poverty backgrounds and have high test scores. Schools should not be financially punished for doing a good job with students. These students need the same support services as every other poverty child.*

Are the supply and the quality of teachers adequate?

The quality of student teachers has been very good, but schools that serve large numbers of low-income students suffer from not being able to attract the cream of the crop of new teachers and from having veteran teachers who need extensive, ongoing professional development. We fear that we do not have the opportunity to recruit or retain the best teachers.

We fear that too few want to be a teacher in today's climate of hostility to public education. The universities are trying to raise teacher standards, but the best and the brightest are choosing other professions because of education's image problem. Those pre-service teachers who have distinguished themselves as potentially outstanding educators too often head to the districts where they can make the most money and where working conditions are not as challenging. It is common knowledge that the teaching profession faces problems of low social status, of poor pay, of inadequate working conditions, of a lack of opportunity to exercise leadership in improving education. These problems are magnified in low-income schools.

What is needed is a professionalization of the teaching profession and specific training and incentives for teaching in high poverty schools. Besides overcoming problems of low pay and lower public esteem, education must do more to provide professional development opportunities for the teachers in the profession. Periodic, one-time meetings with no follow-up are not the answer nor should professional development time be taken away from time in class. The profession needs special institutes of several days or regular professional development sessions on a regular basis, such as one evening a month, with quality substance and regular follow-up.

Professional development needs to be a process that involves the entire staff, rather than a series of isolated activities for individual teachers. If necessary, teachers should be encouraged with compensation increments for quality participation in such activities.

Is the current emphasis on standardized testing helpful?

Strong learning standards and high expectations are a good thing. They positively impact and improve instruction. But inappropriate testing is only an obstacle to the performance of our educational mission. What is needed is not so much to throw out existing standardized tests, but to improve them.

First, testing should focus on the critical learning expected at the grade level being tested with reading and mathematics taking priority over science and social studies. In the 4th grade, for instance, students are given a social studies test. Social studies are important, but the focus of the early primary grades is, and should be, on developing reading and math skills. Achievement in these skills should be the focus of the tests.

The Illinois Standards Achievement Test (ISAT) is currently administered in grades 3, 4, 5, 7, and 8. The 8th grade test is extremely difficult, even “brutal”, for our students and needs revision. The “alternate assessment” for special education students is simply a waste of

time and an excessive paperwork burden. We think that the annual assessment required by the Leave No Child Behind Act should focus on reading and mathematics in grades 3 through 8. Our preference is to select a test that will be tied to the standards and assess students’ ability to apply what they have learned. We also need the results back much more quickly in order to use them to drive school improvement plans. Entirely new models for testing both LEP students (Limited English Proficiency) and IEP students (Individual Education Plan—a program for special needs students) are necessary.

What is needed, in short, is a better balance between assessment and standards enforcement in Illinois’ student testing program.

How do you feel about the state’s accountability system for schools?

Schools must be accountable. The bottom line is that the graduates of each school have to be able to compete with their peers in high school, higher education, and the job market. We are willing to be held accountable. *But, if we are going to be held accountable, then we need financial support commensurate with our challenges in low-income neighborhoods.* Band aids—the approach now being used to support schools in low-income neighborhoods—is not an acceptable level of support.

Low-income schools need, at a bare minimum, equity in funding if their graduates are going to be able to compete with graduates from schools with the advantages of upper income neighborhoods and without the educational obstacles associated with impoverished neighborhoods. Low-income schools need smaller classes than the norm, and certainly much smaller than the standards of one teacher for each 28 children in grades K-3 and one teacher for each 31 children in grades 4-8 that is now used in Chicago. Such class sizes are simply not workable given current socio-economic conditions and poverty-related problems in the schools in low-income neighborhoods.

Low-income, low performing schools can and should be matched with low-income, high-performing schools to foster real collaboration and share techniques that work.

What has been done in your schools to make them high achievers in poor neighborhoods?

The single, common effort made in all three of our schools has been a big effort to empower our faculty to provide leadership. We’ve encouraged faculty self-analysis and reflection based on state, national, and local assessment data, and given them collective responsibility and discretion. We have given our teaching staffs a sense of ownership of their school’s instructional process and challenged them to improve it.

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One way to achieve this is to divide the school into instructional sub-units, or “pods”, and give the teachers in each “pod” the opportunity or encouragement to work collaboratively to produce and implement improvement plans. Teachers are encouraged to take leadership. Our teacher recruitment focuses on finding strong teachers who buy into this collaborative style as well as share our sense of mission to help poor students.

A second successful initiative is emphasis on early literacy. We have aggressively worked with parents before their children enter school to improve their skills or to assist in placing their children in high quality preschool programs. We try to identify “at risk” children before they get to school so we can begin helping them develop the literacy skills they need to succeed in kindergarten. Once they become our responsibility, we provide intensive assistance—often in the form of one-to-one tutoring. Moreover, we ensure that every child has high quality classroom reading instruction, a large block of uninterrupted learning time and extra supports in the classrooms such as large classroom libraries, supplemental computer practice, and writing centers.

In addition, one or more of our schools has utilized the following strategies: (1) work to get rid of weak teachers, working with the unions on this goal when possible and working against them if needed; (2) emphasizing character education in the school; (3) upgrading the school’s reading program; (4) developing and utilizing better screening and referral systems for placing students in particular learning programs (5)

developing an extended school day and used it through-out the year, and (6) providing an intensive summer program for the schools’ students.

What advice would you give to Illinois’ political leaders?

A constructive agenda for improving the performance of Illinois’ schools should include all of the following goals:

- Provide equitable funding to all schools.
- Fully fund universal pre-school for all students from low-income families as well as intervention programs to assist struggling readers in grades K-3.
- Mandate and fund more school contact time with students.
- Ensure each school has access to well-funded “wrap around” social service programs to assist students and their families, if not for all schools, then at least for those in low-income neighborhoods.
- Assure that the agencies providing social service programs at the local level coordinate their efforts. Individual agencies are trying to achieve coordination, but the support of central leadership is lacking.
- Listen to the advice of professional educators, and especially to the principals and classroom teachers in the schools that are achieving

success in reaching their educational goals. Involve these ground level educational professionals as partners in the policy-making as well as the policy implementation process. Give them a meaningful sense of partnership in the educational process.

- Stop punishing the poor schools that *are* achieving success. Instead, recognize and reward their accomplishments.
- Be sure that the goals you establish for us, and the accountability procedures you put in place to enforce them, are realistic, achievable, and affordable.
- Recognize the negative impact of poverty on the education of students. Stop looking for someone to blame and look for positive solutions to overcome the challenges related to educating students who are economically and environmentally deprived.

We sincerely believe that Illinois’ schools can be improved, that they can serve as models for the rest of the nation, and we are anxious to help state and local leaders achieve this goal.

ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTORS:

The co-authors of this *Policy Profile* are three of Illinois' most successful professional educators. By providing leadership to elementary schools in low income neighborhoods that have achieved a high level of success in graduating impoverished students well prepared to continue their education at higher levels, they have been among the state's most successful educators in meeting contemporary educational challenges. They are:

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The views expressed in this edition of *Policy Profiles* are those of Ron Cross, Jeff Dosier and Mattie Tyson, and do not necessarily represent the views of the Center for Governmental Studies or of Northern Illinois University.

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