

4-5-2011

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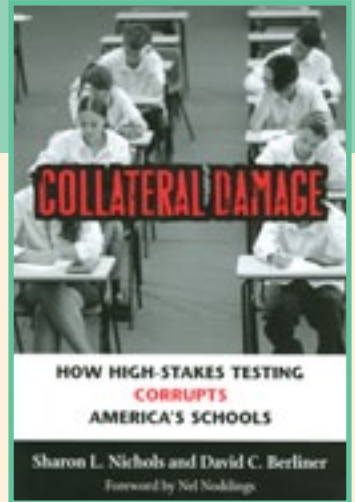
Stockton, Terry (2011) "A Look at the Report - Poverty and Potential: Out-of-School Factors and School Success," *Colleagues*: Vol. 6: Iss. 1, Article 9.
Available at: <http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/colleagues/vol6/iss1/9>

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A Look at the Report —

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

By Terry Stockton,
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While this paper shows how school success is affected by outside pressures, the book *Collateral Damage* coauthored by Sharon Nichols and David Berliner, shows how the very ways we are currently measuring school success could be eroding the U. S. educational system.

The increasing attention surrounding achievement gap in U.S. schools has ignited a passionate dialogue concerning how to address obvious and significant disparities in the education system. The rhetoric speaks to fixes and solutions related to school failure. It points to super-teachers like Jaime Escalante (*Stand and Deliver*), Erin Gruwell (*Freedom Writers*), and Joe Clark (*Lean on Me*) confirming that the right teacher can impact a significant academic shift. This notion that the right schools or super-teachers can rectify the achievement gap is reinforced through the work of the recent documentary *Waiting for Superman*. David C. Berliner in his brief, *Poverty and Potential: Out-of-School Factors and Schools Success*, explores the complex and pervasive socio-cultural, biological and psychological variables underlying the achievement gap (2009). Rather than looking to villains and heroes, Berliner seeks to understand the complicated factors of poverty and how they contribute to diminished academic success. Berliner's report attempts to explore how these 'out-of school factors' (OSF) impact student performance.

Berliner stated the "effects of OSFs on impoverished youth merit close attention for three reasons." First the evidence contradicts popular opinion that schools are failing students, instead it suggests that cognitive and behavioral inequality stems from familial and neighborhood sources. Secondly, research shows a significant correlation between poverty and academic proficiency. This indicates that "schools work less well for impoverished youth and much better for those more fortunate." Finally, the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) laws and an increased political focus on accountability has shifted the cultural perspective to an output oriented examination of school performance, neglecting the inputs that significantly impact results. This lopsided attention of test scores (focused primarily on math and reading) intended to eliminate excuses for teachers and administrators for failing schools perpetuates the myth of a singularly school-oriented liability for the achievement gap. The no excuses approach is further promoted when occasionally a school overcomes the "academic detrimental inputs." Notwithstanding the extraordinary impact of these super-schools, generalizing that schools alone can overcome the significant impact of poverty ignores the extraordinary effects of out-of school factors on achievement (Berliner, 2009). Further it presumes a simplistic solution to a complex problem. Berliner suggests instead that schools that demonstrate success amidst significant obstacles be studied to learn how to promote,

replicate, and reproduce success in other schools. However, focus on success should "never be used to excuse the societal neglect of the very causes of the obstacles that extraordinary educators must overcome" (2009).

No Child Left Behind and a cultural predisposition to expect schools

to address issues of achievement, expects them to address concerns largely out of their zone of influence. This unrealistic expectation promotes failure of schools at the cost of impoverished learners. Berliner asserts that any significant dialogue about the achievement gap must include a systemic examination of the factors related to poverty that contribute to it. Seven significant OSF, which are largely ignored by NCLB philosophies, have a profound influence on learners. In addition, ignoring these factors promotes an imbalanced resolution for the increasing achievement gap. Each of the OSFs discussed represents a barrier for learners and a significant impasse collectively.

OSF-1—Low Birth Weight

The first OSF, low birth weight, is strongly associated with diminished cognitive function and behavioral problems. The associated cognitive and behavioral problems are addressed in public schools where students receive specialized services to meet their considerable needs. Meeting student needs (specialized or not) represents a task all schools must address. However the concentration of low birth weight among poor and African American families in high-poverty schools increases the school's responsibilities dramatically. Berliner sites a study suggesting a 246% increase in pre-term birth to low-income and African American families (2009). This disturbing figure highlights what high-poverty schools can and are expecting in their next generation of students. With the added services such students need, schools will struggle to manage and then succeed with these students.

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OSF-2—Medical Care and Schooling

According to Brown and Beardslee (2008), 45.7 million U.S. citizens lacked any health insurance coverage in 2007. Although an absence of health insurance alone does not equate to illness, it does contribute to the ability of students to gain academic achievement. Their research has shown a strong correlation between student health and academic success. In addition to not addressing chronic or acute medical conditions that can effect learning, a lack of medical insurance and proper medical care prevents many families from acquiring the necessary prescription drugs that control medical problems. Finally, lack of dental care and vision care prevent learners from fully participating in school.

OSF-3—Food Insecurity and Schooling

“There exists no ‘safe’ level of inadequate nutrition for healthy, growing children, even nutritional deficiencies of a relatively short duration a missed breakfast, an inadequate lunch impair children’s ability to function and learn. When children attend school inadequately nourished, their bodies conserve the limited food energy that is available. Energy is first reserved for critical organ functions. If sufficient energy remains, it is then allocated for growth. The last priority is for social activity and learning. As a result, undernourished children become more apathetic and have impaired cognitive capacity. Letting children go hungry means that the nation’s investments in public education are jeopardized by childhood under-nutrition.” (2008)

This telling quote (2008) from Brown, Beardslee, and Prothrow-Stith legitimizes what teachers have understood for a long time: children without proper nutrition lack the attention and cognitive function necessary to be successful learners. It is clear through a plethora of research that learning and nutrition are undeniably linked. Berliner additionally reminds readers that the current recession exaggerates the already too prevalent problem of under-nutrition in impoverished communities.

Although diminished nutrition in older children and adults decreases attention and cognitive function, it represents a mostly manageable problem. Once adequate nutrition is provided the resulting inadequacies decrease to close to normal levels. However, when under-nutrition is coupled with early development the problems are long lasting and irreversible. This is a problem that again is overrepresented in poor and minority communities.

OSF-4—Pollutants and Schooling

Mercury, lead and other pollutants impact learning in multiple ways. The literature is <http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/colleagues/vol6/iss1/9>

full of examples and evidence that clearly links pollutants to increased illness, decreased school attendance, and impairment of children and adults on a permanent and ongoing basis. It is also clear that these pollutants are disproportionately represented in poorer communities. These impacts subsequently impact how schools teach and address the needs of learners

OSF-5—Family Relations, Stress and Schooling

Family can provide tremendous support in difficult times; they can also become the object of aggression, anger, and fear. Berliner’s fifth OSF, family relations, explores how stress influences family relationships. He demonstrates through periodical reports the significantly elevated levels of abuse and violence in families in lower socioeconomic status. The stark correlation of poverty level and abuse is a telling story. Readers cannot escape the potential impacts of abuse on schooling, nor can they ignore how this impact, again, is represented disproportionately. Berliner’s brief further addresses how depression and mental illness impact individuals. Depression, abuse, stress, and family’s dysfunction coalesce, creating children ripe for continued mental illness, including Oppositional Defiance Disorder, depression, and failure in schools. The seemingly inescapable cycle of poverty increases the likelihood of internalizing stress, further impacting children and amplifying the achievement gap.

OSF-6—Cumulative Vocabulary for Three-Year-Old Children in Three Different Social Classes

Berliner recognizes the power of language. It is clear through his research that language develops differently among social classes. In fact, studies reflect a significant fading of language acquisition as young children move down the social ladder. Plainly, language reduction plays a significant role in student performance. “The compatibility or incompatibility of the language experiences at home simply adds another source of family influence that makes it harder for schools that serve the poor to do well” (2009).

OSF-7—Neighborhood Norms and Schooling

Anecdotally parents, teachers, and society at large understand that neighborhoods impact learning. In his brief, Berliner reveals how studies support this understood phenomenon. He points to the issues of neighborhood violence isolating students and limiting language acquisition. He further examines how increased student mobility of and instability of neighborhoods impacts learning environments (some places where there is a 100% turnover of students in one year). These factors strongly

impact learning and place students at risk.

Conclusion

Each of the seven out-of-school contribute to the increasing achievement gap; individually, they pose real problems to learning environments. Collectively, however, OSF factors create an obstacle for schools that lies outside of their influence and beyond their control. Many out-of-school programs seek to address the obvious and intense needs; including summer programs, preschool programs and after school programs. However, lack of funding, lack academic assistance, and lack of attendance from those who most need the services limits their impact. Berliner suggests that attempts to address the problem at a school level fail to address the complex and interwoven factors that truly prevent school success. Therefore to shrink the achievement gap:

“We [must spend] our nation’s most precious resources on such strategies as trying 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 rates of family violence in low income households
- Improve mental health services among the poor
- More equitably distributed low income housing throughout communities
- Provide high-quality preschools for all children
- And Provide summer programs for the poor to reduce summer losses in academic achievement.”

-Berliner, David C.

Please view the full report at: <http://nepc.colorado.edu/publication/poverty-and-potential>

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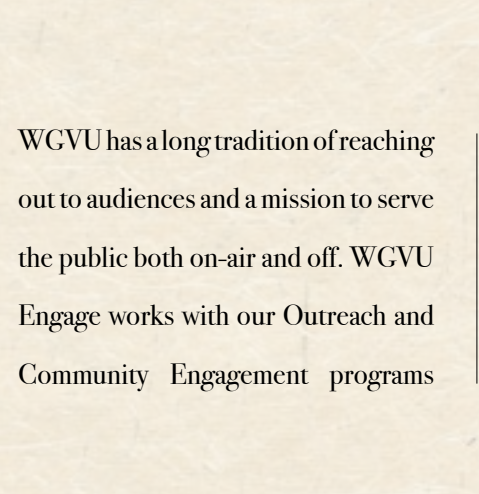
KidsDay at the Zoo



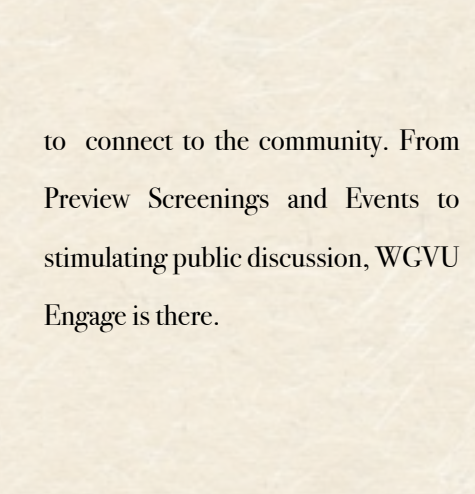
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