Poverty and Education

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As the United States population has increased, so has the enrollment of students at either public or private schools. From 1991 to 1999 the percentage of children between the ages of 3 and 5 attending educational programs such as Head Start and nursery schools increased from 53 to 60 percent. From 1972 to 1994, the percentage of racial minority students who attended public schools in the United States nearly doubled from 22 to 43 percent (Rooney, 2006).

As the population grew, statistics indicated that more minority students attended high poverty schools. High poverty schools are schools when 75% or more of their student population receive free or reduced price lunch (Rooney, 2006). As we began to scrutinize the reason(s) for this problem, we need only to observe the population shift that has occurred in the past four decades. An examination of the major urban populations such as Detroit, Chicago, and the like, shows a major exodus of white families. For example, Detroit's population decreased 9.5 % from 1960 to 1970 (Snyder, 1998). When we continue to explore metropolitan population decrease, we notice that during the 1970s, 34.6% of Detroit's population was white (U.S. Department of Commerce, 1973). Today, the white population of Detroit is 11.1% (factfinder.census.gov).

The United States has always had a strong tradition of local control of education. According to a 1997 General Accounting Office study, local governments provide an average of 47.8 percent of educational expenses, with states funding 45.2 percent, and the federal government providing the remaining 7 percent (Allen, 1997). With the mass departure of the metropolitan population and the growth of suburbia, school funding from property taxes, as well as state funding for public education, was no longer going to cities like Detroit and Chicago.

Reliance on local funding has meant that affluent suburban districts are able to spend more for education of their children than metro urban areas. Poorer school districts are not able to provide the facilities students need, despite high tax rates, while wealthier districts often exceed the needs of students with low tax rates. According to a study discussed in The Detroit News, under our current school funding system, Metro-Detroit area school districts such as Bloomfield Hills and Birmingham are able to provide safe and modernized school buildings and athletic resources with relatively low school tax rates because property values are so high. In districts like Detroit, property values are far lower, therefore leaving this district to work hard to provide a similar learning environment despite higher school tax rates (Menard, 2005).

According to this report, the owner of a $50,000 home in Detroit pays $345 to pay off school debt compared to an owner of a $550,000 home in Bloomfield Hills, who pays $184.25. Detroit has the highest school debt millage rate in the state of Michigan at 13.8. In comparison, Bloomfield Hills has a 0.67 millage rate.

Since inner city schools are generally in financially poorer districts, many teachers are either near retirement or with minimal experience. These school systems must find a way not only to attract new teachers who are willing to work with a diverse population, but they must find ways to retain them. While there has been much debate about urban school effectiveness and teacher quality, one suggestion has emerged as indisputable: The success of urban schools depends closely on the quality of the teachers who provide the schools with quality educators and the administrators who support the teachers (Olsen & Anderson, 2007). The problem has been that urban school district recruitment policies have not agreed with the research and knowledge about urban teachers' effectiveness. Consequently, the best teaching candidates may be ignored, neglected, or otherwise discouraged. Metropolitan school districts must tailor their recruitment and retention efforts to address the characteristics and motivations of potential teachers. These schools need to change the idea of teacher retention and support the development of deep and successful careers in urban education (Stotko & Ingram, 2007). Studies have supported the idea that these urban teachers will remain in their school system if they can adopt multiple education roles inside and outside the classroom. Further, they will need to receive professional support during their entire careers and not just when they first begin teaching.

With the onset of Charter Schools, Schools of Choice, and Voucher Plans, urban public schools will be under a constant threat of losing students they once considered untouchable. As parents begin to realize they have more choices for their children’s education than before, many may make the decision to leave urban schools. Urban schools will continue to find themselves defending their existence. Without a significant shift in how schools are funded, and changes are made in the accountability of schools, urban schools will constantly face additional cuts in resources, forcing cuts in programs in order to balance an already delicate budget.

References


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