



# Children at Risk

*Many students come from impoverished homes with no history of financial or familial success.*

By Lawrence Hardy

*How can schools help “at-risk” kids beat the odds?*

On a malnourished 5-year-old, the facial fat is the last to go. Bundled against the Boston winter, he looks like a normal child, his plump little face peeking out from inside a discount store parka. But a doctor can tell he’s suffering.

“The children are so small, you underestimate their age,” says Deborah Frank, director of the Grow Clinic at Boston Medical Center. “If you don’t have a clue, you say, ‘What a cute little 3-year-old.’”

Frank is seeing 10 percent more of these children this year—an alarming, but not altogether surprising, statistic. Rental costs have soared in Boston and throughout the country. Housing programs have been cut. Wages remain flat even as the nation enters its fifth year of economic recovery. And, since 2000, another 1.3 million children have slipped into poverty, bringing the total to nearly 13 million.

The 5-year-old described above is an “at-risk” child—at risk of failure in school and in

life. Before he ever sets foot in a public school, he is months, perhaps years, behind. Now it's the school district's job—your job—to give him the best possible chance at success. What are you going to do?

### **Poverty: A common thread**

Over the next several months, ASBJ will examine the education of children at risk. We'll look at their lives in and out of school, the myriad problems they face, and how some schools are responding to their needs. Social scientists have identified six primary risk factors, all of which are common in low-income households: poverty itself, welfare dependence, absent parents, one-parent families, unwed mothers, and a parent without a high school diploma.

While it is not necessary to be poor to be at risk—children from single-parent families are found all along the income spectrum—poverty usually is the common thread.

How much can schools do to help the poor? That is a matter of considerable debate. Some argue that by becoming more efficient, focused organizations, schools alone can lift children out of poverty. Others say the problems of poor children are so multifaceted and profound that reforming schools is not enough.

Richard Rothstein is in the second camp. For nearly 50 years, researchers and policymakers have been well aware of the link between social and economic disadvantage and the achievement gap, Rothstein writes in *Class and Schools*. “Most, however, have avoided the obvious implication of this understanding—raising the achievement of lower-class children requires amelioration of the social and economic conditions of their lives, not just school reform.”

Critics say Rothstein's position lets schools off the hook: They can blame societal factors for the failure of disadvantaged students without turning a mirror on themselves. Conversely, others would argue that the reverse is true—that putting the onus on schools relieves states and the federal government of the responsibility to truly address the needs of poor and working class Americans.

“I sort of come down in the middle of this,” says Bruno V. Manno, a trustee of the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation and senior program associate at the Annie E. Casey Foundation. “It's naïve to think that resources aren't important, but ... I think it's disingenuous to say that the resources that are presently available are being used in as best a way as possible.

“Let's start by saying, ‘Let's look at what we're doing with present resources’ and acknowledge that we will probably need more.”

How much more? It's a difficult and complex question, to be sure. But Robert Balfanz, a research scientist at the Center for Social Organization of Schools at Johns Hopkins University, has tried to answer it, at least at the high school level. To staff the kind of

small learning community that CSOC advocates would take an additional \$780 to \$1,124 per pupil, Balfanz estimated in a report this year. This would pay for the kind of supports—such as extra reading and math teachers, counselors, and community liaisons—that disadvantaged students would need to improve their graduation rates.

“Schools have got to take on this larger role, and they have to be resourced to do it,” Balfanz says. “That’s the other side of the bargain: If we want schools to do more, we have to provide the resources to do it.”

### **The economic imperative**

There is an obvious moral argument for addressing the needs of poor children. But equally important is the economic imperative. In an aging society that depends on young people for its continued prosperity, the call to leave no child behind becomes an almost literal necessity. As Phillip Longman, author of *The Empty Cradle*, writes in *Washington Monthly*, the Social Security system “assumes that the number of workers paying into the system will increase by 30 percent over the next 80 years. And it assumes that our children and grandchildren will be enormously more productive than today’s workers.”

As Longman sees it, we live in a society that devalues child rearing—a society in which the average nursery school teacher’s salary (\$20,940 in 2001) is less than that of animal trainers (\$27,280). Families with modest incomes can easily spend more than \$1 million raising a child through age 18, he writes, so child rearing “is fast becoming a suckers’ game.”

And fewer people are playing. According to a recent report by the National Marriage Project at Rutgers University, less than 50 percent of women ages 25 to 29 had minor children at home in 2000, compared with 73.6 percent in 1970. And the number of single, childless households has surpassed married ones with children.

Relatively affluent parents may not like the fact that society is less child centered or that their contributions may go unnoticed, but, on average, their children will do just fine. The same cannot be said for the poor, and especially those with the youngest children.

“The way to be poor in this country is to be a young child, and to be the family of a young child,” says Frank of the Boston Medical Center clinic, noting that the poverty rate for children under six is 20 percent. “The younger the child, the poorer the family.”

In Boston, as in other cities, the rising cost of housing is increasing poverty—and with it, malnutrition. David K. Shipler, the Pulitzer Prize-winning author of *The Working Poor: Invisible in America*, explains the dynamics:

“You have to make the car payment—about 94 percent of working poor Americans need a car to get to work in this country,” Shipler says. “You have to pay the electric bill and so forth. But the part of the budget that is squeezable is for food. Families that are paying 50 to 70 percent of their income for housing, because they don’t have Section 8 vouchers

or they're not in public housing, have to squeeze the food part of the budget.”

That kind of belt-tightening doesn't come without consequences. According to the Center on Hunger and Poverty at Brandeis University, the number of people who reported experiencing actual hunger rose 43 percent in America between 1999 to 2004, from 3.1 million to 4.5 million, while food insecurity—defined as limited or uncertain access to healthy food—increased from 31 million to 38.2 million, a number that includes 14 million children.

The fact that poor children suffer from obesity at rates at least equal to that of all children does not diminish the seriousness of hunger and food insecurity. Frank says poor families often gorge on cheap, fattening, non-nutritious food—soda and french fries will keep a child feeling full overnight—when food money is available.

Flat wages coupled with rising housing costs mean families are spending a greater percentage of their incomes on mortgages and rent, according to the U.S. Census' 2005 American Community Survey. In Dearborn, Mich., and Detroit, monthly rents are up 36 percent since 2005. In Newark, N.J., 72 percent of mortgage holders are spending more than 30 percent of their income on housing. Likewise, in Chicago, 40 percent of renters were spending more than a third of their income on housing in 2005, compared to 29 percent five years earlier.

Meanwhile, \$1.5 billion has been cut from public housing operating funds nationally since 2001. And the tear down of aging public housing in cities like Chicago—coupled with insufficient investment in replacement housing and the rapid gentrification of central cities—has left low-income families with few options, says Rene Heybach, director of the law program at the Chicago Coalition for the Homeless. She says displaced people try to double up with relatives or friends, move to “inner ring” suburbs, or find a shelter with space for families.

At Chicago's McClutchen Elementary School near downtown, homeless liaison Annie Pugh says the number of homeless students—70 out of an enrollment of 320—has increased 10 percent this school year.

“Most of them are living in shelters,” Pugh says. “Some people are doubling up. Some of the shelters have their own individual rooms, and some of them don't. Even with the public housing—rents are rising there. There are increasing working poor who are homeless as well.”

### **The at-risk environment**

Certainly, not all poor Americans suffer so acutely. In fact, the number of chronically poor is far below the 12.6 percent national poverty rate, suggesting that the most dramatic cases of homelessness and poverty are not the norm. On the other hand, there is a much larger group of people who move in and out of poverty, including a stunning 43 percent of Americans in their 30s who experienced at least one year of poverty in the 1990s,

according to Monica Lesmerises, a consultant to the Century Foundation. Are their children any less “at risk?”

The chronically poor “are not a very large number,” says Isabel V. Sawhill, co-director of the Brookings Institution’s Center on Children and Family. “But I don’t want us to get too hung up about who is just below or above some arbitrary poverty threshold. What puts children at risk is not being above or below some arbitrary line; it’s the entire environment in which they’re growing up.”

Of course, much of that environment is of their own making. Drug use, gang membership, teen pregnancy—these are all consequences of the poor decisions young people make. No one is forcing young people to embrace the violent culture of the street, to listen to hateful and misogynist gangster rap, or to buy magazines like *Felon*, which, as the *New York Times*’ Bob Herbert recently pointed out, featured a “Stop Snitchin’ issue that included headlines like “Hundreds of kilos of coke,” “Over a dozen murders,” and “No one flipped.”

A pathology, to be sure—and one for which neglectful parents, and the young people themselves, are largely to blame. But there is the reality we create and the reality that is thrust upon us; in the case of the poor, that latter reality is full of deprivation, uncertainty, and the very real possibility of failure. Who can say, for certain, which has the greater impact on any given child’s life?

At the Center for Social Organization of Schools in Baltimore, they’re not puzzling over such questions—they’re busy trying to create high schools that transform the environment in which poor children are educated.

“Poverty has lots of negative impacts that people have to overcome, but schools are one of the major institutions of social intervention that we have,” Balfanz says. “It’s the one sort of public institution that’s everywhere. And so I think, ultimately, we still have to do it through the schools.”

One CSOS-affiliated institution, George Washington Community School in Indianapolis, has made remarkable progress with a student body in which 89 percent of the school’s seventh through 12th-graders receive free and reduced-price lunch. “Nobody pays for lunch except the adults,” jokes Community School Coordinator Jim Grim. “I pay—three bucks!”

Grim is the point person for 49 school partnerships, which help bring community services and outside expertise into what he calls “a full-service community school.” There is a Teen Health Clinic so parents don’t have to miss work taking students to the doctor. There are partnerships with the combined Indiana University/Purdue University campus, and with the city park department, which will operate the school swimming pool once renovations are completed.

“No excuses,” was a slogan the school used when it opened in 2000, and it applied to

both faculty members and students. “If you don’t like it here,” Grim remembers the former principal telling teachers, “there are 78 other Indianapolis public schools that you can go to.”

Standardized test scores have steadily increased over the past five years. But it was the event last May 24 that was the most rewarding to staff members. Eighty seniors matriculated in the first graduating class. Of those, 81 percent planned to go on to post-secondary education—college, community college, or vocational training.

It is an encouraging turnaround for a school that was closed just a few years ago because of its dismal academic record. And, as always with such break-the-mold success stories, the question for educators and policymakers is not just “Can it be replicated?” but also “Can it be brought to scale? Can we conceive of a nation where all disadvantaged teenagers could have the opportunity to attend such a school?”

The pessimists among us might say “not likely.” After all, wasn’t it the very uniqueness of the school that attracted its cohort of committed teachers and long list of influential community sponsors? Try to replicate it across 78 other Indianapolis schools, and would you get the same thing?

Others might say while there may be no second or third George Washington Community School, the lessons learned from this school can be applied to other schools as well—if only we have the energy, will, and resources to do it.

### **Schools as gateways**

The nation’s official poverty level has not changed significantly since the 1970s, and many experts say there is nothing on the horizon that suggests it will move significantly in the near future. Barring some unexpected shift of public sentiment, there will be no Marshall Plan to fix poor neighborhoods or rescue poor schools.

But educators are perennial optimists, and the past 30 years have taught them a lot about what works, whether it’s quality early childhood education or smaller, more focused and personal high schools that strive to become as they once were, the intellectual and social hubs of their communities.

“I think you have to think of various institutions in society as potential gateways,” says Shipler, the author of *The Working Poor*. “And schools are perfect for that because all poor families encounter the schools, and teachers see a lot of these problems without being able to do anything about it. It’s an ideal place. It’s an absolutely perfect setting, if we’re willing to devote the funds to it.”

Schools will need help, adds Balfanz. “I’m not saying they can do it alone. But they have to be the fundamental driver for giving kids a chance to come from poverty and go on to success.

“Ultimately, it’s got to be the public schools. If not them, who?”

Lawrence Hardy (lhardy@nsba.org) is a senior editor of American School Board Journal. December 2006  
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