



## #6 Staff Initiatives to Mitigate the Effects of Poverty in Schools by Sharan Widsten, OCT, B.Ed, BA

*As Educators we must begin by working within our Sphere of Influence and Become Allies to Low-Income Students*

### Who We Are:

- Social Planning Network of Ontario (SPNO) Host of the Knowledge Network for Student Well-Being (KNSWB) Equity and Inclusion Community of Practice with a focus on Low-Income Students and Families.

### Objectives

- To bring knowledge and awareness on the inequitable and exclusionary experiences of students from low income families to educators at the local level in our communities (teachers, principals, superintendents, trustees).
- To build a base of awareness and commitment among educators, parents and students in our communities that could advocate for systemic change in the education system to end/reduce inequitable and exclusionary treatment for low income students and families.
- To interrupt biases, assumptions and commonly held misconceptions of low-income students and parents which serve to undermine student achievement, well-being and meaningful parent engagement.

### The Study

During the 2018-2019 School Year data was collected from WRDSB School Staff to gather information about initiatives/fundraisers that helped close the gaps that resulted from students living in poverty. The purpose of the study was to gain insight into the various efforts staff were taking across the board to ensure student and student's families needs were being met. These included fundraisers, food drives, clothing drives, organizing and parent workshops among other efforts.

The data indicated that the efforts were originated as a result of needs not being met in the following three areas: **student nutrition, student preparedness for school and parental support** all of which are connected to the monetary demands that are associated with the three areas.

### This Report will provide an overview of the following areas

#### 1.) The Gaps Observed by Educators:

- ◆ Student Nutrition
- ◆ Student Preparedness for School
- ◆ Parental Support

#### 2.) The Impact on Students' Educational Experiences

#### 3.) The Efforts by School Staff to Mitigate the Impacts of Poverty

#### 4.) Short and longer-term Consequences for Students

#### 5.) Impacts on Staff

### Nutrition

**One in ten students arrives at school without enough nutrition to sustain them for an entire day.** (Nutrition for Learning) According to the survey, 90% of the schools that responded to our survey operate a Nutrition for Learning Program in their school.

- ◆ Staff and volunteers observe the nutrition gaps based on interactions with students and communication with parents and guardians.
- ◆ Staff at various school sites work closely with outside charities to provide healthy food for students at school and to take home.
- ◆ Classrooms have fresh fruit available to students throughout the day,
- ◆ Breakfast programs in place.
- ◆ Seasonal food hampers are prepared by school communities for families in need. According to the survey, 90% of the schools that responded to our survey operate a Nutrition for Learning Program in their school.

## Nutrition (continued)

### Staff support: Organizing and Fundraising

- ◆ On average 1-5 staff members per school assist with organizing programs or facilitating regional programs.
- ◆ This includes coordinating with school staff, communicating with support staff in regards to food storage in the school, connecting with families and organizing day to day implementation. Other schools hold fundraising events to raise money to buy gift cards from grocery stores that are then given to families who need assistance in purchasing food.
- ◆ The prizes are donations from the community as well as staff.

## 2) Student Preparedness for School:

**Clothing:** Staff have observed that a students' ability to be successful in school is heavily influenced by having the necessary gear and supports. The primary focus for staff in this area is student clothing, weather related gear and school supplies that are not included in classroom budgets. These gaps are more immediately addressed when refugee families join a school community as the needs are anticipated.

### Absences related to Inadequate Clothing and Costs of School Events

School secretaries observed an increase in absences when the weather turns very cold, as well as when there are special events hosted at schools that have an associated cost, or specific dress code.

**Efforts by staff, and in some case, other students, to provide resources and necessary items for students include:**

- ◆ Clothing drives
- ◆ Clothing Cupboards: Schools that see a high rate of students who lack weather appropriate attire also have Clothing Cupboards (this also applies for when students have clearly outgrown shoes or clothing). These cupboards are restocked by staff and donations.
- ◆ Community Closets that provide brand new clothing and school supplies for students (these are sourced by donations, as well as reaching out to corporate sponsors and local businesses).
- ◆ Staff reaching out to the community as well as corporations to procure sanitary products for female students, as well as toiletries for intermediate students.
- ◆ Community organizations that schools work with also help to provide necessary supplies to families. Send them off Smiling is one organization (<http://sendemoff.ca/>) that facilitates donations and distribution on a large scale.

## 3) Parent and Guardian Supports:

As teachers observe the challenges their students face as a result of living in poverty and work towards supporting their learning, they also reach out to the families to ensure that the students' are also continuing to have their needs met when they leave school. School staff recognize that parents and caregivers are doing their best to meet their children's needs, but depending on the circumstances there are instances when this is simply not possible.

School communities are benefitting from teacher organized and facilitated parenting workshops that deal with a range of issues such as: healthy eating, positive parenting, literacy, Canadian law, financial literacy, accessing community supports and guidance about using public transit. Staff organize child care,

### 3.) Parent and Guardian Supports (continued)

The Waterloo Region District School Board (WRDSB) runs a before and after school program that allows for onsite childcare, which for many working parents and guardians facilitates being able to retain for full-time employment.

As described by an extended day staff member: **“Research tell us that programs that support working conditions for families, lower the depth of household poverty.”**

- ◆ Our before and after school programs are available in all schools with no waiting lists and support working conditions for families. Programs are subsidy eligible.
- ◆ Over 500 families attending the program receive full fee assistance. This program directly supports working conditions or parents returning to school to upgrade their skills. WRDSB operated locations are inclusive, offered in every school no matter how few children sign up.”
- ◆ The subsidies and fee assistance is an integral support, the workshops that some schools operate support parents in making use of this resource.

**In addition to supporting parents, some schools offer programs that provide students with opportunities that are not available to them at home.**

- ◆ This includes afterschool programs that are focused on literacy. As research shows, a strong foundation in literacy and numeracy can be solidified by strengthening these skills when not at school- for instance, by being read to, or being encouraged to participate in household tasks.
- ◆ Community programs and literacy clubs at schools where parents are unable to provide these essential skills are run by school board staff across our Board.
- ◆ Student’s are also welcomed into a safe space at GSA’s at most school in our school board, while not directly associated with living in poverty, these open spaces create an equitable environment that nurtures inclusivity, which boosts student confidence and their sense of belonging.

**At most elementary schools across the board there is additional funding provided for school supervision monitors.**

- ◆ Many admin are using this part time position to provide parents of students within their schools who are struggling financially an opportunity to participate in their child’s school experience, learn new skills and increase their confidence.

**To access the supports some families depend on school board staff to drive them to assessments, appointments and follow up meetings.**

- ◆ School staff work tirelessly to ensure that families will be able to access the community resources that are available, often spending a great deal of time:
  - coordinating rides,
  - coaching parents about public transit
  - making additional phone calls to accommodate families’ unique circumstances.

**The impact on students' educational experiences:**

While it is heartening to see the efforts and lengths school board employees are going to with the goal of creating a meaningful learning experience for our students, these efforts create other gaps and discrepancies within the system.

**Inequity of Experience and Access**

- ◆ Staff at lower income schools program with their families limitations in mind, which means that all extra-curriculars and field trips are planned with a limited scope.
- ◆ In contrast to teachers at affluent schools, who have a wider range of activities, interactive experiences and off campus excursions they can organize for their students to extend the in class learning. These “extras” are meaningful, interactive experiences that provide higher level learning opportunities for students.
- ◆ Often students at affluent schools are exposed to these experiences in their home lives as well, further reinforcing knowledge, confidence and inspiring new interests in more privileged students.

**Meeting Basic Needs**

- ◆ The time, effort and energy that goes into ensuring that basic student needs are being met comes at the cost of teachers being able to use that same time to provide extracurricular activities for their students.
- ◆ While staff at lower income areas are just as active in providing clubs, teams and events for their students- the scope is not nearly as big as at affluent schools- where parents are able to volunteer a great deal more time as well as fund events through school council fundraising efforts.

**Missing School**

- ◆ The reality of poverty in our schools is that students are often not able to attend school, not able to fully participate in school due to not being prepared, not able to focus on learning due to hunger, not able to emotionally regulate as a result of the stresses they face on a daily basis.
- ◆ However they are expected to achieve, behave, and thrive as their counterparts who do not live in poverty.

**Interesting Findings and Final Thoughts:**

- ◆ Staff mentioned that the initiatives at their schools helped to create a stronger sense of community and trust between the school and families.
- ◆ Teachers remarked that the time they spend focusing on these initiatives takes time, effort and energy out of potential extra curricular activities that they could be organizing.
- ◆ School staff discussed that they struggled to find meaningful field trip possibilities for their students that would not impose a financial burden on their families.
- ◆ Staff thought that it was unreasonable to run and organize certain activities that would require parent volunteers or extra costs—so they don't run them (for instance, some schools have a ski club, but others don't)
- ◆ School secretaries notice an increase in student absences on certain days (first really cold day, certain spirit days that require a specific costume or dress code.)

**\*\*\* It is clear that living in poverty is a barrier to full academic potential, and as a system we need to close these gaps before students arrive at school.**