Children & Poverty in our Community: A Perspective from the Schools

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When you consider what it must be like to be a child living in a state of poverty, what do you envision? Do you visualize a sad, sullen young person, an individual who cannot even consider the possibility of a happy life for themselves? Do you see an individual who may be poorly fed, ill-clothed, or whose eyes reflect a profound sadness?

When we see this young person in the community, we cannot fully know if the possible signs of poverty that we are observing is a consistent life-condition for them. However, in the schools and in our classrooms, educators quickly learn of the dire conditions that far too many of our community youth exist in. Through daily contact, teachers quickly recognize the signs of those who might be lacking sleep or who might be disconnected from their peers. These children become quickly evident to the caring educator, who can recognize a youngster who lacks not only material things, but also the essential components and necessities needed for a healthy brain and body, a sense of self-esteem, and a positive vision for their own future.

Students who live in poverty literally parachute into the school environment from their “other world” on a daily basis, always striving to display a semblance of normalcy. It can be a tortuous and damaging existence for them. It can assault their young sense of self and distort what they see as their own value and place in society. For many, the school and classroom offers at least a temporary respite from those fundamental things lacking in their young lives.

Our community is indeed rich in resources. We are wealthy beyond measure when it comes to the amount of dedicated people who work to make things better for others. As one who works in the schools, I am often heartened by the degree of dedication and selfless generosity demonstrated by parents and guardians who contribute their time and talents, educational materials, and pantry items to help with the great work going on here. It is truly humbling and encouraging to witness this.

It is exciting to see an increasing degree of collaboration between groups and agencies in our region who are searching for new ways to help those children and their families in our community. At a significant gathering in August, the City of La Crosse, La Crosse County, and the School District of La Crosse hosted the La Crosse Community Summit: Rebuilding for Learning II community conversation. This event brought together city and county professionals, educators, and other community stakeholders with the goal of creating and implementing a web of organized learning supports to address those societal barriers to learning. While children in poverty certainly have the ability to achieve at the same level and reach the same academic benchmarks as their peers, their initial ability to effectively focus and learn can be severely hampered when their basic human needs are not being met because of economic hardship.
A more recent community conversation regarding the subject of children and poverty took place at Viterbo University in October. Co-sponsored by AMOS (a local interfaith community coalition), the D.B. Reinhart Institute for Ethics in Leadership at Viterbo, La Crosse County Human Services Department and Family Policy Board, League of Women Voters of the Greater La Crosse Area, and the Wisconsin Council on Children and Families, this gathering provided a meaningful discussion involving strategies for impacting children and families in poverty. Through these invaluable community conversations, we learn about the resources that we can share and enjoin together for a greater common good.

During this season of giving and sharing, it is a timely reminder that we remain focused on those families in our society needing resources, assistance, job-training, and employment opportunities to better their economic situation and prospects for the future. It is imperative that we do what we can to provide the children with the necessary resources and nutrition so that they can effectively learn and grow while in our schools, thus giving them all of the benefits that a good education will provide. As they experience success in school and grow into young adulthood, so will they be empowered to create a fulfilling life, realizing their greatest potential and promise. In the schools, without question, it is our definitive mission and our charge.

It has been said that it is the moral test of a nation in how it treats those who are in the dawn of life or in the twilight of life. Let us aspire to meet that moral test and, to that end, work to eliminate the poverty that impacts the lives of so many families and children in our community.

Homeless Student Numbers 2012-13: An Update from the La Crosse School District

Homelessness, by definition, can include a number of realities as it relates to the domicile of a student. As far as the school district definition is concerned, it can include students who reside in a shelter or agency setting, in a hotel/motel, or who are “doubled up” while living with other relatives or family friends.

By this definition, for the 2012-2013 school year, we (the La Crosse School District) have identified 107 students who are considered homeless. Of those, 53 students are in the elementary/Kindergarten grades and 29 are at the middle level.

The free/reduced lunch statistics reflect challenging times in the homes of many of our students. District-wide, the number of students who qualified for free/reduced lunch was at 36.1% in the 2003-2004 school year. During the current school year, current numbers indicate that 46.2% of our students qualify for that program.