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Children and Poverty in our Region **A Perspective from the Schools**

By guest author Rick Blasing, Couleecap Board of Directors and School Counselor, School District of La Crosse

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 and future 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, a decent meal, 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.

**Over 8,000
children in our
4-county area
live below the
poverty line.**

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.

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.

In many ways, children are one of the most vulnerable segments of society. Growing up in poverty can have debilitating consequences on a young soul. It can create a stigma - an emotional paralysis that can assault the young person’s sense of self-worth; the tragic fallout of one who exists in a perpetual state of anguish or angst.

Often, students whose lives are in upheaval or who lack the basic components of a stable or secure life will often become those individuals who - by all appearances - appear to be mean, unruly, disorganized or disrespectful. To that end, often those who are identified as “bullies” are themselves living in a world of pain and denial - often striking out at others in reaction to their own distress. While it might defy logic for some, a student who lives in a world of brutality or violence will often express themselves in a similar way to their peers. They will often demonstrate those very behaviors that have been modeled for them, primarily by the adults in their lives. In effect, violence often begets violence.

In like manner, if those students living in poverty don’t withdraw into a shell of isolation or depression, they

may sometimes become overt or attention seeking in their actions. Since many of the adults in homes immersed in poverty may themselves be dealing with a level of depression or devastation related to their situation, their children may also be lacking the amount of attention or love that all people need.

A chronic sense of hopelessness, a feeling of powerlessness, or an inability to cope may become the mindset that defines these children. Perhaps lacking proper nutrition or clothes, they may lash out at their peers or teachers. They may demonstrate a level of impatience or impulsivity, extending less empathy to others. It has been aptly stated that “hurt people, hurt people.”

Our region is indeed rich in resources. And 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. And 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 communities.

The work of Couleecap sets the standard for empowering, uplifting, and encouraging those who are navigating through difficult times. As “people helping people”, we know that “feeling compassion is not enough to end poverty . . . we must act on it.” As Couleecap and other wonderful, proactive organizations promote self-sufficiency out of the state of poverty, the impact on the psyche of the individual is profound. Freeing up the mind of the young person allows them to embrace the powerful sense of accomplishment of an assignment or school project done well.

During the 2016-17 school year, in our 4-county area, 410 students were reported homeless by their school district.

The public school also serves as the stage upon which all societal challenges and social ills are played out. It makes working in this intense environment both challenging and rewarding. For some students living in poverty, schools often exist as the one place that they can obtain a warm meal or a set of new clothes. The most precious commodity – our children – rely on us to help them thrive through their years of formal learning, to realize success in multiple dimensions, and to receive those affirmations that reinforce their unique gifts and personal value.

At a significant gathering this past August, all educators in the School District of La Crosse attended the *Rebuilding for Learning VII* community conversation and summit, with the empowering theme, “Making Connections: Our Community, Our Home.” 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, of which poverty is a significant factor. Through these invaluable community conversations, we can better learn about the resources through which we can share and join together for a greater, common good.

Superintendent Randy Nelson spoke to educators of the need to build even deeper relationships with their students and their families; of the urgency to make these connections even stronger so that those who are existing in a state of poverty become more evident. Most schools already have some degree of food or clothing pantry on site to serve their students and their families. Never has the need been more evident.

Some segments of society may be tempted to blame the victim, to make certain erroneous assumptions about those who find themselves in a state of poverty. Those living in poverty do not fit any particular profile; neither ethnicity, nor race, define this population. But their children pay the price. They often seek to conceal the realities of their young lives, to keep secret their situation, avoiding bringing friends home or participating in things with their friends that require the resources that their family simply does not have.

In his impactful book, *Teaching with Poverty in Mind*, author Eric Jensen examined the effects of poverty.

His research concluded that living in a perpetual state of poverty can result in detrimental changes to the child's brain, that there is a greater incidence of health issues which often manifest themselves in poorer school attendance. Jensen notes that "poverty penetrates deeper into the body, brain, and soul than many of us realize." He observed a sobering reality that a "childhood in poverty often sets the stage for a lifetime of setbacks". . .leaving a "devastating imprint on their lives."

Free or Reduced Price School Meal Eligibility for Public School Districts in Crawford, La Crosse, Monroe, & Vernon counties

Crawford County 50.8%

La Crosse County 30.5%

Monroe County 44.4%

Vernon County 44.5%

According to federal eligibility guidelines, students in households with incomes at or below 130% of the federal poverty rate receive free meals. Students approved for reduced-priced meals are from families whose annual income is under 185% of the federal poverty rate.

Data from Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction
(www.dpi.wi.gov)

During this winter season, 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 children 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 region.

You Can Help, Too

Each of us has the power to help people find a way out of poverty. Here are some ways you can get involved:

- Educate yourself about poverty issues. Visit your local library or websites on the Internet. Some good websites are Wisconsin Community Action Program (WISCAP) – www.wiscap.org; Couleecap – www.couleecap.org; Institute for Research on Poverty – www.ssc.wisc.edu/irp; Wisconsin Council on Children and Families – www.wccf.org; and Center on Budget Policy & Priorities – www.cbpp.org.
- Support and vote for local, state, and federal elected officials who care about poverty issues.
- Support your local food pantries all year round.
- Advocate for a higher minimum wage, more assistance for child care, more assistance with healthcare costs, and more assistance with transportation costs, so working families can get out of poverty.
- Make a donation to Couleecap's People Helping People initiative. Your donation will be used to help our program participants with unmet needs. For more information about Couleecap's People Helping People Initiative, contact Kadie Brueggen at 608-424-2532 or Kadie.Brueggen@couleecap.org.

Couleecap, Inc. is a private non-profit 501(c)3 charitable organization created in 1966. Our mission is to fight poverty and promote self-sufficiency, economic development, and social justice. We are People Helping People, and every day our actions make a difference in the lives of people and families throughout the Coulee Region. We currently implement more than 50 contracts in the areas of housing, emergency assistance, child and family development, business development, employment, transportation, and health services. Each year, Couleecap helps more than 27,000 people work towards self-sufficiency and realizing a better tomorrow. Visit our website at www.couleecap.org or like us on [Facebook](https://www.facebook.com/couleecap).

Special thanks to our guest author Rick Blasing, School Counselor at the School District of La Crosse.

The Effects of Poverty on Children

At greater risk of chronic conditions such as asthma, anemia, & pneumonia

At greater risk of behavioral & emotional problems

At greater risk of poor academic achievement.

At greater risk for a wide range of physical health problems.

Chronic stress associated with living in poverty has been shown to adversely affect children's concentration & memory which may impact their ability to learn.



Poverty impacts children within their various contexts at home, in school, and in their neighborhoods and communities.