

STATELINE

States Confront the Deepest Pockets of Poverty

BY KATHY CHRISTIE



The hit movie, *Slumdog Millionaire*, obviously struck a chord with the U.S. public with its portrayal of a young man who succeeds despite being engulfed in some of the worst living conditions imaginable. While the abject poverty in the urban slums of India is extreme, it helps illustrate why the concentration of poverty is such a major issue in urban communities.

Research on low-income schools and classrooms supports the fact that as the percentage of low-income students increases, so does the challenge of meeting students' needs. Where is that concentration greatest? Urban schools.

In most high-poverty rural areas, a certain amount of diversity occurs out of necessity. The principal's children, the rancher's and the banker's kids, and the store owner's children attend the same school because there are no other schools.

In urban areas, however, higher-income parents have greater choices about where to live and where their children will attend school. Families in high-poverty areas within urban communities often don't share those options. Their children are less likely to spend after-school hours with the local banker's kids

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or share a math class with the local grocery store owner's daughter. High levels of disadvantage are concentrated geographically.

Federal Role

One goal of federal aid has been to provide additional assistance to disadvantaged students. In schools with the highest concentrations of poverty, schoolwide Title I programs often provide extra funding, but as we all know, success remains an uphill battle. Federal dollars play a part in both high-poverty and in less disadvantaged schools, though few believe the available dollars have been adequate. Studies from federal agencies, such as the Government Accountability Office, have shown that money is not necessarily equitably dispersed. And most *Kappan* readers are all too familiar with the debates over money's effect on achievement.

State Funding for At-Risk Students

Mike Griffith, senior finance analyst for the Education Commission of the States, contends that existing state at-risk funding formulas don't sufficiently reflect needs related to high-density poverty. Some state education formulas consider density, but these are neither the norm nor sophisticated enough.

New Findings from California

A January 2009 report from the nonpartisan California Legislative Analyst's Office found that **California's** approach for helping educationally disadvantaged students "fails on virtually every score."

"Improving Academic Success for Economically Disadvantaged Students" puts 47 state and federally funded programs designed to serve disadvantaged students into five categories: early childhood education, childcare and after-school activities, academic achievement, nutrition, and facilities. Fifteen of the 47 programs are supported solely with federal funds, 19 are supported solely with state funds, and 13 are funded with both state and federal monies.

Specifically, the report claims that at both the local and state level, California's existing approach:

- Does not focus on the underlying barriers to academic success;
- Consists of a hodgepodge of disconnected programs;
- Does not link funding to the prevalence and severity of academic barriers and the cost of overcoming them;
- Is neither centered on improving academic

STATELINE

achievement nor well-integrated into the state's overall accountability system; and

- Does not collect and disseminate useful information on program outcomes.

Suggestions for change in California include five steps:

1. Focus on barriers to academic success;
2. Simplify the system by consolidating many existing programs into one large block grant;
3. Link funding to the cost of overcoming barriers to academic achievement;
4. Strengthen overall accountability by measuring year-to-year growth in student achievement; and
5. Collect and disseminate data on outcomes to foster continuous improvement.

State Innovations

There will be critics of the California report, and getting the suggested changes in place could be very difficult. As always, the devil lies in the details. Meanwhile, state leaders could begin to size up whether their efforts match the recommendations. The following appear to have components that do so.

Block grant. In her state-of-the-state address, **Kansas** Governor Kathleen Sebelius proposed a new Early Childhood Block Grant, driven by research-based programming and accountability measures and focused on at-risk children and underserved areas. She also proposed extending the state's network of high-quality early learning opportunities for children by funding prenatal care and newborn screening, Parents as Teachers, Early Head Start, and high-quality childcare.

Focus on barriers to academic success. **Utah** provides additional resources for individual assistance to students at "highly impacted" schools. State law requires the state board to identify highly impacted schools based on: high student mobility rates, the number and percentage of students who apply for free school lunch, the number and percentage of ethnic minority students, the number and percentage of limited-English-proficiency students, and the number and percentage of students from single-parent families.

Louisiana S.B. 701 (2008) provides for integrated case management through the use of No Wrong Door, an initiative targeting disadvantaged children and their families, student achievement, truancy intervention, dropout prevention, family safety and stability, foster care and adoption, prenatal and early childhood care, preventive health care, behavioral health, adult education and job training, and vocational rehabilitation.

Maine S.B. 804 (2008) asks the state to survey students in grades 6 to 12 using a tool that reliably and validly measures risk and protective factors that predict adolescent health and behavior problems, including substance abuse and delinquency.

The 2008 **Illinois** legislature enacted H.B. 4369, creating the Commission on the Elimination of Poverty. This commission is supposed to develop a strategic plan to reduce extreme poverty in Illinois by 50% or more by 2015. An initial report on its activities and recommendations was due March 1, 2009.

Link funding to the cost of overcoming barriers. **Maryland** bills passed in 2008 require county boards of education with elementary schools with high truancy rates to implement a positive behavioral intervention and support program or certain behavior modification programs.

In 2002, the Maryland General Assembly approved the Bridge to Excellence (BTE) Act, which



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continues to bring an additional \$1.3 billion to public schools. The legislation called for the state — by 2008 — to provide an additional \$1.3 billion in education funding to local school systems above the amount that the state would have provided under the prior school finance structure. Legislators required that BTE funding adhere to four principles: adequacy, equity, simplicity, and flexibility. School systems direct how the money is spent.

Learning is the way out of poverty. Schools are places of learning.

Recent evaluative research done by MGT of America found that the largest percentage of additional funds went to recruit and retain qualified educators, a critical factor in improving student achievement. “In the years following the implementation of BTE, local school systems demonstrated substantial improvements in the percentage of their student populations who were proficient in reading and mathematics,” the report says.

Reduce the hodgepodge of programs. Kentucky S.B. 192 amended provisions related to the state’s family resource and youth services centers. New language is meant to ensure that services enhance a student’s ability to succeed in school and to prioritize services to the most economically disadvantaged students and families. Family centers must be in or near every elementary school in which at least 20% of the students qualify for free/reduced lunch. Youth services centers are similar except they are in or close to secondary schools. Each family center is supposed to promote identification and coordination of existing resources, and must include:

- Full-time preschool childcare for 2- and 3-year-olds; after-school childcare for children ages 4-12, with full-time childcare during the summer and days when schools are closed;
- Families in training, which shall consist of an integrated approach to home visits, group meetings, and monitoring child development for new and expectant parents;
- Family literacy services or a similar program; and
- Health services or referrals to health services.

Core components for each youth services site must include referrals to health and social services, career exploration and development, summer and part-time job development for high school students, substance

abuse education and counseling, and family crisis and mental health counseling.

Focus on continuous improvement. The **Massachusetts** state department and Massachusetts 2020 co-hosted the fourth annual Extended Learning Time (ELT) Summit in December 2008. This summit provided a venue for 650 Massachusetts educators, community partners, policy makers, union leaders, and elected officials to consider issues of quality and results that drive the ELT Initiative and to explore key accomplishments and lessons learned.

Extended Learning Time is a state-level public-private initiative launched in 2004 with \$500,000 in state funds to support school planning. Currently, 26 schools and 13,500 students are participating. Schools, with district support, volunteer to redesign their schedules and add at least 300 more hours for all students. Schools decide if they will add time to the school day, school year, or both. Teacher agreements are negotiated locally. Expectations for implementation are defined in seven areas that are essential to effective implementation, and each has supporting indicators that describe best practices. Planning, implementation proposals, and support are aligned to these expectations.

As protagonist Jamal Malik demonstrates in *Slumdog Millionaire*, poor children are capable of cobbling together their own brand of learning. Other inspirational fictional characters, such as those created by Charles Dickens, the orphans in the more modern *Cider House Rules*, and the protagonist in one of the earlier little novels by another orphan, James Michener (*The Fires of Spring*), echo the creativity and resilience of Jamal Malik. Learning is the way out of poverty. Schools are places of learning. And great city schools must be our future. Let’s hope that the necessary economic cuts don’t hit those with the greatest need. ■

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