Current and Potential School System Responses to Poverty

BENJAMIN LEVIN
Ministry of Education and Training
Province of Manitoba

J. ANTHONY RIFFEL
Faculty of Education
University of Manitoba
Winnipeg, Manitoba

The negative impact of poverty on all educational and life outcomes is well known, yet the issue does not seem to occupy as important a place in education policy or practice as its effects would suggest. This paper, part of a larger study on the way school systems respond to change, looks at the ways in which poverty is understood in school systems and the ways that schools try to respond to it. We argue that although poverty is not created by schools, and the problems of poverty cannot be resolved by schools, there are steps schools could take to understand the issue more fully and to cope with it more effectively. Efforts in this direction would seem to be a critical part of any attempt to provide effective education.

BACKGROUND

Concern about the outcomes of education has been an important policy issue in Canada for at least the last decade. Critics have argued that the Canadian education system must improve its functioning if we are to meet impending social and economic challenges. Standards of achievement are held to be too low, especially in key fields such as mathematics and science. Governments in Canada seem largely to have accepted this view, with many if not all provinces issuing reports or passing legislation intended to effect improvements. Among the main initiatives have been changes in curriculum, increased testing of students, reduction in the number of school boards, and a stronger parent role in education governance including, in several provinces, the ability to choose the school their children will
attending. Nor is Canada alone in trying to change its education system; the same kinds of developments are happening in many countries, to the extent that their movement across jurisdictions could be compared to an epidemic (Levin 1998).

One of the striking aspects of education reform, however, has been the lack of attention to the most important single determinant of educational outcomes — socio-economic status (SES) of families. SES continues to be the strongest predictor of educational outcomes, as it has been since it came into prominence as a research issue more than 30 years ago. Almost all educational outcomes, such as initial reading achievement, referrals to special education, discipline and behaviour problems, years of education completed, and grades achieved are strongly correlated with family income (the evidence is reviewed more fully in Levin 1995). So too are factors that themselves influence school outcomes, such as low birth weight, childhood diseases, and slower infant development. Childhood SES is the strongest single predictor of long-term income (Corak 1998) and educational attainment (de Broucker and Lavallée 1998). Other major life outcomes such as longevity, health status, criminal activity, propensity to political involvement, and so on have also been linked to childhood socio-economic status. In every case low family income is strongly associated with poorer outcomes, a finding that has remained extraordinarily robust in the research and applies in the United States, Canada, Australia, and the United Kingdom (e.g., Connell 1994; Natriello, McDill and Pallas 1990; Smith and Noble 1995). Recent evidence from the National Longitudinal Study of Children and Youth (NLSCY) in Canada has strongly reconfirmed this link (Lipps and Frank 1997).

The extensive work documenting the impacts of poverty has not been accompanied by attempts to estimate the economic and social costs to Canadian society. However, if one took the list of negative consequences above, it is evident that poverty creates significant additional costs in regard to health care, education, criminal justice, unemployment, and social assistance as well as reduced productivity. For Canadian society as a whole these must be in the billions of dollars per year. Moreover, poverty is to some degree intergenerational, so that costs continue not only for those who are now poor, but for their children as well. Still, the field would benefit from some more careful efforts to assess the costs of poverty, both in specific subfields such as health and education and more generally.

Educators were, of course, aware long before the research on the subject that poverty had deleterious impacts on education. Programs to provide free meals and health services to needy students began shortly after the introduction of compulsory education in Britain a century ago because it was clear to those involved that students could not learn if they were ill or hungry (Smith and Noble 1995). Yet poverty has had a chequered history as an issue of education policy.

In the 1960s, poverty was an important policy issue for education in many countries (Silver and Silver 1991). The United States launched the War on Poverty. In Britain, the Plowden report attached great importance to schools’ efforts to counteract the many negative effects of poverty. As the political mood shifted to the conservative side over the next decade or so, poverty largely disappeared from the educational agenda. Issues of spending levels, examinations, and governance systems took centre stage. After years of spending and tax cuts, program reductions, and efforts to shrink the public sector, many countries have seen a large increase in the number of poor children with, not surprisingly, some very difficult consequences for schools. Bradshaw’s comment on Britain is equally true of the US and Canada.

During the 1980s children have borne the brunt of the changes that have occurred in the economic conditions, demographic structure and social policies of the UK. More children have been living in low income families and the number of...
children living in poverty has doubled. Inequalities have also become wider. There is no evidence that improvements in the living standards of the better off have trickled down to low income families with children (1990, p. 51).

Poverty is heavily concentrated among young families, and especially those headed by female single parents. Child poverty rates are estimated at about 25 percent in Britain, 20 percent in Canada, and 25 percent in the United States, with far higher rates for some subpopulations such as Aboriginals in Canada or African-Americans in the US (CCSD 1992).

Growth in levels of poverty among families and therefore among children can be attributed to several factors. The most important of these is the deterioration in labour market opportunities. The largest group of poor people now consists of families with one or both parents working but whose income is simply insufficient. High levels of unemployment, falling real wages, and the significant decreases in secure, middle-income jobs such as those in manufacturing have made it more difficult for many families to support themselves. Changes in the structure of the labour force have resulted in more part-time and short-term employment and more insecurity (Livingstone 1999). Wage disparities have grown, so that low-end wages are less and less adequate to maintain a reasonable standard of living.

Market income inequality has risen quite noticeably in Britain, the US, and Canada (Economic Council of Canada 1992; Rashid 1998). If not for income assistance and other social programs, Canadian poverty levels would be much higher. In all three countries the top pre-tax earned income quintile earns 15 times or more as much as the bottom quintile (CCSD 1992). But social programs such as income supports, which do reduce poverty rates significantly, have been cut in all three countries, throwing additional numbers of people into poverty, even though none of the countries is, by international standards, a high spender on social services (Economic Council of Canada 1992).

Another significant source of poverty for children is marriage breakdown — separation or divorce (which is itself affected by poverty, so that, for example, increased unemployment is associated with increased marriage breakdown). The economic implications of separation or divorce are serious and very negative for women, whose incomes tend to drop dramatically in these circumstances, while those of men often rise (Gunderson, Muszynski and Keck 1990). In countries such as the Netherlands or Germany, where child-maintenance provisions are better, and where there are more supports such as low-cost child care available, poverty rates among single parents (overwhelmingly female) are much less than the 50 to 60 percent that is typical of Canada, the US, and Great Britain (CCSD 1992).

Current education policy is also not helpful to efforts to ameliorate poverty. As noted, there is much more attention to curriculum or assessment issues than to inequality issues. Cuts in funding often have greater impact on the additional programs and supplementary services in high need schools. Other reforms, such as parental choice of schools, seem likely to exacerbate inequality (Fuller, Elmore and Orfield 1996; Whitty, Power and Halpin 1998; Thrupp 1999).

All of this puts schools in a very difficult situation. Poverty is a vital issue yet it is difficult to know how to respond to it. A better understanding of the way poverty is seen and understood by educators would seem to be an important part of developing better responses.

**The Study**

The research reported in this paper is part of a larger study of the way school systems respond to changes in the larger society, with the bulk of the data collected between 1993 and 1995. Although social
change is vital to the future of education, most research on school change has focused on the internal dynamics of school systems — on such matters as implementing new curricula or improving teaching practices or assessment procedures. Relatively little empirical or theoretical work addresses the ways that school systems respond to social change.

The primary study on which this paper is based had two main components (Levin and Riffel 1997). The first involved collaborative case studies with five school districts in a Canadian prairie province. These districts included a large urban district with a significant inner-city, a suburban district of mixed socio-economic status, a partly rural and partly suburban district, a rural farming district, and a First Nations (Aboriginal) self-governing district on a reserve. The districts ranged in size from 1,100 to more than 30,000 students. In each district we tried to map the kinds of issues seen as important by administrators and policymakers, sources of information about these issues, and the kinds of strategies districts were using to try to manage the issues. Data sources have included document analysis, interviews, observation, and dialogue with the districts based on the data being gathered. In all we have conducted about 50 interviews with school-board members, district administrators, and school administrators. We reviewed extensive documentation, and held more than a dozen meetings with colleagues in the participating districts.

The second strand of the study looked in more detail at three specific issues: child poverty, information technology, and change in the nature of work. In addition to information on these issues from the five districts, we used interviews, surveys, and conversations to gather information from school-board members and school administrators across the province. The most important single data source for this part of the study was a survey of school-board chairs and chief superintendents in all school districts in the province. In effect, one part of the study looked at many issues in a few districts; the other looked at a few issues in many districts. In the discussion that follows, although the focus is on poverty, some comparisons are made between responses to poverty and responses to the other issues involved in our study.

The quotations used in the paper are from our interviews. We identify the district, either in the preceding text or at the end of the excerpt, where this is important to understanding the point being made, otherwise quotations are anonymous.

**Understandings of Poverty**

In none of the districts in the study did poverty per se appear as an agenda item for school boards or administrator groups, and there were only a few mentions of related issues such as additional programs in high-need schools. It is clear from the interviews that many respondents are highly aware of the importance of poverty as an issue in their school or district. Nonetheless, in reading the official records of these organizations, one would not come to the conclusion that this is a particularly important issue for any of the districts.

In our survey of school-board chairs and superintendents, poverty was given a much lower priority as an educational issue than were information technology or changes in the workforce. Only 26 percent of the respondents described poverty as being an important issue in their district (rated one or two on a five-point scale), compared with 64 percent for changes in work and 91 percent for information technology. No survey respondents said that dealing with poverty was a “major aspect of their work” and 31 percent said it was “important,” compared with 9 percent and 72 percent respectively for technology and 20 and 50 percent for changes in work.

This level of attention seems remarkably low in light of the powerful impact of socio-economic status on school outcomes. Census data indicate that poverty exists in all five of our districts, and it is a widely-publicized fact that the province in which
the research was done has one of the highest rates of child poverty in Canada, at more than 25 percent. Yet among our survey respondents, 65 percent believed that the poverty rate among children in their district was 15 percent or less. These key actors were underestimating the real prevalence of poverty in their areas. One wonders why such a powerful influence on educational outcomes gets relatively short shrift in school districts in comparison to other issues.

Some clue to this situation emerges when we consider the ways in which our respondents report learning about poverty. The primary source of information for respondents is personal contact with other people. In schools and smaller districts the contact is with students and their families directly. In larger districts superintendents and school-board members rely more on reports from other staff, who in turn have direct contact with students. This process is largely informal and unorganized. We were rarely if ever given any data about poverty levels in schools or districts even though the urban district, at least, collects and distributes such data regularly. Survey respondents also gave overwhelming importance to personal contact with staff, students, and parents as their key source of knowledge. Most teachers and administrators come from middle-class backgrounds and have, fortunately, little personal experience with poverty. Nor do teachers and administrators tend to live in poor communities. Among the five districts in our study, only the urban district — and there primarily in the inner-city part of the district — had some mechanisms in place to make sure that poverty issues did receive attention on a regular basis.

District perspectives may also be affected by the fact that there are no pressure groups advocating with the school boards the importance of poverty as an issue, as there are on other issues that seem to get more attention, such as transportation or special education or budgeting. The poor also have less access to the resources necessary for effective political work. Governments in Canada, Great Britain, and the United States have in recent years not given attention to poverty as a source of educational problems. A number of factors, then, combine to make poverty a less visible issue than the evidence on its effects would justify.

District Context and Poverty

The extent to which an issue is seen as important depends on the context of the organization. On the one hand, poverty is on the whole more often and more knowledgeably spoken about by respondents in districts where more of it exists. However, whether poverty is seen is not simply a matter of the statistics on low-income families. It is also a matter of the mental maps of those doing the looking — as to how they conceptualize their organization and their community. In two districts, the urban and Aboriginal, poverty is widely recognized as an issue, while in the other three it has much less prominence.

In the urban district, where poverty is widespread, many, though not all, respondents speak knowledgeably about it. A rough estimate would be that children from poor families account for about half the district’s enrolment, and that a significant number of schools draw almost their entire enrolment from such families. Poverty is seen as an enormous problem which provides a vexing challenge to the district.

It’s a disastrous affliction ... We, and society, haven’t managed it yet ... Poverty is incredibly destructive ... We don’t have any strategies for getting people out of welfare once they are on it (school-board member).

It is certainly a big issue for me at the school. It is a difficult issue to address because I don’t see a direct solution to it. I think it is one of the major factors that certainly impacts on a student’s success in school, because along with it come so many other things (school principal).

In the Aboriginal district, poverty is not an affliction for a limited number of students in a largely
successful system, but a feature of life for many in the community. Everyone is well aware of the problem.

Housing and water are problems. There is still no running water in a lot of homes. Sometimes people say: “My kids are not going to school because I have no water.” That is the main problem. We’ve provided an incentive here in the school for attendance, and we’ve started a lunch program. I think these work pretty well.

Poverty, although common, is overshadowed in the Aboriginal district by other issues, especially general concerns about quality of education and self-governance.

In the other three districts, where real poverty levels are much lower, it is seen either as one issue among many facing the schools, or as largely anomalous — an individual circumstance that needs to be dealt with by schools as it arises for specific children. Respondents in these settings tend to have less individual knowledge about poverty. This is also consistent with our survey data, since 66 percent of our survey respondents agreed that poverty was not a major concern in their area.

In terms of poverty I don’t think we have very many poor kids, although we do have some. It’s a difficult thing to measure ... It’s hard to know how many of those farm kids are in bad shape, some of them are for sure ... I don’t see poverty as affecting a large number of our kids but I know it’s an important thing for the small number of our kids that are in that spot (rural district).

In terms of poverty, in this school in particular I wouldn’t see it being a huge problem. In some other schools in the district it does create a major problem. I think kids are suffering when they come to school without proper food, the parents of many children in the junior high ... aren’t home when the kids go home, alcohol creates a problem, many are on social assistance, kids can’t get involved in extracurricular activities that cost money so schools try to develop programs that won’t cost money (rural/suburban district).

As noted, these remarks probably understate the real incidence of poverty in these districts. In the rural/suburban district and even more in the suburban district there is growing awareness of the issue.

Up until the last five to eight years, you probably could have identified which schools in the district would have children that would have poverty as an issue in their life. There were schools where that would not have been an issue at all. What we are seeing is that the issue of poverty and all of the concerns that come with it are becoming more prevalent in a number of our schools ... Probably the majority of our schools have some element of that (suburban district).

For the most part, poverty is still seen as a problem of individual students, making it hard for them to succeed in school. Low income is seen to mean that students are less prepared for school, that they may come to school hungry, and that there may be no books in their home, that they may not receive adequate parental supervision, that they may not be able to afford extracurricular activities. Among survey respondents, the most common outcome of poverty was felt to be the inability to participate in extracurricular activities (88 percent), though most respondents also agreed that poverty resulted in lower school achievement (79 percent), more behavioural problems (67 percent), and less parental interest in children’s education (55 percent). If students lack the accepted requisites for success — what is sometimes called “social capital” (Coleman 1987) — they are likely to have difficulties at school. Within this frame, those we interviewed noted a number of ways in which poverty manifests itself, ranging from relatively simple matters such as inability to pay for extracurricular activities, to behavioural problems to secondary-school students being forced to support themselves.
RESPONSES TO POVERTY

Given the diversity in ideas about the extent and causes of poverty, it is not surprising that we found uncertainty and mixed opinion about the degree to which school districts ought to be responding to the issue. One set of those we interviewed feel that the social mandate of schools is inappropriate, and 50 percent of our survey respondents either agreed or were neutral on the suggestion that schools should not be responsible for dealing with problems of poverty.

Schools already do too much. I think people in the community feel that way too. Teachers are expected to do too much, we shouldn’t have to feed, we shouldn’t have to clothe, kids shouldn’t be sentenced to school by the justice system, we shouldn’t have to do all the social aspects, but then they’ll say, somebody has to do it. There’s a feeling that if only those governments could figure this out so that teachers could concentrate on teaching, things would be better.

But others see no way for schools to avoid the issue, even if they are troubled by it.

I see the school as the only institution in the society that has a captive audience for 5 1/2 hours a day. So, as well as educating the kids, we are also given the mandate to feed, clothe, house and counsel them, etc. I have no problem with having to do these, what I resent is that the resources that enable us to do them are being taken away, and the fundamental causes of these things are never addressed.

Most educators believe that the regular academic work of the school cannot be done unless basic social needs are met.

Research studies identify primary needs and demonstrate that it is difficult to focus on secondary needs until you satisfy the primary need. Consequently it is very difficult for students here to focus on education needs when in fact they do not know where they will be living the next day, and when they will be eating.

And some noted that the schools had themselves assumed the mantle of an anti-poverty agency.

... for a long time schools were able and willing to take on more and more. Many teachers have a strong social conscience and they identified needs in a child and were determined to meet those needs. Other agencies have built on this pattern and said let’s try to push a service on to the school system. On the other hand we’ve probably voluntarily taken on things like this. For example, we knew the kids were coming to school very hungry and so they weren’t being productive in school, so we took on a Nutrition Program. Maybe it was easier for us just to implement a program than it was for us to fight with somebody else to get them to take it on.

All the districts have taken some steps in response to what they see as the impacts of poverty. Their efforts are defined largely within a frame that sees poverty as a problem of individual students or families and their consequent inability to meet the demands of schools. In two of the districts these policies are at least partly coordinated at the district level, while in the other three the problem is seen largely as a responsibility of individual schools with the district assisting in various ways. None of the districts has what could be called a plan or strategy on the issue, though the urban district does have a range of programs. The individualistic orientation to poverty as an issue means that most efforts focus around providing extra resources to schools so that they can in turn provide programs that will compensate for the limitations of children’s home lives. Although 85 percent of our survey respondents agreed that schools with significant numbers of poor children require additional resources, much of the school response to poverty depends on the orientation, energy, and commitment of principals and teachers.
No, it’s not taking a leadership role or an initiative situation. It’s hoping that the parents would come forward with something that we could support. It was at the initiative of the parents committee at [one school] that a lot of these developments went forward. It was also at a time when we had a lot more financial resources. It may be difficult to start a lot of those initiatives in the current economic climate.

The most common, practically universal, responses are school budgets and policies to ensure that children can participate in school activities regardless of family ability to pay. All the districts make at least some provision for schools to pay for various activities such as field trips or musical instruments for students who would otherwise not be able to afford them. Most districts also mention guidance and counselling services as a response to students with difficulties, whether caused by poverty or not.

The board supports a breakfast program at [one] school, and has also provided extra staff, a full time guidance counsellor and a resource teacher, so there has been some input where it is needed. In [this community] poverty is not that visible. At [another school] where I was previously, we had a full time resource teacher, a full time guidance counsellor, and we also had a community liaison worker, and, through a grant from the government we had a staff person who would work with students who needed extra help. Many of those students came from low income backgrounds and many were experiencing social problems in the home.

Some districts were also attempting to work collaboratively with other social service and community agencies.

Although these are the most common measures, districts are also trying some other approaches. Four of the districts provide, at least in some schools, services such as meal programs or winter clothing to needy students. The suburban district has one school that has made an important effort in working more closely with parents and families.

In my mind [one school] has been a shining example of overcoming some of those problems. The active involvement of the parents and the school has resulted in initiatives that help the school to develop programs to fight racism, to give support to single parents in terms of day care and before and after school programs, to assist in the early identification programs for students to regain some advantages in education, to provide community liaison workers to work with immigrant parents to learn more English and to increase employment opportunities. Those are the kinds of things a lot of us would like to see more of.

Still, the predominant response in these districts is low-key and local, and coupled with some uncertainty as to whether schools can be effective in this area.

We try, to a limited extent, to give help to students. There is very little initiative at the senior high. The students at high school come from a number of areas, they are not localized to individual areas like elementary schools. As a result we do not see a high proportion of poverty in any one particular high school. To tell you the truth, I just don’t have a good explanation for it.

The exceptions to this pattern occur in the urban and Aboriginal districts, and it is worth looking at each of these in more detail.

The Urban District
The urban district has recognized the existence of educational problems in the inner-city for more than 20 years, and has developed a set of programs and practices around these conditions. For example, it provides extra resources to schools characterized as inner-city, and does have an array of programs and services related to poverty. These include lunch and breakfast programs, summer enrichment programs,
the only nursery program (for four-year olds) in the province to be supported by a school district, housing registries in some schools to try to reduce student mobility, special “migrancy programs” for students who change school frequently, and others. Many school and district communications are translated into the variety of languages spoken by students and parents. The district has also supported an organization that hires local people as community workers to help connect inner-city schools with parents. The district budget figures show that several million dollars — perhaps as much as 5 percent of its total operating budget — are provided in additional support to inner-city schools.

Despite these measures, people in the district are well aware that problems of poverty are continuing, if not increasing, leading to some tension between what is being done and what might be needed. The district is facing severe budget pressures due to restricted provincial funding. Many of the anti-poverty programs have been raised as possible areas to cut in order to protect what are considered to be more basic school programs.

We have an inner-city superintendent and a number of inner-city schools which primarily get their designation from poverty as poverty manifests itself as unemployment data, or welfare data … We have extra funding for those schools … There are nutrition programs and all sorts of other supports. Is this a bottomless pit? Probably. Is this a pit where you shouldn’t be throwing any dollars? No. What’s the appropriate amount of dollars to spend? How much change have you got in your pocket? Spend everything you can to try to give those kids a break … I think we need to do all we can to give them at least a fair break and a decent start. I know of no other way to do that other than through extra resources … The resources are a dilemma, there never are enough in any system. You try to strike a balance and I think what we’ve done is quite reasonable. Out of [our] budget we spend in the area of [4 to 5%] on extra support.

Only in the urban district did one or two respondents say that schools need to reconceptualize their role so that dealing with issues of poverty is integral to what the school does.

Many of the people working in inner-city schools see themselves not just as educators but also involved in social change for children and communities. They are not just looking at what goes on in the classroom from an academic point of view, but looking at a broader scenario and putting programs such as conflict resolution into place to deal with issues that perhaps other districts might say are not within the purview of the school … I think they see change within the district a bit differently than other districts do.

One principal in the urban district has taken a strong community economic development approach in her school. The school has made deliberate efforts to put local people on its payroll and to support local economic enterprises, such as their connection with a community food co-op and with a neighbourhood parent centre that creates various employment projects. Stronger relationships are being built with the community, employment is generated and money is kept in the community, and parenting skills are strengthened. Students are learning academic skills but also working for the benefit of their neighbourhood. However, this example remains an exception dependent largely on one person’s initiative; the district response to high poverty levels continues to focus on additional resources and extra programs.

Aboriginal District

Unlike other districts, there is no debate among the board of the Aboriginal district as to whether dealing with poverty is an issue within their mandate. The school community is not separated from the general community, so the problems of the latter are always seen as issues for the former. The district has implemented a number of programs, chiefly around the provision of food and clothing, to try to remedy some of the effects of poverty in the community.
We are very much aware that there is child poverty here. [We] have initiated a nutritious snack program because some of the students come to school without breakfast. At Christmas time last year, instead of giving the kids from Nursery to Grade 6 toys and little trinkets, we gave them scarves, tunics, and gloves ... We did this because we noticed that a lot of the kids have nothing to cover their heads, and their fingers are cold in the winter. We also extended our incentive program. Now all students from Grades 7 to 12 are included in the program ... If you attended 20 days of school you got 40 dollars, if you missed one day, it was 5 dollars less unless you had a good reason ... I found out we were losing kids in Grade 7 with regard to attendance and dropout ... We introduced the program to help families that have little or no income.

In this community the school board is and sees itself as a major economic factor through its employment of residents, its sponsorship of students into postsecondary programs, and its purchase of services. In addition to sponsoring people into a teacher-training program in the community, the school also hires local people as teacher aides, bus drivers, maintenance workers, and secretaries. All of these activities are regarded by the school-board members not simply as things to be done as efficiently as possible, but as ways in which the school contributes to the overall welfare of the community. In no other district did we find this same sense of the school system itself as a generator of economic activity for the local community.

At the same time, poverty did not come through in our discussions as a major theme in the work of the Aboriginal district. Perhaps because poverty is so widespread in this community, it is taken for granted. We found more focus on creating a system of education, for all their students, that is of equal quality to that of the white society. Particularly important in doing so is the movement of authority, including control over education, from the federal government to the Band. Taken as a whole, the set of policy and program responses in the Aboriginal district is still largely organized around a deficit model in which the school will provide extra services for poor children, but the major elements of schooling do not change.

**Barriers to Action**

Our survey data revealed that many educators see the current set of responses to poverty as generally adequate. When asked about issues of technology and labour market change, many people identified strategies that they felt would be effective, but which they were not using. However, in regard to poverty, there were few such suggestions; our respondents in most districts did not see a disjuncture between what they might do and what they were presently doing.

Maynes (1993), in studying the educational response to poverty in Edmonton, suggests three reasons why school districts have not been more active on the issue. First, educators see poverty as outside the mandate of the schools. As has been noted, many of our colleagues shared this view. Even in districts that are trying to address issues of poverty, many respondents do so only because no other agency seems willing to do so and they cannot avoid its impact on their students. Only a few of our respondents spoke with a sense of advocacy and commitment about the need for schools to work on issues of poverty.

A second factor noted by Maynes is the lack of a sense of strategy as to how to address poverty. The administrators and trustees he interviewed could not identify a set of policies and practices that would constitute the basis for addressing poverty issues in schools. This view, too, surfaced in our interviews, even in the urban district which is devoting substantial resources to the problem. Many educators do not see how the schools can tackle issues of family income, unemployment, or poor housing. Among survey respondents, 70 percent agreed at least partly
with the statement that schools were unlikely to be successful in ameliorating the effects of poverty. Mandate is relevant here, too, of course. School districts clearly see their primary responsibility in terms of traditional teaching and learning functions. They believe they know how to do these things, but do not know how to tackle wider social issues.

Finally, Maynes cited the lack of organized political pressure on school districts as a reason for less attention to poverty. Our review of school district documents found that boards and administrators did devote time to issues that were placed on their agenda by external groups, and that there were few if any such groups lobbying around poverty. The exception is in the urban district where several advisory councils do raise issues connected with poverty on a regular basis.

We would add to Maynes’ list the issue of resources. Resources play a critical role in determining the fate of every issue facing school districts, especially when budgets are steadily diminishing. One’s view of available resources depends, of course, on one’s sense of priorities, but the reality is that new initiatives or directions may be particularly difficult given shrinking resources. In the urban and suburban districts budget pressures were cited by several respondents as a key barrier to stronger action on poverty.

Overall it is clear that poverty is simply a lower priority for school districts than are many other issues. We asked survey respondents to rate the importance of six barriers to more action on the issues of poverty, technology, and changes in work. The barriers were: not a major concern in our district; not a responsibility of schools; unlikely to be successful in doing something; do not have enough resources; other issues more pressing; and provincial government support lacking. On all six items, respondents rated the barriers in regard to poverty as being more significant than for the other two issues. Simply put, poverty is seen as less important as well as more difficult.

Possibilities for Action

It is vital to remember at the outset of this discussion that schools are not responsible for the problems of poverty and cannot be expected to solve these problems. It is unreasonable to expect schools with high concentrations of poverty to produce the same kinds of outcomes as schools with more advantaged students (Thrupp 1999).

At the same time, schools cannot avoid issues of poverty just because these issues affect so dramatically their ability to help students. And to say we cannot do everything does not mean that we can or should do nothing. Our understanding of poverty in schooling and how to address it has improved significantly in recent years. We do know that a concerted educational response to poverty will require significant changes in how schools function.

A growing research literature points to a wider set of strategies that schools could use. One important approach is to change the way that high poverty schools approach instruction, so as to ensure that disadvantaged students receive as challenging a level of instruction as other students (Knapp, Turnbull and Shields 1991). Although it seems obvious, this strategy is not widely accepted. In fact, the evidence is that students in high poverty schools typically receive instruction that is less interesting and less challenging (Connell 1994; Haberman 1991; Thrupp 1999). The required change would mean moving away from pull-out remedial programs and curricula with lower expectations, such as non-academic tracks in secondary schools. Several whole-school instructional approaches or programs now have empirical support in terms of effectiveness in high poverty schools (Herman and Stringfield 1995; Slavin and Fashola 1998). The Australian Disadvantaged Schools Program (Connell, White and Johnston 1991) provided a strong approach to meeting issues of poverty in many schools over a number of years.

However, a response to poverty in schools cannot be limited to changes in instruction or curriculum,
important as these may be. This strategy assumes that the school cannot stand apart from the community, and must work closely with parents and others to ensure not only that schools are good places for young people, but that the school contributes to the overall economic and social welfare of the community. It is clear that poverty is not just an individual issue. Thrupp (1999) shows clearly how high-poverty schools are quite different places from middle-class schools, and will require institutional or community, rather than individual strategies if there is to be any chance of progress. Simply put, schools in high poverty communities must work far more closely with parents and the broader community (Nettles 1991; Comer 1995), not only on academic issues but on social and economic questions as well.

One important element is expanded provision for early childhood education. The value of early intervention is now widely recognized. The oft-cited figure of a 7:1 benefit-cost ratio for pre-school education is shaky, since it rests entirely on a single, small study. However, a much larger body of evidence does indicate that working with students and families as early as possible has positive effects on long-term outcomes (Barnett and Escobar 1987; Karweit 1989; Slavin et al. 1994). The federal government and several provinces have recognized this evidence in their health and social services systems by developing or expanding programs that work with high-risk pregnant women or families with young children.

Models of community economic and social development provide another promising avenue for high poverty schools to explore (Hunter, in press). Schools would need to see themselves as having a role beyond delivering the curriculum; a role that extends into helping the community create employment and strengthen its social systems. This strategy is especially important and promising in First Nations and other Aboriginal communities, where poverty levels are high and inextricably connected to the overall development of the community.

All of these strategies depend in the first instance on seeing poverty and its consequences as a fundamental educational problem that requires sustained and careful attention. Current efforts along these lines are usually short-term programs relying on committed individuals and targeted funding. Instead, school systems will have to build these strategies into their base operations. The issue is quite similar to the debate in health care over prevention. We know that in many cases treatment approaches are more expensive and less effective than prevention efforts. The challenge is to find ways of reshaping institutions and reallocating resources from current activities to others that would yield better returns.

At the same time, effective action will depend on resources being available. There is good reason to think that high poverty schools would need additional resources simply to provide a reasonable level of instruction given the disadvantages their students begin with (Connell 1994; Natriello 1990; Thrupp 1999). It is also necessary to extend the work of high poverty schools beyond the work of other schools, and this will require additional resources. There is much debate over the impact of additional spending on educational achievement, but virtually no debate over the requirement for additional resources, if well used, in schools where need levels are high (Odden and Clune 1998). An evaluated investment in better education for those most at risk, in the broad sense in which “better education” has been defined here, seems self-evidently desirable.

**CONCLUSION**

Economic deprivation has profound impacts on educational outcomes, even though this relationship is very difficult to change and not all educators or policymakers fully recognize it. The impacts of poverty are very visible in many schools, and change the whole nature of some schools. Poverty marginalizes or excludes large numbers of students. Problems of unemployment, crime, and disease are
clearly linked to poverty among children. Schools are not responsible for, and cannot be expected to solve problems of poverty, which are firmly rooted in the more general social and economic structures of our society. At the same time, more could and should be done around this issue because its effects are so profound.

The general issue of child poverty has recently resurfaced on the political agenda in Canada, with initiatives by the federal government to provide assistance primarily through tax credits. Policy research in health has also identified poverty as a critical issue, and has suggested that schools should play a much more important role (see papers in National Forum on Health 1998). The development of databases such as NLSCY has provided, for the first time, good longitudinal data on income, family structure, and educational attainment. The Canadian Teachers’ Federation and the Canadian School Boards Association have both been trying to raise awareness around the issue. But these remain minor influences on education policy and practice.

The general climate in education policy is increasingly focused on achievement and standards related to economic goals, and is largely hostile to equity issues (Levin 1997). The result is that schools cannot and do not give poverty issues the attention they deserve. Given financial and other political pressures on schools, willingness to try to tackle problems related to poverty is limited.

We need in relation to poverty the same kind of effort given to the introduction of new curricula or the expansion of technology in schools. The suggestions made earlier — to focus attention on improved pedagogy and to look at an expanded role for schools with much stronger ties with parents and communities — are a good point of departure. Even within the current policy climate, much could be done. Resources now allocated to low-value activities such as individual remediation could be used to support new initiatives. Connections could be made to emerging work in health around strategies to strengthen communities. Stronger ties could be built with Aboriginal communities. Promising instructional models could be piloted and evaluated in Canadian schools. Given some support and encouragement from governments, some modest additional resources, and a stronger connection to research and to policy in other fields, schools could, even with all the limitations, be more successful.

NOTES

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Benjamin Levin is Deputy Minister of Education and Training, Province of Manitoba.

J. Anthony Riffel is Professor Emeritus of Educational Administration at the University of Manitoba, Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada R3T 2N2.

1 Countries vary in their definition of low family income. For example, the “qualifying level” of income for the official definition of poverty in the United States is significantly lower than in Canada. However, the definitions do not matter to the substance of the argument — that low income, however defined, is strongly correlated with poor life outcomes and underplayed as an education policy issue.

2 The province is not identified in order to protect the identity of the school districts.

3 The survey received a response rate of 50 percent; 49 surveys were returned out of the 100 mailed (50 districts, 2 surveys to each district). However, more than 80 percent of districts responded to the survey either through their superintendent or board chair, and the districts that did respond were broadly representative of districts in the province as a whole.
REFERENCES


