



Child poverty in our schools

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Child poverty affects children and, of course, families, but what is often an afterthought is poverty's profound impact on Ohio schools. Being poor can hinder children's school readiness as well as their ability to learn and achieve at their best level. It also can inhibit the ability of teachers and administrators to build relationships

and effectively educate all children. Understanding the extent of child poverty in Ohio and how it specifically touches classrooms is crucial to ensuring our children's educational needs are best served.

How many Ohio children are poor?

Ohio children have been deeply affected by the economic downturn of recent years and continue to feel its harsh effects, despite signs the economy is improving. The number of children in Ohio who are poor has been growing at a consistent and alarming rate. In 2011, nearly one-quarter (24%) of Ohio's children were considered poor, compared to just 15% of children in 2001. During that same decade, child poverty increased in all of Ohio's 88 counties — with the majority seeing increases of at least 50%. In seven counties (Champaign, Coshocton, Crawford, Defiance, Greene, Miami and Medina), the child poverty rate increased 90% or more.

In its annual Ohio's KIDS COUNT Data Book (<http://links.ohioschoolboards.org/56002>), the Children's Defense Fund-Ohio found that child poverty continues to be highest in Appalachian and metropolitan areas. However, poverty rates in the suburbs also are on the rise. A 2013 Brookings Institution study found that the state's poverty rate increased more in the suburbs from 2000 to 2011 than within the seven largest cities in Ohio (Akron, Columbus, Cincinnati, Cleveland, Dayton, Toledo and Youngstown). Ohio's child poverty rate is worse than the average for the rest of the country. Since 2006, the percent of children in Ohio who are poor has outpaced the national rate; only 16 states had higher rates of child poverty than Ohio.

Because Ohio's youngest children are disproportionately raised in poor families, Ohio's high child poverty rate will sustain. More than 29% of Ohio children ages 5 and below are poor. The percentage of children considered poor in this age group increased 68% from 2001-2011, compared to an increase of 61% in the overall child poverty rate in Ohio. This suggests that the children who enter Ohio classrooms



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in the next five years may be even more likely to be poor than current students.

What does it mean to say a family is poor?

Poverty is defined by the federal government for a family of four as a household income at or below \$23,550. This is well below Ohio's median household income of \$45,803 and also below most estimates of what qualifies as a "living wage" in Ohio counties — the amount of money a family needs to earn to meet its basic needs without assistance.

Children from low-income families often qualify for public benefits such as the federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (also called SNAP, or food stamps); Medicaid; and the National School Lunch Program, better known as free or reduced-price lunch. Along with growing child poverty, participation in state and federal assistance programs has generally been increasing.

For example, 29% of Ohio children participated in the National School Lunch Program in 2001, but by 2011 the number rose to 45.3%. Participation in free or reduced-price lunch in Ohio's 32 Appalachian counties currently averages 52%, with Guernsey, Meigs, Scioto and Vinton counties exceeding 60% of students. The suburban poverty study mentioned earlier also found that the rate increase in students receiving free or reduced-price lunch has been higher in the suburbs than within their respective cities.

Poverty leaving our children behind

Poor children begin school at a disadvantage and the disparities in their readiness and success rates can grow worse if schools are not prepared to address them early. A 2012 Brookings Institution report showed that fewer than half (48%) of poor children were ready for school at age 5, while 75% of children from moderate- and high-income families were ready (a 27-point gap). There are many factors that lead to this disparity in school readiness, most of which are outside of schools' control — parent education levels and access to health care, among others. But there are concrete things schools and communities can do to effectively educate poor children.

First, expand preschool programs and make contact with parents of young children in your community to facilitate early and accurate referrals to high-quality preschool programs. Studies show that expanding preschool programs for 4-year-olds can improve school readiness by age 5 more than any other intervention or program. While the 2014-15 state budget provides an additional \$30 million for high-quality early childhood education programs, which will serve thousands of additional poor children, this is just a start and more funding is needed to improve our educational outcomes.

Second, it is imperative educators and administrators stay

current on child brain development research. The newest studies show the detrimental effect of stress and trauma on children's ability to learn and build positive relationships throughout their lives. A recent study at New York University showed significant connections between stress in the lives of poor children and the early achievement gaps experienced by children from low-income households. Integrating trauma-informed practices into school interactions, classroom management and discipline systems can begin to repair some of the harm caused by stress and trauma. These practices also help children learn important communication and academic skills that will continue to benefit them throughout their educational careers.

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Finally, school board members, parents, educators and community members can all work together to address communitywide problems that contribute to the gap in school readiness for low-income children. Local school readiness projects have successfully reduced disparities in communities across the country. The Chicago School Readiness Project, for example, is an emotionally and behaviorally focused classroom intervention that provides extensive teacher training on appropriately managing student behavior, and connects schools and educators with existing community resources.

Addressing poverty benefits all children

Poverty is a reality for too many children in Ohio. Schools alone cannot prevent or address every factor that contributes to Ohio's high child poverty rates. School and community leaders can, however, lead the way in promoting and implementing proven methods to better serve the needs of children who grow up in low-income families. These efforts benefit all children, because schools that serve poor students will perform better and develop healthier, more respectful climates that allow all children to develop their skills to the best of their abilities. ⁿ

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