

Majority of U.S. public school students are in poverty

by <http://www.dailykos.com/user/teacherken> SAT JAN 17, 2015 AT 06:33 AM PST

For the first time in at least 50 years, a majority of U.S. public school students come from low-income families, according to a new analysis of 2013 federal data, a statistic that has profound implications for the nation.

That is the opening paragraph of this Washington Post story reporting on a new report by the Southern Education Foundation which found 51% of our nation's school children in 2013 were from low-income families.

Allow me to offer three early paragraphs from that report:

In 40 of the 50 states, low income students comprised no less than 40 percent of all public schoolchildren. In 21 states, children eligible for free or reduced-price lunches were a majority of the students in 2013.

Most of the states with a majority of low income students are found in the South and the West. Thirteen of the 21 states with a majority of low income students in 2013 were located in the South, and six of the other 21 states were in the West.

Mississippi led the nation with the highest rate: 71 percent, almost three out of every four public school children in Mississippi, were low-income. The nation's second highest rate was found in New Mexico, where 68 percent of all public school students were low income in 2013.

This SHOULD have major implications for policies on education at both the national and state levels.

Please keep reading.

The real educational issue in the United States is not and never has been poor quality of teachers, it has been the concentration of poverty.

I will remind people of some data from recent international comparisons.

Finland, the highest scoring nation in recent years, has less than 4% of its children in poverty.

Even using somewhat out of date statistics from OECD, which sponsors the PISA tests used to bash US schools in comparison with international competitors, US schools with less than 25% of their children in poverty perform as well as an nation, and those with 10% or less of their children in poverty outperform Finland.

Despite the existence of social welfare programs in this country, we still have a problem of concentration of poverty. Yes we now offer free lunch and in some (but not enough) cases free breakfasts to children from poverty. But that does not feed them on the weekend, or if school is closed because of weather.

They are often food insecure.

They may be homeless, or not that far from being homeless.

Their families lack consistent sources of money.

Even if they have access to health insurance through Medicaid or SCHIP, it often does not cover vision, hearing or dental.

They live in neighborhoods where violence may may life itself insecure.

I am going to push fair use by quoting five consecutive paragraphs from the POST story to provide a sense of this. I understand this may be anecdotal, and the plural of anecdote is not data. And yet, as any teacher who has taught students in high poverty situations, as I did briefly before my wife was diagnosed with cancer, has experienced what you will encounter in these five paragraphs:

“When they first come in my door in the morning, the first thing I do is an inventory of immediate needs: Did you eat? Are you clean? A big part of my job is making them feel safe,” said Sonya Romero-Smith, a veteran teacher at Lew Wallace Elementary School in Albuquerque. Fourteen of her 18 kindergartners are eligible for free lunches.

She helps them clean up with bathroom wipes and toothbrushes, and she stocks a drawer with clean socks, underwear, pants and shoes.

Romero-Smith, 40, who has been a teacher for 19 years, became a foster mother in November to two girls, sisters who attend her school. They had been homeless, their father living on the streets and their mother in jail, she said. When she brought the girls home, she was shocked by the disarray of their young lives.

“Getting rid of bedbugs, that took us a while. Night terrors, that took a little while. Hoarding food, flushing a toilet and washing hands, it took us a little while,” she said. “You spend some time with little ones like this and it’s gut wrenching. .??. These kids aren’t thinking, ‘Am I going to take a test today?’ They’re thinking, ‘Am I going to be okay?’ ”

The job of teacher has expanded to “counselor, therapist, doctor, parent, attorney,” she said.

If you are in a community with high levels of poverty, you are likely in a community that lacks the tax base to provide decent public education, even were the students not already disadvantaged in their basic living situations.

The federal involvement in education beginning with the first Elementary and Secondary Education Act under Lyndon Johnson, who as a young man had taught children in schools populated by the disadvantaged, had as a major goal addressing the needs of such children.

Somewhere along the way too many in this nation seem to have lost their souls when it comes to addressing those in poverty.

When more than half of our school children are from low-income settings, and far too many from situations of severe poverty, how can they - the children - be responsible for that? Where is our societal responsibility not to condemn them to a lifetime of poverty?

How is it that we have allowed a small percentage to get disgustingly, even obscenely wealthy, without acknowledging and addressing the increasing percentage of our population whose economic situations continue to worsen.

Those of us who teach do all we can to ameliorate the difficulties with which children arrive in our classrooms.

But what happens outside school has a profound effect on what we can do in school.

And oh by the way - we know these children will score lower on the kinds of tests we are using to beat up on public education. Those of us who teach know that does not mean they cannot learn. But it is often precisely these children who need the enrichment of music and art and poetry and drama and access to the things taken for granted by kids of middle class settings and up that our impoverished children can only access through school - that is, until we cut out those "frills" in order to raise scores on tests that really do not indicate a higher level of learning.

51% of our school children are low income.

That means we are not a middle class society any more.

It is also an example of American "exceptionalism" that should be a matter of concern.

No, that is not strong enough.

It is an example of a national shame.

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Kenneth J. Bernstein is proudly 68 years young, and returned to the classroom fulltime in August. He remains a Quaker liberal. His main focus now is the health of Leaves on the Current, his beloved spouse and closest friend.