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Five Things Most People Don't Know About Poverty & Student Achievement

By [Peter DeWitt](#) on October 13, 2013 9:06 AM

Today's guest post is written by [Eric Jensen](#), the author of just-released *Engaging Students with Poverty in Mind* (ASCD). He's written 28 books on learning and teaching and consults with schools to boost student achievement. Subscribe to his free monthly newsletter on teaching and learning at www.jensenlearning.com.

Stop Looking to the Government for Help. It's been 50 years since the start of the "War on Poverty" and enactment of 1965 ESEA legislative funding (Title I- VII programs). Today, the U.S. Senate Budget Committee says we have 83 overlapping government welfare programs that together represent \$1.03 trillion in fiscal spending by federal and state agencies (this year alone), based on data from the Congressional Research Service (CRS). We now have 22% of all school age kids (12 million) from poverty in K-12 schools. The government's approach, over 50 years, isn't working.

The Real Causes of Poverty. Since 1970, the dollar has lost 80% of its purchasing power. Those in lower or middle class, on a fixed income, lose the most. The inflation is a result of government debt and printing money. While it's true that depressed job markets have some correlations with greater poverty, the greatest factors are rarely talked about:

- a) **marriage rates** have dropped in half in the last 50 years; yet cohabitating married couples, who have children after age 21, reduce their chances of poverty to under 5%.
- b) **high school graduation** rates for poor and minority students are still a coin flip or worse in most of the nation's 50 largest cities (including Detroit at 25%, Indianapolis at 30% and Cleveland at 34%). No diploma means job chances go down.
- c) **"job ready" life skills**; schools rarely prepare kids for life in the real world (relationship skills, effort-building, executive function skills, positive attitudes and money/finance skills). If you're educated, with good life skills and married, your odds of being poor are under 2%.

Teacher's Roles Have Changed Dramatically. Many teachers work long hours at school. Some work on weekends. For most, but not all, effort is not an issue. What is an issue that many still work with the "mental model" of what teaching used to be 50 years ago. We often see the same "stand and deliver" and the same "apple-sorting" of kids, with desks in a line with reduced movement, emotional support and brain-building.

What's different? Almost everything; there's compliance paperwork, more collaboration, more focus on test scores and far more accountability. The list could go on. Kids don't look to teachers for knowledge anymore; Google can provide knowledge. Teachers have tough new choices to make. They either must "upgrade" their teaching every year, or fall further behind. This shift is not easy to make and many teachers struggle with it.

Teachers Affect the National Rate of Poverty. Is there a correlation between student achievement and the rate of poverty in the U.S.? Yes; nationally over 7,000 students a day (1.2 million/yr.) get so fed up, they drop out. Each dropout costs our economy three quarters a million dollars over his or her lifetime.

1. Teachers often come into the profession as a chance to "make a difference." But making a difference can go both ways. If students achieve well, the difference is positive. If students struggle, our nation struggles. If teachers raised student achievement by 10%, the U.S. schools would not only rank among the top 5 in the world, it would also raise gross domestic product by 1% a year. Over the next two generations, this would boost the economy by 112 trillion (not a typo). The government has tried for 50 years and failed; but educators can erase poverty in our own lifetime.
2. Here's what we do know, as of today: a) the classroom teacher is still the single most significant contributor to student achievement; the effect is greater than that of parents, peers, schools or poverty, b) the effectiveness of classroom teachers varies dramatically, especially within schools, c) research shows teachers in the top 20%, based on year-on-year progress with their students, will completely erase the academic effects of poverty in five years, d) most teachers simply don't know how to be a high-performer and others have lost hope and don't try any more.

Results of a Recent Study. We live in an era of unprecedented academic and neuroscientific research. I just finished doing a study on twelve high

poverty schools from three time zones and five states. Every one of these schools had 75% or more students from poverty. But, half of them were high-flyers, with school achievement scores in the top 25% of their state. The other half of the schools struggled; their scores were in the bottom 25% of their state. The demographics were identical. The two cohorts of schools (low and high performers) also shared many of the same values. When I offered statements such as, "I believe in my kids," both school staffs said, "I strongly agree." So, what was different?

It's not poverty that makes the difference; it was the teachers. The difference was that the high-performing teachers actually "walked the walk." First, the classroom and school climate was MUCH better at the high-performers. Secondly, the teachers at the high-performing schools didn't complain about kids not "being smart" or being unmotivated. They made it a priority and built engagement, learning, thinking and memory skills every day. In short, they didn't make excuses; they just rolled up their sleeves and built better student brains. I show you how they did it in my new book on poverty, but first a preview.

What Have We Learned? Here is what we have learned (so far) to boost student achievement in high-poverty schools. The list is NOT in any order at all.

- Relationships still matter, and they matter a lot. Strong relationships and family connections do help.
- High expectations are not enough. Help students set crazy high goals, and then actively point out to them how their daily actions connect to their long-term goals.
- The most important cognitive skills to build are:

1) reasoning, 2) working memory, and 3) vocabulary usage.

- Build academic optimism so that kids hear and believe every day that they can and will succeed. Zero doubt equals better effort.
- Increase feedback on the learning and zero it in on the specifics of effort used, strategies applied or attitude engaged.
- If you don't like the student's attitude, change it. Use hope building and the growth mindset every day, all day.
- Engage like crazy using more social collaboration, energizers, participation and affirmations. When kids feel liked, have goals and energized, they work harder.
- Finally, having a positive attitude or opinion is useless; IF you fail to act. IF and HOW you act on it is... priceless. Now, go make a miracle happen today.

New: [Study guide](#) to engage students living in poverty.

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