

Poverty Impacts Education

September 2014

As I reflect on my 26 years in education, I am reminded of how things have changed in our schools and community. Many of the changes have been good, but some have not been so good. Among the greatest changes in Whitfield County is the rise of poverty documented by our percentage of students on free and reduced lunch.

In 2000, we had 39 percent of our students participating in the free and reduced meals program. Last year, the percentage in Whitfield County Schools was up to 71.64 percent, which exceeded the state average of 62.16 percent. The federal summer feeding program is one indication of the rising poverty rate. Our cafeteria workers served 287,926 meals to hungry children throughout our county at 35 locations during June and July, an increase of nearly 60,000 meals over the previous summer.

A rising poverty rate is not unique to Whitfield County. Georgia now has the 6th highest childhood poverty rate in the nation and has reached such heights that some are calling it an epidemic. Educators know poverty brings additional challenges to educating our children.

Children of poverty need special support and intervention in order to be reading on grade level by 3rd grade. The Archway Partnership and Readers to Leaders organizations have helped our community come together to support these children. In addition to the nutritious food children received this summer, volunteers led educational activities and provided books for them at meal sites. The Whitfield County community continues to seek support for these children and has joined surrounding counties to apply for a Birth to Five grant. If awarded, this funding will enable us to provide additional support for area children before they begin school.

Our teachers know children cannot learn when they are hungry, and many of their students show up at school hungry every day. To help with this problem, our system participates in a federal food program to provide free breakfast to all elementary students. The hunger of poverty is often easier to manage than poverty's effect on the social and emotional aspects of a child's development.

Like everything else in life, the cost of educating a child has increased through the years. The expenditure per student has risen from \$1,650 in 1981 to \$7,875 last year. Although this is a big increase, it is one of the lowest expenditures per student in the state. At a time when the needs of our children are higher than ever before, required budget cuts have put us 140th out of Georgia's 180 public school systems in per pupil spending.

Children of poverty often come to school lacking the experiences, adequate nutrition, and medical care needed in order for them to learn at optimum levels. These children often begin school at a disadvantage, academically trailing their more affluent classmates. A lot of this is due to a lack of experiences such as vacation trips. They also may not have access to books and other educational materials. Besides a lack of resources, they sometimes bring a set of characteristics very different from those of a teacher raised in a more affluent middle-class family. These children are often disorganized, frequently lose papers, don't have requested parent signatures, don't do homework, and may struggle to monitor their own behavior. The teacher must understand that most students want to do what is expected, and sometimes they just need help understanding those expectations.

All students need support, and it is important that teachers build relationships and establish schedules to help all children succeed, but children of poverty need some extra support. Without strong interventions, many will grow up and remain in poverty because they don't know there is an alternative. School is the best resource to help these students break the cycle of poverty. While schools provide students with skills to earn a decent income, teachers, administrators and staff must also be good role models who provide emotional support to help their students develop into productive citizens.

We are fortunate to live in such a caring community. If you have never lived in another place, I dare say that you don't realize what a great community we have in Whitfield County. I have worked in three different counties, and none have provided the support for children that I find in Whitfield County. Our schools regularly have volunteers who do everything from listening to children read, to painting, to yard work, to sending sacks of food home on Friday afternoons so children will not go hungry over the weekend. The Whitfield County community has a "we can" attitude and always rises to support the many needs of our children. We may never be able to totally wipe out poverty, but working together we can change poverty's effect on our children's futures.