

The Impact Of Poverty Upon Schools

Compiled By the WCPSS Evaluation and Research Department

What do researchers mean when they talk about poverty and what difference does poverty really make? They are usually talking about two types of poverty: the poverty level of individual students, and a measure of the poverty level within a school. For an **individual student**, the most common definition is whether or not that student is eligible to receive free or reduced-price lunch. For **schools**, the definition is usually the percentage of students eligible to receive free or reduced-price lunch.

A large body of research shows that an individual student who is eligible for free or reduced price lunch is at risk for academic failure. The risk factors for individual students can be ameliorated by extra support and academic assistance to ensure academic success. A high concentration of low-income students in a school, however, appears to have negative effects on students, teachers, and the school, and these effects extend beyond the effect of the individual students' economic condition. For example, researchers have reported that :

- "In schools with above average poverty rates, the poverty level of the school influences the scores of all children, including those from more advantaged families. Low-income students in high-poverty schools are doubly at risk..." (U.S. Department of Education, 1996). (Also see Kennedy, Jung, and Orland, 1996)
- Low-income students in low poverty schools score better than low income students in high poverty schools. (U.S. Department of Education, 1996)
- Students' achievement showed sharp declines when the school poverty concentration rose above 40%. (Lippman, Burns, and McArthur, 1996)

A similar study looked at some of the negative effects of poverty and found that:

- Achievement of average students in high-poverty schools is lower than achievement of Title I students in low-poverty schools. (Puma, Jones, Rock, & Fernandez, 1993)

In a review of literature on the impact of magnet schools, the authors concluded that:

- Low-income students achieve better educational results in classrooms where the majority of students are economically advantaged. (Yu and Taylor, eds., 1997)

One factor which may lead to higher student achievement for both low-income and higher-income students in economically advantaged schools is the availability of skilled teachers. A 1996 analysis of data from the Schools and Staffing Survey conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) showed that when schools with more than 40% of students receiving free or reduced price lunches are compared to lower poverty schools:

- The percentage of principals who reported difficulty hiring teachers increased dramatically in high-poverty schools.
- The percentage of teachers who reported that teacher absenteeism was a problem in their school increased to higher-than-expected levels in high poverty schools.
- High-poverty schools had the highest percentage of teachers with 3 years or less teaching experience. (Lippman, 1996)

Other NCES data show that teachers in poorer schools are less likely to have majored or minored in the subject they teach and schools serving larger percentages of low-income students have higher numbers of teachers who are teaching out of field. (Whitmire, 1997)

Figure 1: Principals Reporting Difficulty Hiring Teachers

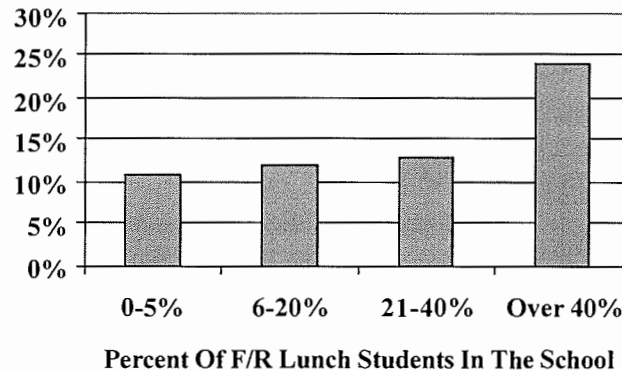
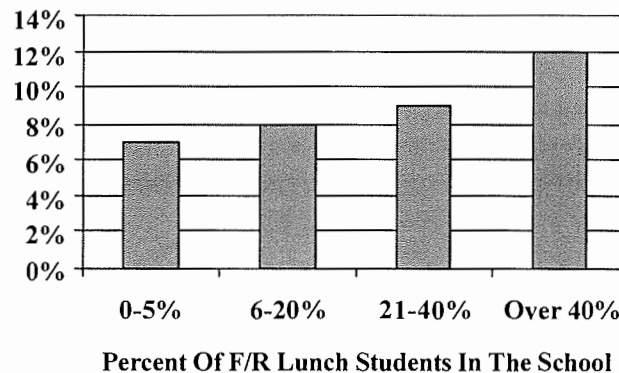


Figure 2: Percent of Teachers With 3 Years Or Less Experience



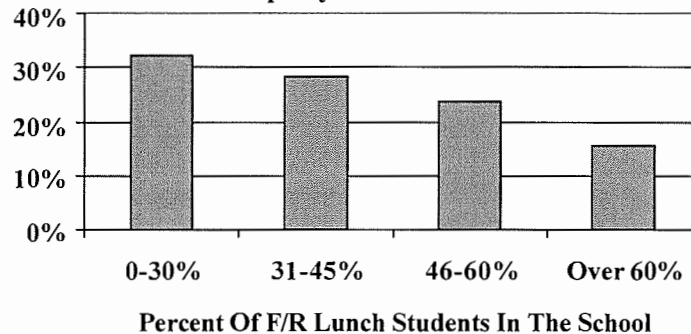
When poverty is concentrated in a school, both low-income and higher-income students are impacted by the instructional climate in the school. Data from the National Education Longitudinal Study conducted by NCES showed that:

- The percentage of 8th-grade teachers who reported spending more than one-fifth of their time on classroom discipline increased sharply from 12% in low poverty schools to more than 21% when the concentration of students in the school living in poverty reached over forty percent. (Lipmann, 1996)

Poverty can impact a school in indirect ways. In North Carolina, schools receive financial incentive awards averaging \$1400 per teacher if students show “exemplary” growth on state tests. A school’s ability to produce exemplary growth may be linked to the concentration of poverty in the school. An analysis of results from the first year of the North Carolina ABC Accountability Program yielded the following conclusion:

- “Having an above average proportion of free and reduced lunch students increases the likelihood of a school not meeting growth [targets for student achievement established by state formulas] by 27%” (Johnson & Ward, 1998).

Figure 3: Percent of NC Schools Achieving Exemplary Growth In 1996-97



Poverty, and the low achievement scores strongly associated with poverty, can be concentrated in schools (through neighborhood assignment) and in classes (through student scheduling). Extensive research on “tracking”, a practice which often results in the assignment of homogeneous groups of students to classes, has found that:

- “In fact, lower scoring students achieve at even slower rates in homogeneous classes. These same students, when placed in heterogeneous classes, perform at higher levels...” (Wheelock, 1994).
- The slow pace of instruction and lower skill level so often used in lower-ability classes hinder student motivation and achievement. However, students in high ability classes have been found to achieve at comparable rates when placed in heterogeneous classes. (French and Rothman, 1990)

The homogeneity caused by tracking students into particular class sections can occur schoolwide when school assignments allow concentrations of poor students to accumulate in selected schools. In an examination of the Norfolk, Virginia school district’s change from a desegregation plan to neighborhood schools in 1986, Gary Orfield noted that “The implementation caused severe concentrations of poverty in the segregated schools...After eight years, white enrollment had fallen substantially, parental involvement at all-black neighborhood schools dropped, and racial gaps on test scores were as large or larger than before.” (Orfield, 1996) Problems in Norfolk appeared to Orfield to be largely related to poverty rather than race.

There seems to be strong evidence that encouraging heterogeneous student populations in schools can improve schools’ ability to produce strong student achievement. Students are most likely to be successful when they are in heterogeneous classes in socio-economically diverse schools in which concentration of poverty is kept as low as possible.

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