WHEN POVERTY COMES TO SCHOOL

American Federation of Teachers
Poverty climbs the steps of the school bus in the morning, when a child comes in from the cold with no jacket. Paraprofessionals and school-related personnel (PSRPs) see it again at the end of the day when there is no one to meet that bus—in an unsavory part of town—because parents are busy working too many hours at low wages. We see it at lunch, when children ask for second helpings because they are not getting enough to eat at home.

Teaching assistants see it in children unable to focus on fractions and percentages because they are afraid they’ll have no food over the weekend, when no school meals are available—or because they are sick and there is no money for medical care. It’s on the playground and in the school halls, where custodians sweep around children sitting outside the classroom as punishment for acting out in class, mimicking the negative behaviors they witness in their neighborhoods. And we see it in the school office, where the administrative staff can’t record a student’s permanent address because the child lives at the local homeless shelter.

Besides these heart-wrenching consequences, poverty also affects academic progress, the very heart of a school’s mission. Research shows that the distractions of poverty, including poor nutrition, lack of sleep, and stress, are clearly linked to brain development, working memory, and attentional control.

POVERTY BY THE NUMBERS

According to the National Center for Children in Poverty, one in five children in the United States lives in poverty. Approximately 31 million children are enrolled in the federal free and reduced-price lunch program, indicating that their families needed help providing nutritious food. But schools feel the impact far beyond the cafeteria.

By the time children living in poverty are four years old, they lag 18 months behind what is “normal” cognitive development for their age group. By third grade, their vocabulary is one-third that of their middle-income peers: about 4,000 words to their peers’ 12,000. Poor parents are typically less educated and often too stressed by making ends meet to engage their kids in challenging verbal exchanges.

Children from low-income, poverty-stricken neighborhoods are behind from the start, with less preparation and more risk for developmental delays and learning disabilities.
Because of environmental factors like lead poisoning—which has been related to poor working memory, difficulty linking cause and effect, and health-related issues such as untreated ear infections that limit hearing and asthma triggered by poorly ventilated buildings—attention, reasoning, learning, and memory can be diminished.

**SEEING BEYOND THE NUMBERS**

Sandy Thompson, an administrative assistant at a Title I school and the vice president of the TOTEM Association of Educational Support Personnel, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) local in Anchorage, Alaska, describes what poverty looks like at Creekside Park Elementary School: A child as young as seven wakes up alone, because her single mother has already gone to work at one of her several jobs. The girl must get out of bed on time, wash herself, get dressed, remember her homework, and walk nearly a mile to school—maybe with an older child, maybe not. If she arrives at school early enough, she’ll get breakfast; if not, she’ll be hungry until lunch.

“We have those students who are tardy frequently, and a lot of times it is because their parents have worked late into the night,” says Thompson. Kids rely on cell phones as alarm clocks, and often the phones are not charged. “We’ve gone out and purchased alarm clocks and snow pants and winter gear,” says Thompson, noting that yes, even in Alaska, some children come to school without a winter coat. School employees sponsor a winter gear swap and keep extra boots, gloves, snow pants, and coats on hand.

In Syracuse, New York, Syracuse Teachers Association PSRP leader Bernard Washington, who works in the cafeteria, notices the details of poverty: Poor kids keep their heads down, he says. They come to school with their hair uncombed, in pants that are too short and with shoelaces that don’t reach the tops of their shoes. They ask for more food (“I’m really hungry,” they’ll say, and Washington might slip them money for an extra piece of pizza). Last year, one boy regularly stuffed milk and fruit other children left behind into his backpack. Washington learned the child was homeless.

In McDowell County, West Virginia, coal mines are shutting down and there’s not much employment beyond the local grocery store, says Margaret Beavers, who was a prekindergarten instructional assistant there before her recent retirement. Many
parents are drug addicted or imprisoned, and their children come to school dirty and unfed. Beavers was moved by one particularly troubling case: A six-year-old girl came to school with makeup meant to hide bruises from physical abuse. The father was a drug dealer, and his girlfriend, arrested for severely beating the child, later committed suicide. “Some of what these children live through, it’s heartbreaking,” says Beavers. Recently elected to the school board, she hopes to continue to serve them, their teachers, and other support staff.

Just getting to school can be a challenge in rural Harney County, Oregon, where Monica McCanna is a paraprofessional in a life skills class. Some families must drive 10 miles to reach the bus stop, and if the car breaks down, the child may simply skip school. With no free breakfast for the upper grades, one 16-year-old student “is too busy asking, ‘What’s for lunch today, when is lunch, how long is it to lunch?’” to concentrate on his work, says McCanna. Another boy couldn’t participate in gym class because the only shoes he had were donated, were the wrong size, and made blisters on his feet. “I know some people in town who are working four and five jobs just to keep food on the table and the kids in clothes,” she says. That leaves little time to help them with homework.

Other families face exposure to toxins, illnesses, and injuries from unsafe living conditions and play areas; tardiness caused by staying back to get younger siblings to school; and stress over violence in the family or neighborhood (that gang-related murder might have taken place right outside your student’s door). Homelessness presents a host of issues, from sleepless nights and dangerous shelters to keeping it all a secret from schoolmates. In an interview with National Public Radio, a 14-year-old Los Angeles boy living with his mother and three siblings in a station wagon described brushing his teeth at a McDonald’s before heading off to school; his friends wondered why he wore the same shirt every day, and his 9-year-old sister complained that her homework was sloppy because she wrote it on the back of the car seat.

WHAT WE CAN DO

While the statistics may feel overwhelming, addressing poverty is something many AFT PSRPs do every day. In Anchorage, TOTEM holds a food drive every Labor Day; collects soaps and other personal hygiene items at its holiday social; and participates in Graze to Raise, earning money for charities during a 5K walk with donated restaurant
tastings along the way.

In New York, Cincinnati, and Massachusetts, community schools provide crucial services, including tutoring, after-school programming, and school-based health clinics. Vision tests at one New York community school showed that more than 40 percent of the children needed glasses right away, and the school was able to deliver them, free, without parents’ having to take time off work, or children’s having to be pulled from class. Community schools are “a commonsense approach for the common good, and one that I truly believe will reduce the barriers to education,” says Karen Alford, a United Federation of Teachers (UFT) vice president.

Alford heads the UFT’s Community Schools Learning Initiative in New York City, which is modeled after Cincinnati’s success. In Cincinnati, every school is a community school, and services range from psychiatry to dental care, healthcare, food assistance, tutoring, nutrition, mentoring, peer mediation, and vocational guidance for older students. There are groceries for families who need them over the weekend and day care connections for high school girls ready to drop out because they’ve just become young mothers.

THINKING BIG, CHANGING POLICY

Duplicating these sorts of programs and policies could make all the difference for individual families struggling with poverty. But addressing broader policy issues is also essential to bridge the deep economic divide between the haves and the have-nots. We will work to bolster systems that support our most vulnerable families and elect officials who understand the urgency of taking care of this population, not only because it is the humane thing to do, but because it will help us build a country of strong, smart, prosperous people who can take care of themselves and their families and who are able to contribute their talents—and their tax money—to the common good.