

Improving Education for Students with Learning Disabilities Living in Poverty January 2014

By representatives of the National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities*.

Students with learning disabilities struggle to keep pace with academic demands and often feel lost in the classroom. What if these same students are also living in poverty? If addressing the larger problem of child poverty weren't difficult enough, addressing the challenges of low-income children with learning disabilities may seem insurmountable. But there is a way forward, as long as educators, policymakers, and administrators are proactive in recognizing and addressing these issues. The first step is understanding the challenges these students face.

On the surface, poverty may seem to be "merely" a lack of money and resources. For students with learning disabilities however, the conditions associated with poverty can have dire consequences and negatively affect an otherwise positive life trajectory. At a deeper level, the issues surrounding poverty can be complex, sensitive, and overwhelming. Discussions can become so heated, as stakeholders focus on cultural, political, and economic considerations, that it may seem poverty is an impossible problem to solve for children with learning disabilities.

As professionals involved in education, we think otherwise and believe we can make a difference by focusing on the pathways to positive change for students. We must invest our resources in prevention and early intervention supports for students living in poverty who may be at risk for or have a learning disability.

There are many conditions of poverty that pose challenges to educational success for students with learning disabilities. These challenges lead to chronic stress and include inadequate nutrition, limited access to educational and medical resources, and even dangerous living situations. Many students living in poverty face daily uncertainties in their lives, often moving between caretakers, schools, and residences in a short period of time. Educational, medical, and mental health records may not follow these students to their new school in a timely fashion. Despite these circumstances, students with learning disabilities can succeed, especially when educators are aware of these challenges and how they undermine the efforts of students and all who support them.

Pathways to success for students with learning disabilities living in poverty need to be integrated, holistic, and focused on wellness. Communities can mitigate the negative effects of poverty. For example, nonprofit organizations and faith-based centers can provide a rich source of supplemental resources and offer positive role models and mentors for both parents and students. More specifically, some community groups provide books during well baby visits, trips to the library with toddlers, and after-school reading programs for older students that build and reinforce foundational learning and literacy skills. After-school recreational programs also offer much needed creative outlets, time for physical activity, and social interaction in safe environments.

Educators must create positive learning environments by setting reasonable and challenging expectations for all students. Positive, predictable learning environments are essential requirements for students living with both poverty and a learning disability. These students are not only vulnerable to the consequences of a negative learning environment, but may be insecure about whether their basic needs will be consistently met. Students with learning disabilities who live in poverty deserve well-trained educators who can distinguish between the impact of poverty and the impact of a learning disability.

Students experiencing issues related to poverty are at greater risk for being identified incorrectly for special education or not being identified when a true learning disability exists. Consequently, school personnel must be highly qualified in diagnosing the cause of a child's learning difficulty and be empowered to intervene. School personnel need ongoing professional learning opportunities focused on the intersection of poverty and learning disabilities. Dynamic assessment and ongoing student progress monitoring, two components of a sensitive and specific comprehensive evaluation process, are required to plan effectively for the complex issues of students with learning disabilities impacted by poverty.

Schools require professionals who are trained to provide mental health services for students and who can assist teachers in preventing problems and in promoting healthy learning environments. Schools can also establish mentors so that every student experiences a trusting relationship with an adult focused on the student's strengths and successes.

We call for bold actions by educational leaders and policymakers to address the needs of students with learning disabilities living in poverty. School, family, and community collaboration is essential for shining a spotlight on the unique characteristics of these students and providing optimal learning opportunities and outcomes. Just as a learning disability is not a prescription for failure, poverty should never limit a student's aspirations and achievements.

* The authors of this commentary serve as representatives for their respective organizations on the [National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities](#).

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