

The Importance of Making the Well-Being of Children in Poverty a Priority

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Hurricane Katrina exposed to the world the side of America that is often ignored or forgotten—the side of America where people live in poverty and struggle to meet their most basic needs. This article focuses primarily on children in Mississippi and highlights the effect that poverty has on children’s well-being at an early age and future academic success. It also provides evidence for the importance of funding high-quality pre-k programs and parental training to ensure they begin the process of preparing their children for success, not only in Mississippi but in the other states that are leaving their children behind. Finally, with the reauthorization of No Child Left Behind in 2007, recommendations are made for refocusing the premise of the law from accountability and high stakes testing to meeting the needs of all children so they can truly be successful in school.

KEY WORDS: poverty, child well-being, ready to learn, no child left behind, academic achievement.

On August 29, 2005, Hurricane Katrina made land-fall on the coasts of Mississippi and Louisiana. For weeks after the disaster, countries all over the world witnessed not only the effects of the hurricane but also the face of poverty in the richest nation in the world, America. While much of the early news coverage criticized the victims for not heeding the evacuation warnings, the commentators soon realized that many of the victims who were left behind lacked the resources to evacuate. It was evident that planning for a disaster of this magnitude had been neglected even though warnings from experts had been voiced on many occasions.

This incident unfortunately parallels another crisis in our nation. Many of America’s children are being left behind educationally because sufficient

planning to ensure their well-being and development during early childhood has not taken place. Research has made evident the importance of a child’s development during his early years to his well-being and lifelong development (NICHD Early Child Care Research Network, 2003). Poverty is one factor that can hamper a child’s development. Studies have found that children from low-income families are “more likely to suffer from preventable illnesses, fail in school, become teenaged parents, and become involved with the justice system. As a result, these young people frequently reach adulthood without the necessary tools, experiences, and connections to succeed.” (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2005, p. 5). Early childhood education is another factor that affects a child’s development. While, in 2005, state legislatures across the nation approved the largest single-year increase in pre-kindergarten (pre-k) funding in the past five years (600 million new dollars), there are still nine states that have yet to fund pre-k programs and two that actually decreased funding (Scott, 2005). Children in Mississippi and other states in the nation fall into both of these traps.

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The lack of preparation to meet the basic human needs of so many after Katrina was astounding. There was a tremendous outcry from the rest of the nation and the world as we watched in horror at the conditions these people had to endure. The realization that this same scenario is playing out with our most precious resource, our children, particularly preschool-aged children, in states across our nation should be a very sobering wake-up call as well. The purpose of this article, focused primarily on children in Mississippi, is to highlight the effect that poverty has on children's well-being at an early age and future academic success. It also provides evidence for the importance of funding high-quality pre-k programs and parental training to ensure they begin the process of preparing their children for success, not only in Mississippi but in the other states that are leaving their children behind. Finally, with the reauthorization of No Child Left Behind in 2007, recommendations are made for refocusing the premise of the law from accountability and high stakes testing to meeting the needs of all children so they can truly be successful in school.

SPOTLIGHT ON EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

The 1980s and 1990s were exciting times for the education and well-being of young children. The persistent voices of early childhood professionals spawned much debate and reform of educational thought and practice. In 1989, Congress passed the Goals 2000: Educate America Act (U.S. Department of Education, 1994). Our government acknowledged that for many children having the opportunity to attend school was not enough; but, because of the conditions of their childhood, some children needed more help in order to be successful at school (Sizer, 2004)

The act established eight broad goals for improving student learning and achievement. Of the eight goals, the first emphasized the importance of providing for the basic needs of our preschool-aged children. This goal stated that by the year 2000, all children in America would start school ready to learn. This goal emphasized to parents, educators, and politicians the importance of the early years of a child's life, those before kindergarten, to school success (National Education Goals Panel, 1997). This goal was quite significant in that (a) it acknowledged that all children were not coming to school ready to learn and (b) much of what is required for children to

learn and achieve academically occurs before children reach school age.

As a means of reaching goal one, three broad objectives were developed. These objectives:

- addressed the need for all children to have access to high-quality and developmentally appropriate preschool programs.
- noted that parents are a child's first teacher and insured that parents would have access to the training and support needed to help prepare their children for academic learning
- stated that children would receive the nutrition, physical activity experiences, and health care needed to arrive at school with healthy minds and bodies. Providing children with these necessities would allow them to maintain the mental alertness necessary to be prepared to learn. This same objective stated that the number of low birthweight babies would be significantly reduced through enhanced prenatal health systems.

This goal truly reflects the importance placed on the well-being of children and on preparing children at an early age for successful learning by ensuring that their basic needs are met (U.S. Department of Education, 1994).

EFFECTS OF POVERTY

Each year, the Annie E. Casey Foundation (AECF) compiles data on a set of 10 indicators of child well-being in their Kids Count Data Book (2005). According to AECF, the ten most significant indicators of how well children are doing in the United States are:

- the percent of low birthweight babies
- infant mortality rates
- child death rates
- teen death rates
- teen birth rates
- the percent of teens who are high school dropouts
- the percent of teens who are not attending school and not working
- the percent of children living in families where no parent has full-time, year-round employment
- the percent of children in poverty
- the percent of children in single-parent households.

Of these indicators, at least half can be closely related to young children's well being and potential success in school. The 10 indicators are measured for every state and an overall ranking is assigned to the state with regards to the well-being of its children. In the 2005 Data Book, the state of Mississippi ranked 50th, meaning children in this state did not fare as well as children in any other state; a truly alarming fact that has to be acknowledged.

According to AECF (2005), poverty status is one of the strongest predictors of child well-being.

Poverty is, as commonly defined by U.S. researchers, the state of living in a family with income below the federally defined poverty line. According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2005), the federal poverty level in 2006 is \$16,600 for a family of three and \$20,000 for a family of four. In 2004, 37 million Americans were living below the poverty level (National Center for Children in Poverty, 2006).

Poverty has tremendous negative effects on the well-being of children and their access to basic necessities. Children living in poor families are more likely to have diets of lower nutritional value (Fox & Cole, 2004; Nord, Andrews, & Carlson, 2005) higher rates of physical inactivity (Abernathy, Webster, & Vermeulen, 2002) and suffer more from not only treatable but also preventable conditions. According to National Center for Children in Poverty (2006), in 2004, almost one fourth (24%) of the children in Mississippi were living in poverty and 12% were living in extreme poverty. In addition, 26% of the children in Mississippi under age 6 were living in poor families. These percentages are higher than the national average.

CHILD WELL-BEING

The indicators identified by AECF correspond closely to the objectives of goal one of Educate America Act, particularly the third objective which addresses four aspects of child well-being: nutrition, physical activity, health care and low birthweight infants. They also relate closely to poverty status. Training parents so that they understand the importance of providing, to the best of their ability, these needed elements is also an important aspect of goal one. The well-being of children in the state of Mississippi will be examined through a study on nutrition, health care, and low birthweight infants. Physical activity will not be addressed because most of the available data examining physical activity concerns adolescents and adults, not young children.

Nutrition

Proper nutrition is essential for the well-being of children and adults. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2004) identified unhealthy diets as one of the six primary health risk factors for children and adolescents. One of the most important nutritional periods in a child's life is during infancy. Jensen (2005) emphasizes the importance of good nutrition for optimum brain development during the early

years. According to the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) (Kleinman, 2004), the preferred and most nutritionally complete source of nutrition for infants is breast milk. A growing body of research provides evidence that breastfeeding offers many benefits for young children both while being breastfed and in their early childhood years (American Academy of Pediatrics, 1997; Arenz, Ruckerl, Koletzko, & Von Kries, 2004; Duncan et al., 1993; Lawrence, 1997). However, according to the results of the 2004 National Immunization Survey (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2004), nationally, only 14% of the mothers responding to the survey reported having breastfed their infants and in Mississippi, only 4.7% reported having breastfed. Moreover, according to the survey results, infants residing in poor and low-income families were the least likely to have been breastfed. In light of these findings, it can be said that many of the nation's children begin life with diets that are not nutritionally sound and according to Carlson, Lino, Gerrior, and Basiotis (2003), diet quality decreases as the child gets older which further affects their academic success. Training for parents on the importance of good nutrition and what foods are needed for their children to be strong and physically fit is imperative.

Another indicator related to the nutritional value of a child's diet is the family's access to food. The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) regularly monitors the food security of American families. Food-secure households are those in which families had consistent access to enough food for the entire family to live an active, healthy life. In 2004, 12% of all households in the nation were considered food-insecure which means they had difficulty meeting the most basic of all human needs and over 17% of those households included children. The rate of food insecurity in Mississippi was 15.8%, well over the national average (Nord et al., 2005). Several factors were found to be associated with rates of food insecurity. The rates varied by family composition, ethnicity, and income level for the nation's families. Families headed by single mothers, minority families, and families considered poor or low-income were more likely to be food-insecure than families without those characteristics.

Health Care

Another significant indicator of child well-being is a child's access to health care. Ample research has shown that access to health care is influenced by

insurance coverage and that children with health insurance generally have better health throughout their childhood than uninsured children. According to Cohen and Bloom (2005) children who are insured are more likely to receive preventive care to keep them healthy and to get the treatment they need when they do get sick.

As a nation, great strides have been made to ensure poor and low income children are covered by health insurance. In 1997, the federal government created the State Children's Health Insurance Program (SCHIP) as a means of helping families provide health insurance for their children when their incomes are too high to be covered by Medicaid and too low to afford private insurance. As a result between the years of 1998 and 2000, there was a 25% decrease in the number of uninsured children (Cohen & Bloom, 2005). Nevertheless, in 2004 there were still over 8 million uninsured children.

According to the results of the Summary Health Statistics for U.S. children: National Health Interview Survey (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2004), the rates of uninsured children varied by poverty status. While 11.2% of all children in the nation are uninsured, when children living in poverty are examined that figure escalates to 18.9%. Similar to the national picture, children living in poor and low-income families in Mississippi were more likely to be uninsured than their more affluent counterparts. Over 16% of Mississippi's children living in poor and low-income families were uninsured compared to 7% of children living above the poverty level. Children who are poor are more likely to have limited access to health care and more likely to have unmet medical needs.

Low Birthweight

The final indicator listed in the third objective was the number of low birthweight (LBW) babies. LBW is defined as infants born weighing less than 5.5 pounds. According to Mathews, Menacker, and MacDorman (2004), an infant's weight at birth is a significant indicator of current as well as future well-being. According to these researchers, LBW is a factor in 65% of infant deaths and is also a factor in the number of infants requiring expensive specialized care in neonatal intensive care units. Furthermore, LBW babies are at increased risk for future medical and educational problems (Mathews et al., 2004).

According to the National Center for Health Statistics, nationwide, 8.1% of all live births in 2004

were babies with LBW. In Mississippi the rate of LBW babies was 11.6% (Hamilton, Martin, Ventura, Sutton, & Menacker, 2005). Not only does this rate represent at least a 13% increase since 1993 but it is also the highest rate in the nation (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2005). Far too many of Mississippi's babies are being born too small. Moreover, LBW infants in Mississippi that do survive are more likely than infants in other states to experience future educational problems because of living in a state that has the other risk factors discussed earlier—poverty, poor nutrition, and inadequate health care.

Based on an examination of the research on child well-being, America has not made the well-being of its children a priority as was mandated in Goals 2000: Educate America Act. Children living in Mississippi are less likely to have their most basic of needs met than children residing in any other state in the nation. Because research shows that there is a relationship between poverty and a child's academic success, it would seem apparent that many children in Mississippi would not fair well in the academic arena.

STUDENT ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT

Longitudinal studies (Barnett, 1995; Karoly et al., 1998; NICHD Early Childcare Research Network, 2003; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000) that have followed children through early childhood development have determined that higher quality early childhood education settings and interventions led to better cognitive skills and social interactions, higher graduation and employment rates and lower rates of involvement with violence and delinquency. The well-being and training of young children has a tremendous effect on their future academic success and as a result also affects the community where they live.

In 2001, the federal government issued a promise to America to close the achievement gap through its historic No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) (U.S. Department of Education, 2004). The focus of the new education legislation changed from concentrating on the well-being of children for success to the accountability of the schools. In the quest to understand and fulfill the demands of NCLB, educators no longer seem to be focused on the well-being of children and the circumstances of their lives that cause them to start off and remain behind. They are, instead, focused on raising test scores and meeting adequate yearly progress.

Although the purpose of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) was to "ensure that

students in every public school achieve important learning goals while being educated in safe classrooms by well-prepared teachers” (Yell & Drasgow, 2005, p. 8), the promise evident in its title appears to be an empty one for children in poverty. Darling-Hammond (2004) would argue that because of the demands of this legislation for accountability as measured through test scores, the children who are already behind because they live in poverty will continue to suffer academically. These children will probably not receive the important services they need in school because of the current focus created by this legislation. NCLB appears to have overlooked the significant relationship between child well-being and academic achievement.

It has been established in research that there is a relationship between future school success and the state of childhood poverty and well-being. Because Mississippi children fall into both of these traps and to provide support for these research findings, academic achievement for Mississippi high school students will be examined. Three commonly used measures of student educational achievement are the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) scores, ACT scores and high school completion status.

National Assessment of Educational Progress

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) (NCES, 2005), the NAEP is a national assessment of what American students know and are able to do in specific content areas (i.e. reading, mathematics, science, writing, U.S. history, civics, geography, and the arts). The assessment results for each state are reported in scale scores which correspond to one of four achievement levels: below basic, basic, proficient and advanced. Scores in the proficient and advanced range indicate that students understand the concepts and procedures of the subject matter and are able to apply that understanding to complex, real-life situations. Scores in the basic and below basic range indicate that students may or may not understand the concepts and procedures of the subject matter and are unable to apply that understanding to complex, real-life situations.

The most recent round of assessment, conducted in 2005, assessed 4th and 8th grade students in the subject areas of reading and mathematics. Nationwide, 65–71% of the nation’s school children have a basic or below basic understanding in the subjects of reading and mathematics (NCES, 2005). As bleak as

the situation may seem for the entire nation, the achievement levels for the state of Mississippi are even worse. According to NCES, reading and mathematics scores in the state of Mississippi were lower than the national average at both grade levels and in both subjects. Moreover, the results indicate that at least 80% of the students in Mississippi only have a basic, at best, understanding of reading and mathematics at the 4th and 8th grade levels and scored lower on these assessments than students in 40–48 other states.

ACT Scores

The ACT is the most widely accepted college entrance exam in the nation. Research documents the significant relationship between ACT scores and success in the first year of college as measured by retention rates and GPA (ACT, 1997; Noble & Sawyer, 2004). The ACT yields subject area scores in English, math, reading and science and an overall composite score ranging from 1 to 36. According to the ACT organization, students with composite scores less than 19 are unlikely to be successful in college without taking remedial or developmental courses first. In 2005, the average composite score for the nation was 20.9. Similar to the NAEP results, the average composite score for students in the state of Mississippi was lower than the national average. The average composite score for Mississippi’s students was the lowest in the nation at 18.7. Mississippi was the only state with scores that indicated the average student of the state was not prepared to be successful in college without remedial or developmental assistance.

Upon closer examination of the ACT High School Profile for the state of Mississippi a relationship between reported family income and composite scores was observed. The average composite score for students reporting family incomes below \$18,000 was 16.3 in Mississippi. As family income increased so did the composite scores, however family income had to exceed \$42,000 in Mississippi for the average composite score to reach 19 (ACT, 2006).

High School Completion Status

The final and most complete measure of student achievement examined is high school completion on a track for a regular high school diploma. This measure is quite significant for two reasons. For one, high school graduates have increased earning potential and secondly, for those who fail to graduate

from high school, there are a host of negative adult outcomes. This most certainly affects the cycle of poverty that exists in many states.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2005), high school graduates earn significantly more than those who do not graduate. In 2004, the mean yearly earnings for high school graduates in the nation was \$30,640 compared to \$22,232 for individuals that did not graduate from high school. Moreover, high school graduation is the gateway to higher earning potential provided by a college degree. In the same year, the average earnings for an individual with a college degree was \$53,581. In addition to the lost earning potential, individuals not graduating from high school are more likely to serve time in the penal system. As previously stated and evidenced by the statistics, a measure of graduation rates is a significant measure. Considering the earning potential of high school graduates, this could be a key to breaking the poverty cycle.

While the majority of students in the nation do graduate from high school far too many of them do not. According to Seastrom, Hoffman, Chapman, and Stillwell (2005), writing for NCEES, the graduation rate for public school students in the United States in 2002–2003 was 73.9%. Mississippi did not compare favorably with the rest of the nation with a graduation rate of 62.7%. This statistic is not surprising because on each the previously discussed indicators of poverty, child well-being, and student academic achievement Mississippi ranked near or at the bottom in terms of positive outcomes.

CONCLUSION

This article supports research that identified relationships between poverty, child well-being, and student academic achievement. On most indicators, income was positively related to child well-being and student academic achievement; as family income increased so did measures of child well-being and student achievement. Hurricane Katrina uncovered a side of America we often forget: the side of America where people struggle to have their most basic needs met. Many of American's children live in poverty and the devastating effects it has devastating effects on their well-being and future success. Although the federal government has issued a promise to leave no child behind educationally, that promise is an empty one. Many children, like the thousands of Hurricane Katrina victims, will continue to be left behind because we are not heeding the warnings. We are not

providing for their well-being at an early age. Nor are we ensuring that every child has equitable opportunities and guidance that will prepare them for life.

Legislators from all states should examine closely the effects that poverty has on our country. With the evidence available that indicates the relationship between poverty, child well-being, and high school success, it seems that taking care of the needs of our young citizens could possibly be a factor that would break this cycle of poverty. If children are well-prepared to enter school and the schools are allowed to meet their needs rather than focus on test scores, it could mean that there will be a higher number of better educated high school graduates who will enter the work force with the skills necessary to be successful. This could mean less involvement in crime and fewer inmates in our penal system. Perhaps Mississippi and other states could be raised from the bottom of so many lists. There are things that could be carried out at the federal and state level that could alleviate some of the problems we face. With careful planning and diligence, we can make a better life for all.

In 1982, Mississippi passed legislation that mandated funding for kindergarten in public schools. That monumental piece of legislation led the nation in funding for early childhood education. Now, nearly 25 years later, Mississippi is on the bottom again in this respect. There is a strong movement in the state to promote funding for public preschool education. In the 2006 Mississippi legislative session, a bill was passed that allowed for pilot pre-k programs funded with state monies. With the election year approaching there is hope that with support from our state's citizens that legislators will come to realize the importance of funding pre-k education. Currently there is an economic boom in the state; sadly it is because of the tragedy of Katrina. Sales tax revenues as a result of rebuilding the coast have added much needed money to our coffers. Perhaps the coming year will be a positive one for our youngest children in the state.

In addition to the importance of funding pre-k programs, training programs for parents need to be established. Parents need to know the positive effects of good nutrition and health care. They need to know the best practices for caring for their children and as their child's first teacher, they need to understand the activities that will help their child develop skills and knowledge that will put him on the level with every other child in the class (Jensen, 2005). They need to know the effects of low birthweight and how to

prevent this from happening to their child. In addition to this, parents need training for employment to help pull themselves above the poverty level. The AECF (2005) supports this notion and provides recommendations for helping parents overcome the obstacles that often cause them to remain in the poverty cycle. These parent training programs can be initiated and funded at the local, state, and federal level. It takes everyone helping to improve our situation in this democratic society.

A third element of the picture that needs to be amended is NCLB. With the reauthorization of this legislation coming up in 2007, the opportunity is near for positive changes to be made for America's young children. The research that was used to support the Educate America Act: Goals 2000 which establishes the need for a strong early childhood start should be revisited. The realization that setting a firm foundation provides the base for later learning and productivity should be closely examined. The legislature should consider the effects the current policies for measuring schools have on the diverse group of children that attend. More emphasis should be placed on measures that will fix the problems that are evident rather than chastising school districts that score below expected levels. Most often these districts are those who have large numbers of students living in poverty, children who don't have the advantages of other children from more affluent neighborhoods.

There was a great outcry at the lack of preparation for a disaster such as Katrina. This is a wake-up call to help our most vulnerable citizens, our young children. It is imperative that our nation develop a comprehensive plan so that no more children will be left behind. We can't wait for another disaster to occur. We can't let another child begin a life in poverty without interventions that give him every opportunity for success.

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