Struggling in Suburbia

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IN DENVER’S WESTERN suburbs, a social studies teacher thought up a novel approach to teaching her students the unsettling realities of urban homelessness. She assigned them the task of sleeping overnight in the backseat of the family car.

But the assignment held a surprise in store for the teacher—one that provides a glimpse into the reality of 21st-century poverty in America. The teacher did not realize that one of her students was homeless. The girl had already spent many nights in her parents’ car.

“These days in suburbia, you never know who you will have in your class,” says Sheree Conyers, homeless liaison for the Jeffco Public Schools of Jefferson County, Colorado. “These are hard times. So many of our families are in transition.”

A decade ago, the Jeffco Schools had just 59 homeless students in a district that serves about 86,000 students. By 2012, there were close to 3,000,
representing 3 percent of the district enrollments. At Parr Elementary School, 28 percent of the students were homeless, according to a 2012 report.

The increasing poverty in Jefferson County, where close to one in three students qualifies for free and reduced price lunch, reflects the explosion of poverty in suburbs nationwide. Throughout the 2000s, the suburbs were home to the largest and fastest-growing poor population in the nation, according to a 2011 analysis of U.S. Census data by the Brookings Institution. From 2000 to 2010, the report also says, poverty grew by 53 percent in the nation’s suburbs.

This rapid change has left many educators behind. They are still teaching as if the suburbs have remained immune from the poverty that has long troubled urban areas, says M.J. Lechner, a University of Colorado-Denver professor who oversees seven student teachers at Parr. “Some teachers have been responsive [to the changes],” she says, “while others are still struggling to give up the notion that all kids are the same as they were 10 years ago.”

A Poorly Defined Problem

The explosion in suburban poverty is part of a larger, more disturbing trend. Childhood poverty nationwide is at its highest point since 1993, with 16.5 million, or 22 percent of children ages 18 and under living in poor families, according to the 2010 U.S. Census. Race is still a factor. For African-American children, the poverty rate was 38 percent; for Latino children, it was 32 percent.

Being classified as “poor” means that a family of four earns no more than $22,314. However, the National Center for Children in Poverty at Columbia University estimates that families typically need twice that income to cover their basic needs. That looser definition puts 44 percent of American children in low-income families.

The growth in suburban poverty has had a major impact on suburban schools, like those near Denver. Without the safety net of social services that city governments provide for the urban poor, suburban schools have had to scramble to set up programs that address basic needs, such as adequate food and clothing, for their students from low-income families.

The Jeffco district has established school-based food banks and an emergency fund for health needs, such as eyeglasses or medication. It also has held clothing drives at schools with large homeless populations. Schools feed students free or low-cost meals during the week, but not on the weekends. So 13 Jeffco schools have partnered with community sponsors and local food banks to provide food for the weekends.

At Parr, school officials have even altered the curriculum to accommodate homeless students. But some teachers have not adjusted to the new reality. “If a student has neither the place nor the tools with which to complete tasks sent home, they are often reprimanded or punished by missing...
Lechner says. “This makes our homeless population feel even more singled out and ostracized.”

**Who Are the New Suburban Poor?**
According to Scott Allard, an associate professor at the University of Chicago, the new suburban poor are a mix of old and new poverty. In more mature cities, like Chicago and New York, poverty has grown up around the inner-ring suburbs, where urban families have migrated from rundown city neighborhoods and the recession has deepened financial need. Many such communities experienced a spike in poverty during the economic downturn of the late 1980s.

The new suburban poverty, says Allard, has developed in the outer-ring suburbs, which underwent tremendous growth in the 1990s and 2000s. New immigration patterns have brought immigrants directly to the suburbs as well, unlike previous waves of newcomers who first settled in urban areas. In addition, Allard says, these outer-ring suburbs were hit hard by the recession, and by the subprime mortgage bust, which has led to foreclosure on more than 6 million homes.

“It’s not unusual for immigrants now to go straight to the suburbs and become part of the working poor,” says Allard. “The changes in the suburbs have been significant.”

This means that the face of suburban poverty can be diverse. Impoverished immigrants may lack both language skills and job prospects. In addition, some who were once members of the suburban middle class have lost their jobs and their homes. A traditional view of America’s underclass is that poverty is a cultural phenomenon that gets passed down from generation to generation. But the new suburban poverty, at least in part, comprises families descended from the middle class who find themselves suddenly poor.

**How Educators Can Help**
Teachers can help low-income students simply by knowing all their students better. A teacher who’s aware that a student is sleeping in a car—or just struggling to stay in her house—will be more sensitive about approaching topics like homelessness. Teachers can also help by confronting biased attitudes against low-income neighbors. Jokes about “rednecks,” “white trash” or dressing “ghetto” should be addressed as they come up in classrooms and hallways.

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**COMBATING THE “CULTURE OF POVERTY”**

Educators grappling with the new poverty in the suburbs often turn to popular writers such as Charles Murray and Ruby Payne. They will find themselves misled.

According to *The New York Times*, “The libertarian writer Charles Murray has probably done more than any other contemporary thinker to keep alive the idea of a ‘culture of poverty,’ the theory that poor people are trapped by distorted norms and aspirations and not merely material deprivation.”

Murray reinforced that idea in his 2012 book, *Coming Apart: The State of White America, 1960–2010*. One of his long-held beliefs is that social programs make the problems of poverty worse, not better. But Murray’s libertarian beliefs leave him little room to do more than call for less government. “I don’t do solutions very well,” he says.

Payne, an educational consultant, has had a more direct impact on schools. Her work is rooted in a long-held view that much of American poverty is generational, with children growing up in families that have been mired in the underclass for two or more generations. Although her outlook is popular, critics argue that her characterizations are overly simplistic, even bigoted, and harm relations between teachers and students.

According to Payne, children whose families have been poor for generations tend to value relationships over achievement, believe in physical fighting to resolve conflicts, view the world through a strictly local lens and value food for its quantity rather than quality.

Low-income children run into problems, says Payne, because their schools are run on the hidden rules of the middle class. These rules hold that work and achievement are the driving forces for decision-making, that fights are conducted with words rather than fists, the world is defined in national terms, and food is valued for its quality rather than quantity.

Paul Gorski, an assistant professor of integrated studies at George Mason University, says that Payne’s approach—considered a “deficit” model because it focuses on what low-income children lack—doesn’t hold up. The increasing diversity of the poor in the suburbs, he says, makes such an approach even harder to justify. “The suburban poor are diverse, and becoming even more diverse, so the stereotypical version of the poor, urban person just doesn’t work anymore.”

Gorski says that educators need to move away from a focus on the “culture of poverty.” Instead, they should look at more structural issues, such as the lack of resources in some schools that teach the poorest children. Today, that includes suburban schools struggling to address the needs of a new wave of impoverished children.

“We talk about education being the great equalizer, yet our poorest students are in the least equipped schools,” he says. “We don’t need to fix poor people. We need to fix the system.”
But much of the most important work needs to take place at the administrative level. Here are some tips for school administrators who might be seeing widespread poverty at school for the first time:

**Watch for changes of address.** Families facing sudden poverty may move a lot. In many cases, the parents are understandably afraid their children will be forced out of a desirable school or district. This puts great stress on the students—stress the school or district can ease in part by helping the parents understand their rights.

**Work around the car culture.** Gasoline and car maintenance can be huge expenses. Don’t assume that parents can always shuttle their kids to and from school activities.

**Become familiar with the McKinney-Vento Act.** This federal law guarantees the rights of children and youth experiencing homelessness to a free and appropriate public education. It requires a local homeless education liaison in every school district. It also ensures enrollment, access to services, school stability and academic support.

**Help with fees.** Students who are suddenly impoverished usually avoid field trips and extracurricular activities that require fees. In some cases, they’ll even misbehave right before a big event to be prohibited from going. Make sure teachers are on the lookout for this behavior, and make sure the school has a response. For example, see if the PTA can create a fund to keep these students from being marginalized.

**Find out what’s needed.** Ask parents what’s needed to help their children stay in school. Perhaps they need the library open late a few nights a week to have a place to go after school. Perhaps students need more computer access to complete assignments. Perhaps they need help with meals or transportation.

**Provide services.** After the problems have been identified, advocate for ways to address them.

Conyers, Jeffco’s homeless liaison, says one of the simplest things educators and support staff can do is to simply remain alert. A student’s sudden poverty is likely to show up in increased absences, exhaustion, mood changes, change in performance and an unkempt appearance.

Also, educators should understand that the families of these students now face the daunting task of navigating the labyrinthine social-service network—a disorienting and often embarrassing task. “These former middle-class families don’t know how to apply for food stamps, they don’t know where to begin,” Conyers says. “There needs to be more hand-holding.”

**Toolkit**
What assumptions do you hold about students and poverty in your area? Evaluate your district’s response to the problem.

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