

THE POVERTY MYTH

‘LOW-INCOME’ SHOULD NOT MEAN LOW EXPECTATIONS.

BY **JACQUELINE CHING** ILLUSTRATION BY **JAMES STEINBERG**

IN HER FRESHMAN YEAR, BRENNA Reed, 17, was aware of the haves and have-nots. “At my school, there’s no in between,” says Brenna, a student at Green Bay Preble High School in Green Bay, Wis. “You’re either rich or poor.”

The former either drive to school or are driven by their parents, while the latter are bused from greater distances. Some 40 percent of students there, like Brenna, are enrolled in the free or reduced-price lunch program, a common measure of a school’s poverty rate.

Brenna felt marginalized by some of her teachers. One was nice for a couple weeks, but the relationship soured quite suddenly. “[The teacher] said to me, ‘Did you turn in your homework?’” Brenna recalls. “I said, ‘No.’ She said, ‘Of course you didn’t, bitch.’ The whole class heard it.” After that, Brenna felt “pegged”—just another underachieving low-income kid, pitied if not scorned.

The marginalization Brenna encountered is hardly unique to one school. In fact, students in every district are likely to face these problems of perception.

Seniasor Rodríguez-Gómez, Green Bay Preble’s student support staff person, says the school works hard to “make every student feel proud to be part of the school. But there are always students who are very aware of their personal situation and have low self-esteem.” After her run-in with the teacher, Brenna proceeded to fail half of her classes that year. But that’s not the end of her story.

Many school districts have deliberately sought ways to help their teachers become more conscious of personal biases they bring into the classroom. Stereotypes regarding race and gender

in particular have received increased scrutiny since the 1970s. Unfortunately, teacher dispositions surrounding low-income students rarely get the same level of attention. The teachers themselves may be unaware of the little ways they signal disdain or lower expectations for these students: that they see them as poorly motivated, emotionally troubled, lacking confidence and family support, or otherwise unprepared to achieve academically. And as

has been often demonstrated when it comes to stereotypes, students tend to fulfill those expectations.

“We have touted the myth that if you are low-income, you can’t achieve,” says William Parrett, director of the Center for School Improvement and Policy Studies at Boise State University. “That is an absolute myth.”

Parrett says that low-income students can find themselves pigeonholed. “You’ll hear terms like ‘those



kids’ or ‘poverty kids’ from teachers, staff, administrators. That’s how they often get labeled,” says Parrett, co-author of an upcoming book, *Poverty and Underachievement: How High-Performing, High-Poverty Schools Lead Their Students to Success*. “Classrooms might be set up to help those who are just below being proficient, not way, way below—because people think the chances of them catching up are small.”

Blaming the Kids

Margo Hurrle, the shelter office coordinator for Minneapolis Public Schools, has heard it all. “There are teachers who think these kids are so unstable, why bother. They don’t want to give a student a uniform because they’re just going to leave.” Those attitudes demonstrate a lack of empathy and understanding of the realities of most low-income families, Hurrle adds. “In fact, we have stable, poor neighborhoods in which families have lived for generations.”

Another stereotype low-income students face is that their parents don’t care about education. “I hear, ‘Why can’t we put pressure on the parents?’ There are people in our community who believe [the kids] should pull themselves up by their bootstraps, and don’t understand what they go through,” says Hurrle.

The flip side of such hard-heartedness can be misplaced sympathy that can also hobble low-income learners. “Low-income students are faced with the stereotype that they can’t learn,” says Andre Dukes, engagement director of the Northside Achievement Zone (NAZ) in North Minneapolis. “Administrators lower the standards in school because they supposedly can’t meet the norm. We say you should never lower the standards.”

Initiatives like NAZ seek to change expectations of poor and minority students in their neighborhoods. The program, which was modeled after Geoffrey Canada’s Harlem Children’s Zone, offers students a host of services to get

them college-ready. The best way to fight the stereotypes, Dukes contends, is to show that these students can achieve.

Stripping Away Stereotypes

How can educators assess and correct for their own biases toward low-income students? Existing programs that promote awareness of racial and gender stereotypes can provide some starting points. But here are concrete steps for filling in partial knowledge regarding low-income families and communities, as well as helping low-income students feel welcome and more secure in school and the classroom.

➔ Examine beliefs regarding the so-called “culture of poverty,” a term introduced in 1961 by ethnographer Oscar Lewis. Despite later research challenging Lewis’ conclusions, the idea that many poor people share a degraded culture has been promulgated ever since. “The Myth of the Culture of Poverty” by Paul Gorski, published in *Educational Leadership*, is a good place to start.

➔ Conduct in-service training about issues of poverty in your community and the impact it can have on school-age children. Begin by contacting the district homeless liaison.

➔ Prompt students to reflect on and express their talents, beliefs and values in assignments and classroom activities. Such personal affirmations can bolster students’ confidence and performance, and help teachers recognize the unique qualities of all their students.

➔ Avoid references to free or reduced-price lunches, or other indications of financial assistance in front of the class. Do not tease about threadbare, out-of-style or ill-fitting clothing. Even seemingly innocuous comments can stigmatize low-income students.

➔ Expose your class to older, successful but empathetic students who can act as academic and social role models.

➔ Increase the number of cooperative learning opportunities. Comparisons and stereotypes are less common in cooperative settings.

➔ Confront bullying toward low-income students—by other students or fellow teachers—just as you would for other vulnerable groups.

➔ Include lessons about the antipov-erty work of Jane Addams, Martin Luther King Jr., César Chávez and others, but avoid learning materials that stereotype people living in poverty.

Respect for the unique challenges faced by low-income students can be the difference between educational achievement and dropping out. In the end, the support of other teachers helped steer Brenna Reed from self-doubt to success. After a year of cutting classes and blowing off tests, Brenna saw the light and enrolled in a program to build credits.

“What helped me was going to night school and getting my confidence back,” Brenna said. Since then, the girl who failed her freshman year has published a poem in *The New Yorker*, earned straight A’s and is now on her way to college. ♦

Unmaking the Myth

KWL FOR EDUCATORS

KNOW—Low-income children often have a harder time achieving in school.

WANT to Know—How can what happens in schools from 8 to 3 can make a difference?

Need to LEARN—How to see opportunity gaps instead of achievement gaps.

QUESTIONS FOR HOMEWORK

Before you assign work, ask yourself:

- Do all my students have a workspace and good lighting to read at home?
- Do my students work in the evening or have household responsibilities?
- Do they have Internet access?
- Is there an adult who can help with homework?

WATCH THE CUES

Irritable student? Maybe she’s hungry.

Disengaged during class? Maybe he needs glasses.

Asleep at the desk? Maybe she has a night job.