



# Reducing Student Poverty in the Classroom

School-Based Antipoverty Strategies the Federal Government Can Learn From and Act On

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Saba Bireda and Joy Moses September 2010



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# Introduction and summary

Since the time when the most pressing problem facing educators was pigtailed boys being dunked in inkwells, the American school house has maintained a tradition of delivering the 3 Rs—reading, 'riting, and 'rithmetic. Those halcyon days, if they ever existed, are long past. Today's educators face a myriad of concerns including the high concentrations of poverty that limit opportunities for young Americans to succeed in too many of our schools. That's why the American school house must play a critical role in addressing at least one more R—reducing the negative consequences of poverty by becoming a central component of federal, state and local antipoverty strategies.

Schools that are educating high numbers of disadvantaged students must employ innovative strategies to promote academic achievement. Many of these strategies are what we believe have a direct impact on student learning, such as offering incentives to recruit and retain highly effective teachers, implementing challenging yet accessible curriculum, and providing additional learning opportunities beyond the traditional school day. Yet it is just as important to address outside-school influences, specifically poverty that can also significantly impact student achievement and success.

Factors from inadequate housing, food instability, and financial insecurity place stresses on young people that distract them from their studies and can cause them to disengage from school entirely. When poverty intersects with poor performing schools the outcome for low-income students can be devastating, from dramatically lower test scores as compared to their higher-income peers, to staggering dropout rates.

Further, there are a number of government programs that help address the basic needs of school-age children but families often face barriers to participating in these programs. Some of these barriers include:

- Lack of outreach and accessible information about the programs
- Transportation challenges of visiting and signing up for these programs at different (and sometimes remote) locations
- Burdensome application requirements, such as unnecessary repeat visits to program offices and unnecessary document requests
- The stigma associated with applying for programs

These problems are multiplied and made more complicated for those families that qualify for more than one public-benefits program.

Communities across the country are finding that pairing antipoverty strategies with schools result in positive student outcomes as well as improve the delivery of public benefits. Although these are not traditional relationships, schools can play a pivotal role in providing the important economic services that stabilize families—services that can also eliminate some the challenges that undermine student academic achievement. Already school-based antipoverty initiatives in places such as New York City, Michigan, San Diego, and New Mexico highlight the success students can realize, not only in the classroom but also as it concerns their overall sense of well-being, when the traditional role of the school is expanded to include services targeting poverty.

For a number of years the city of San Diego had one of the nation's lowest rates of participation in the federal SNAP/Food Stamp program (about 35 percent of eligible residents). The low participation rate was pegged to a number of factors, from inconvenient and hard-to-reach enrollment locations, to lack of assistance to help families fill out cumbersome and confusing forms.

To boost participation in the program, county officials enlisted the help of the San Diego School board, which in turn agreed to allow four of its schools located in high-poverty neighborhoods to serve as food stamp screening centers. This school-based program has been able to remove a number of enrollment barriers, including easing the sense of anxiety experienced by many families, by providing locations with which they are familiar and comfortable. While advocates are still working to help increase participation rates, more than 600 San Diego families have been counseled on eligibility requirements through the school-based initiative.

The SNAP/Food Stamp program is just one of the many federal, state, and local government programs and services available to low-income students and their

families. Unfortunately, families who can benefit most from these programs often encounter challenges and barriers to participation that are similar to those that existed for San Diego's SNAP program. Dealing with multiple agencies in different locations, requiring different application processes can be overwhelming for many families. Streamlining the process by allowing for central connection points for services will maximize outcomes.

Schools are ideal locations because they have unparalleled access to poor students and their families—they are located in the neighborhoods in which families live, are recognized and familiar community institutions, and have established relationships with low-income students and their families. In short, schools are ideally positioned to become effective central connection points for a broad range of social welfare services.

Consequently, in this paper, we urge:

- Congress, with its current concerns about reducing costs, to attach to an appropriations bill (or other vehicle) a requirement that relevant federal administrative agencies produce a report to Congress that outlines a plan for expanding the use of central connection points and simplifying and consolidating public benefit application requirements. These efforts should include advancing school-based antipoverty strategies.
- The White House Domestic Policy Council and the White House Office of Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships to get involved in efforts to develop a plan, and take a leadership role to help spur Congress to action.
- Congress to invest in community school models and to create a new innovation fund designed to explore the potential benefits of delivering public benefits through schools.
- State and local governments to establish interagency committees to replicate and expand upon existing school-based antipoverty models and maintain new modes of providing services through schools.

We're confident that after reading our analysis and recommendations policymakers in Congress and the Obama administration will realize the positive impact that school-based antipoverty programs could have on the education and well being of low-income children across our country.

# Poverty and student achievement

We know that in-school factors, most importantly, effective teaching have the greatest impact on student achievement, especially for students from low-income families.<sup>1</sup> But the influence of poverty on student achievement should not be ignored. There are real-life consequences that flow from living in poverty that can interfere with a student's ability to learn.

A lack of consistent healthcare can contribute to frequent absences and therefore interrupt the learning process. Homelessness and inconsistent housing also contribute to frequent school transfers and student absence. Hunger and malnutrition make it difficult for students to concentrate and participate in classroom activities. In general, family economic instability (parents being unemployed or being inconsistently able to meet basic needs) can put a significant amount of stress on young people, distracting them from their studies or causing them to completely disengage from school.

When poverty's effects are combined with ineffective instruction and disorganized schools, it's easy to understand why many low-income students struggle to achieve academically. In 2009, only 16 percent of low-income eighth graders scored proficient in reading compared to 41 percent of their higher-income peers.<sup>2</sup> And in 2007, the dropout rate of students from low-income families was about 10 times greater than the rate of students from high-income families.<sup>3</sup>

Increasing the economic stability of a student's family has been shown to lead to improved academic performance. The well-known New Hope Project in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, for example, found that elevating family incomes above the poverty level correlated to positive student achievement gains and prolonged engagement in school.<sup>4</sup> That's why it is important to ensure that economic benefit programs effectively target low-income families with school-aged children to ensure that families have the opportunity to rise out of poverty.

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## Services available to students living in poverty

Low-income students and their families stand to gain from multiple public benefits that help to meet their basic needs. The federal government offers programs that:

- Reduce hunger—the SNAP/food stamps program, and the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children, or WIC
- Reduce homelessness—public housing, housing choice vouchers, and emergency housing
- Reduce deprivations from lack of home heating—Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program, or LIHEAP, and the Weatherization Assistance Program
- Reduce dangers and safety risks to children—childcare subsidies and child welfare services
- Reduce health concerns—Medicaid, Children’s Health Insurance Program, or CHIP
- Reduce poverty more generally by directly providing families with income—Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, or TANF, Supplemental Security Income, or SSI, the Earned Income Tax Credit, Child Support Enforcement, and Unemployment Insurance. In addition to these benefits, many state and local governments offer their own services that are unique to their jurisdictions.

Individually and in tandem with one another, these programs have the ability to lift families out of poverty, providing additional resources that allow them to make ends meet and provide for the basic needs of their children. Unfortunately, families often face barriers to participation. Some common challenges associated with connecting families to social programs include:<sup>5</sup>

### Insufficient outreach

Many people who qualify for various services are often unaware that the services exist. Some are misinformed about eligibility and participation requirements. In addition, programs often lack the resources and mechanisms to effectively market their services to target populations.



## Required locations

Families must apply for services at identified locations. This can be challenging if those locations are far away from where many low-income people live and/or are difficult to access by public transportation.

## Burdensome application and continued participation requirements

Some programs have application or participation requirements that erect barriers to receiving assistance. For instance, they may require applicants to make multiple trips to their offices, which is difficult for those lacking transportation or who are unable or can't afford to take off from work. In order to ensure eligibility and prevent fraud, others may require detailed information and the production of multiple documents, such as lease agreements, birth certificates, utility bills, employment information, all of which could lead to different types of delay. Families may have to request documents from other entities or make a trip to the application site only to find out that they are missing a document and have to return at a later date. Although some of these steps make sense, some agencies ask for more materials than are reasonably necessary.

## Stigma

Some potential participants equate the need to ask for help with embarrassment, personal failure, or shame. They may not want to be seen entering certain locations that are identified with participation in social services. Environments that are unwelcoming or that fail to treat people with dignity may contribute to these negative feelings.

## Insufficient staffing

Some agencies have a small number of staff available to assist participants. This can result in long waits over the phone or while standing in lines. It may also mean that insufficient attention is paid to the needs of participants or to answering questions about the services provided.

## Wariness and distrust

Potential participants may become wary of government programs, distrusting the ability of these agencies to actually provide help. This may occur if an individual experiences one or a combination of the above factors or knows someone who has, leading to a possible reluctance to participate.

All of these complications are multiplied for those families that stand to benefit from more than one program. Imagine a single mother balancing a number of different responsibilities who qualifies for three different programs, say housing subsidies, childcare assistance, and food stamps. She may have to make multiple trips to three different program offices in different parts of town just to receive and maintain her benefits. There would likely be three different application processes that ask for similar though not overlapping information and documentation.

She may also wait in several different lines and make several follow-up calls that require her to spend time on hold.

In short, multiple agencies each work to verify her income eligibility and prevent fraud when just one form could have been used and just one entity could have given her the stamp of approval and then shared that information with other agencies.

For some participants, there are negative consequences—employers are angered about time spent on personal issues and jobs are endangered—or it becomes difficult to keep track of all the things that are required for program participation and benefits are jeopardized. Sometime eligible participants become completely discouraged and give up on efforts to obtain needed and helpful benefits for themselves and their children.

In addition to these inconveniences, this is simply an inefficient way of delivering services and maximizing outcomes. Filling out multiple applications wastes the time of program participants and the resources of government agencies, especially when applications are seeking similar information about family income and resources. Further, segregating the application processes for benefits programs fails to allow for interconnected approaches that maximize outcomes by assessing a family's broad range of needs in order to match them with services that complement and coordinate with one another.

Filling out multiple applications wastes the time of program participants and the resources of government agencies.

# Moving toward a better approach

As this paper suggests, much more can be done to improve the delivery of public benefits to families in need. This will require reforms that are tailored to each individual program. But there is also a need to look at the big picture and at reforms that impact the entire antipoverty service delivery system that includes the broad range of public-benefits programs. Important to these efforts is the creation of more central connection points for the receipt of services.

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## The benefits of central connection points

Families would benefit from central connection points for services. These are singular locations where families are informed about the broad range of public benefits available to them. Ideally, families would be able to apply for and engage in activities necessary for the enrollment and maintenance of their benefits all under one roof.

This approach works to address some of the barriers identified above. For instance, it eliminates burdensome application and continued participation requirements. There would no longer be a need to travel or make phone calls to multiple government agencies in order to get all required assistance. Outreach efforts would be much easier since enrolling in one type of service would occur at a location where a family could learn about other available services. Staffing needs can also be reduced. A family who can learn about three different programs from one worker at a central connection point, requires less human resources than that same family talking to three different workers at three different agencies.

Central connection points can also help facilitate another important reform: consolidating application processes to the greatest extent possible. Since families often provide similar types of information and documents, such as those related to income, identification, residency, and children, to each agency from which they garner benefits, it would save time, energy, and staff resources to have families fill

out one form and have the form apply to multiple programs. Central connection points are ideal locations for filling out consolidated forms since these locations would not be attached to a particular program.

Strides toward these ideals are reflected in the nonprofit effort Single Stop USA, which provides information and helps people access a broad range of public benefits and services at one location.<sup>6</sup> And lessons also can be learned from efforts to centralize employment and training services via federally funded one stop centers run by the Department of Labor.<sup>7</sup>

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## Why schools?

Schools are in an ideal position to become effective central connection points for social welfare services. There are several advantages to co-locating antipoverty services at schools, among them:

### Access

Schools have unparalleled access to students and families in need of services. Even students and parents from the most financially challenged families come into contact with school officials. Community schools and other reforms models that make parental engagement a priority are especially suited for doing this work because as a matter of course they are engaged in helpful activities such as doing outreach to parents, housing other types of services that attract adults (such as job training), and extending their building hours that accommodate parental work schedules. Thus, schools, and community schools in particular, are uniquely positioned to address challenges related to public-benefits outreach.

Public-benefits programs that target low-income families with children can connect with those families in schools and inform parents of their services. This is particularly true of schools receiving Title I funds that serve significant numbers of children living in poverty.

## Convenience

The school building presents a ready-made space for service providers to set up shop. Schools are often located in neighborhoods where low-income families live, which reduces their transportation burdens. Since parents have other reasons (child drop-off and pick-up, parent-teacher meetings) to go to their child's school, co-locating services reaches parents at a place where they are already likely to be found.

## School community

Teachers and principals interact with students and families on a daily basis and can identify issues that impact student learning. These educators often have insights into what types of public benefits are most needed by their students' families. Since children spend significant amounts of time at schools, astute educators are likely to be the first to notice student issues such as hunger or homelessness.

## Familiarity

The school building is often the most recognized structure in a community. Beyond proximity, the school may be less threatening to families than other social agencies. As familiar places that are already providing necessary educational services, schools can help reduce feelings of wariness and distrust of public-benefits programs.

## Reducing stigma

Parents already have other reasons to be in a school building. Unlike with identified agency locations, if someone sees a parent going inside a school they won't automatically know that the family is in need of public benefits. Also, if schools take a more child-centered approach to public benefits, suggesting that supports are being offered as a part of an educational plan or to promote better educational outcomes, then parents may be less likely to view their circumstances as a personal failure. Rather than being embarrassed, they may view program participation as another thing that they can do to ensure that their child does well in school.

## Improving student and family connection to school

When parents and family members frequent the school building they engender more positive feelings about the school, which may in turn lead to more involvement with their children's education. Studies have demonstrated that parents who utilize services at school participate more in school activities and attend more parent-teacher conferences.<sup>8</sup>

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### Challenges

Some challenges may be associated with providing access to public benefits at school sites. Importantly, most of these challenges are not rooted in federal legislation. Typically, authorizing legislation creating public-benefits programs does not mandate or limit locations where participants must apply for services. To the contrary, many laws encourage effective and creative outreach approaches, reductions in participation barriers, and interagency coordination and collaboration.<sup>9</sup> Case in point: The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act says that supportive housing providers are allowed to help participants in obtaining access to federal, state, and locally funded assistance programs, including those that help with mental health and employment needs. In general, federal education law does not prohibit schools from allowing public-benefits program services from being offered in their buildings.

In implementing federal programs or addressing other concerns, however, states and localities may have developed policies (official and unofficial) that create barriers to connecting families to public-benefits programs within schools. For instance, state or local guidelines may require that caseworkers conduct the application process or demand in-office visits to complete the enrollment process.<sup>10</sup>

Implementation of a school-based antipoverty program strategy could initially require a significant time investment from public-benefits staff as well as school leaders in reviewing and revising policies, forging interagency discussions and collaborations, and providing new information and training to staff. This may be difficult for those government agencies that are underfunded or have staffs that already have too many demands placed on their time, or both.

This problem may be particularly acute during this current era in which states and localities are experiencing severe budgetary constraints that may include employee layoffs. Decreasing or failing to increase staff, at a time when there is a greater demand for poverty programs, can make it difficult for agencies to dedicate time to new projects and innovations.

There may also be barriers created by the culture of programs. Sometimes it is difficult to get workers, especially career employees, to make a mental shift from the way things have always been done. Some may be very protective of their programs, and thus reluctant to share responsibilities with other agencies or have others involved in their work. Others may be concerned about such plans diluting their efforts or missions, among them educators who think schools should be focused on academic instruction and not on ancillary services and programs. Further, there may be fears that involving others in the work of agencies or expanding access to remote sites may somehow make it easier for individuals to commit fraud and wrongfully gain access to services.

Finally, there may be logistical concerns that must be overcome. Individual schools, for example, may not have an adequate amount of physical space to accommodate these efforts. Precautions may have to be taken to protect family privacy. And divisions of labor and sources of funding may be an issue. Many of these concerns are valid, but they are not insurmountable. Through coordination, flexibility, and innovative thinking about the intersection of school and social services, successful school-based strategies can be created. In the next section of this report, we'll examine two states and two big municipalities where school-based antipoverty programs are proving their worth every day.

There may also be barriers created by the culture of programs.

# Where it works

States, districts, and schools across the country are implementing strategies at the school building to support family economic stability and by extension, student academic success. We take a look at two states and two big cities: New Mexico and Michigan, and New York City and San Diego.

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## San Diego

A school-based effort to increase the number of families receiving food assistance<sup>11</sup>

San Diego has had the lowest federal SNAP/Food Stamp enrollment rate of any metropolitan city for several years.<sup>12</sup> The county lost approximately \$107 million dollars in unclaimed benefits in 2007.<sup>13</sup> In 2009, facing pressure from hunger advocates, the city partnered with several nonprofit organizations and embarked on a city-wide campaign to increase enrollment. San Diego's public schools became an integral part of the strategy.

Advocates cite numerous reasons for San Diego's low enrollment rate, which is about 35 percent of the residents eligible for food stamps.<sup>14</sup> The county has rarely employed aggressive outreach plans and county guidelines require home visits for many applicants to prevent fraud. Many new immigrants were also deterred by language barriers and a general lack of information about eligibility. A recent report by the U.S. Department of Agriculture found several "choke points" in the county's food stamp application system, including long waits, an epidemic of lost documents requiring multiple trips to the county office, and unnecessary and time-consuming investigation of applicants.<sup>15</sup>

Both the county and school district recognized that students were harmed by the low participation rates of families. So last year the San Diego School Board



directed the school district to work with county officials and local nonprofits to increase food stamp enrollment for families at high-poverty schools.

The district's school-based enrollment strategy centers on the placement of full-time Americorps volunteers provided by the San Diego Local Initiatives Support Corporation and trained by the San Diego Hunger Coalition in four high-poverty schools. The school district provides office space and administrative support to the volunteers who screen parents to determine whether families meet the requirements for enrollment.

Moreover, the volunteers help families fill out applications and acquire the necessary documentation to ease the submission process. The coalition also hosts special enrollment fairs at schools with high numbers of low-income students. And importantly, the county government bolstered the school-based outreach program by overhauling application processing procedures and increasing waivers for face-to-face interviews.

The San Diego Local Initiatives Support Coalition estimates that volunteers have counseled more than 600 families at the four participating schools, resulting in a monthly benefit total of \$39,116 for these families. Volunteers are now expanding the scope of their involvement to include assisting with other benefit programs and general family assistance. The coalition plans to broaden the impact of the initiative by creating counseling hours at additional high-poverty schools in the fall of 2010.

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## New Mexico

A focus on economic stability for middle school students and their families<sup>16</sup>

New Mexico is one of four Elev8 sites in the country. Elev8, a nationwide initiative funded by the Atlantic Philanthropies and other public and private partners, focuses on providing integrated services in the middle school years when risk for school disengagement is high. The New Mexico Community Foundation manages the Elev8 New Mexico initiative in five middle schools, in three different school districts. These schools are carrying out the Elev8 components of providing extended-day learning programs, comprehensive school-based health care, and family support services. The schools are provided with financial and programmatic support from the Atlantic Philanthropies-funded initiative to implement a system of wraparound services for students.

The New Mexico sites are particularly diligent about building up the benefits enrollment portion of the Elev8 program.<sup>17</sup> Each school site works with a non-profit partner that provides staff at the school. Several of the schools created family resource centers where parents can drop in and access a variety of family support services. In partnership with Single Stop USA, staff at the family resource centers screen parents for several benefit programs, including TANF, Medicaid, child care assistance and the Earned Income Tax Credit using a web-based multi-benefit screening tool.

Families can benefit from assistance with the state’s presumptive Medicaid eligibility process, which provides coverage while the family completes the enrollment process. Because enrollment completion can be an issue for families, staff follow-up with families to ensure that benefits are actually received. Staff also works full-time on outreach to parents, referring families to services outside the school and providing financial literacy classes. These family resource centers are open before and after school to encourage use at times that best suit parents’ schedules.

The Elev8 program has not yet conducted a formal evaluation, but officials are collecting student achievement and anecdotal evidence that indicates positive changes at the schools. The initiative cites a 45 percent leap in math proficiency scores at Laguna Middle School, with a saturation rate of Elev8 programs at almost 100 percent. Aggressive outreach to parents at one of the participating schools, Grant Middle School in Albuquerque, led to a 10 percent increase in free and reduced-price lunch enrollment. All of the schools report high levels of parent involvement from extended-learning students, increased visits to doctors and dentists, and lower absentee rates among students at Elev8 schools participating in the extended-learning program.

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## Michigan

[A statewide initiative to provide basic needs assistance through schools](#)<sup>18</sup>

In 2003, Michigan, like many other states, found that several of its schools failed to meet “adequate year progress” as required by the federal No Child Left Behind law. The state determined, as part of its reform strategy for these low-performing “priority” schools, that students at these schools were often engaged with the Department of Human Services. Research and site visits also revealed several common characteristics of students at the schools: High mobility rates for fami-

lies, high poverty rates, excessive absentee rates, general education lags, and poor school grade performance.<sup>19</sup>

At the same time, Gov. Jennifer Granholm’s Children’s Cabinet was seeking ways to increase access and make service delivery easier for families. So in 2003, Michigan established a statewide system of wraparound service centers known as family resource centers at many of the state’s lowest-performing schools in response to these findings.

According to Linda Schmidt, Michigan’s poverty policy director, these family resource centers are based on the premise that when students’ basic needs are being met they are more likely to be academically successful. Each center is staffed by a Department of Human Services caseworker who provides direct access to DHS programs such as emergency cash assistance, food stamps, homelessness prevention services, and Medicaid enrollment. The centers are often deliberately located in schools with high populations of families turning to DHS programs so that parents can complete caseworker visits at the schools. In this way benefit recipients can comply with the demands of public programs without making time-consuming extra trips to a county office.

Family resource center staff also coordinates other services at the school, depending on student need and availability of locally based agencies. Several FRC-linked schools in Kent County, for example, are part of a larger community school effort—the Kent School Service Network. The Kent schools build upon the FRC success and coordinate service delivery at the district level through several non-profit partnerships.

Schools with family resource centers attempt to set goals and target services to the specific needs of the school population by using both student achievement data and information gathered through the state’s Department of Human Services. In Genesee County, for example, the district found that a large number of students were not finishing the school year at the school where they first enrolled. During the 2002-2003 school year, at least two schools experienced mobility rates of over 50 percent for families with children enrolled at the schools.<sup>20</sup> To decrease the number of highly transient students, the district began providing a rent subsidy to families at risk of residential displacement.

Family resource  
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school.

After two years, a 2006 evaluation of the program found that students whose families received rent subsidies had higher attendance rates and performed substantially better on state assessments than students who were not in the program.<sup>21</sup> Schools with FRCs have yielded positive outcomes across the state. A state evaluation found that FRC-linked schools were four times as likely to make adequate yearly progress as non-FRC linked schools.<sup>22</sup>

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## New York City

### Coordinated outreach to uninsured students and parents at school

New York City's Children's Aid Society runs one of the nation's oldest community school initiatives.<sup>23</sup> CAS community schools are predicated on the idea of co-locating social and health services at school, but in the late 1990s CAS also recognized that many students and their families were in need of health insurance. Because CAS community schools prioritize outreach and parent involvement at school, launching a project to base health care enrollment at schools fit well into the model.

In 1998, the organization began providing staff at its community schools to identify and assist families with health care enrollment. In 2000, CAS became a facilitated enrollment contractor with New York State, which greatly increased its role in the enrollment process. As a facilitated enrollment agency, CAS staff can substitute for Medicaid office staff, reducing the need for families to spend hours at an office outside of their comfort zone.

CAS, in 2007, launched a pilot community-based program in conjunction with the city's health care access agency. The city and CAS created a roster of potentially uninsured students at CAS schools. Using demographic information provided by the school and the city, CAS staff reached out to families in an effort to notify them of eligibility criteria and then guided them through the enrollment process. Each CAS community school also has a parent coordinator who can play a vital role in identifying families in need of health insurance and planning outreach events.

The combination of outreach and placing a facilitated enroller in the school building (facilitated enrollers are also in several other locations) helps CAS reach

and enroll otherwise uninsured students and families in Medicaid. CAS's Health Access Project also pairs case managers with families to help clients navigate the managed care process once they are enrolled.

These successful school-based antipoverty programs provide telling evidence that a federal role in these efforts would be equally effective. They demonstrate that schools can play a large role in empowering families and providing stability to low-income students. Schools can be the center of poverty reduction strategies without having to dramatically alter the school management structure or add new staff. Public-benefits programs also gain from having an effective avenue for conducting outreach, identifying members of their target populations, and having a more effective means of delivering their services. So how could the federal government learn from these experiences and tailor their antipoverty programs accordingly? To this we now turn.

# Policy recommendations

Too few high-poverty schools and social welfare agencies implement the strategies highlighted here—strategies that can make a significant difference in the lives of students. There must be a more concerted effort to fully realize the potential of these school-based, antipoverty models. Although communities must have significant flexibility in deciding what works best for them, at a minimum, such efforts should include:

- Schools providing a physical space for the delivery of public benefits
- Public-benefits programs collaborating to inform and facilitate delivery of services via schools
- Public-benefits programs developing methods of simplifying and consolidating their various application and maintenance of benefits requirements

For maximum effectiveness, we would also recommend:

- Full-time staff at each school who can bridge the gaps between educators, public-benefits programs, and families. Ideally, these individuals would be social workers who can act as case managers and be sensitive to the needs of low-income parents.
- Active involvement of school staff, including participating in trainings and information sessions about government-benefit programs and in the referral process using their knowledge of their students. For example, if a child in their class is showing signs of hunger, teachers should find tactful ways of encouraging the child's family to take advantage of the benefits information and access being offered at the school.
- Public-benefits programs that ensure all requirements for applying and maintaining benefits can happen at the school building. This is preferable to families still being required to make trips to remote locations to handle certain portions of the process.

- Engaging nonprofit organizations and other relevant entities that can provide input and assistance in perfecting these models.

For these ideals to take hold across the country, policy and culture changes must occur at the federal, state, and local levels. Let's begin at the federal level.

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## Focus on improving entry points into public-benefits programs

Better coordination of the nation's various public-benefits programs must be a priority. These efforts are necessary to ensure that delivering services through schools reach their full potential. There are multiple administrative agencies responsible for public-benefits programs, among them the Departments of Health and Human Services, Agriculture, Labor, and Housing and Urban Development, all of which must work together in developing ways to consolidate application and income verification requirements while also breaking down barriers to establishing central connection points.

Given the potential cost savings associated with simplifying and consolidating application requirements, Congress should be involved. Legislators engaged in appropriations and authorization should find an appropriate congressional vehicle through which to direct federal agencies to produce a report to Congress that outlines a realistic plan for reaching these goals—one that includes cost-savings estimates and any offsets for new expenditures.

To be effective, the development of this plan also should involve the Domestic Policy Council and Office of Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships<sup>24</sup> within the White House. The ultimate goals should be to:

- Review and revise any regulations or guidance that may hinder progress in the area
- Develop new guidance and models for consolidating and simplifying public-benefits applications and instituting central connection points at locations that include community schools.
- Develop new informative materials, trainings, and meetings that help market such guidance and models to states and localities
- Create lasting federal interagency collaborations focused on delivering public benefits through schools

Better coordination of the nation's various public-benefits programs must be a priority.

- Translate collaborations on the federal level into models for state and local collaboration efforts.

In addition to managing logistical concerns, these efforts will help facilitate a cultural change within individuals programs and the entire array of public-benefits programs.

Notably, the Obama administration is already taking some important steps in the direction of connecting the delivery of public benefits to schools. The administration boasts a “Federal Strategic Plan to End Homelessness” that includes a relevant new initiative that is included in the president’s 2011 budget. It is relevant because fostering collaboration among the Department of Housing and Urban Development, Department of Health and Human Services, and the Department of Education, the initiative could serve as a model for delivering public benefits through schools. In the proposal, homeless liaisons, or school district personnel who are responsible for ensuring that homeless children are enrolled in school and achieve positive outcomes, would help identify students whose families would benefit from housing choice vouchers.

This is one version of delivering public benefits through schools that will likely produce tremendous positive outcomes as children with the most serious housing needs achieve housing stability, which is associated with better educational outcomes. Expanding that model to include other types of public benefits would further reduce the impact of poverty on effective learning and otherwise improve the well-being of children and their families. New efforts to deliver services through schools should definitely be targeted to established community schools, federal agency activity should be developed to broaden outreach to other schools and to urge communities to utilize their existing resources for these types of service models.

The Obama administration is already taking some important steps in the direction of connecting the delivery of public benefits to schools.

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## Federal support for community schools

Community schools combine their educational mandate with other antipoverty programs designed to boost student achievement, stay open longer to increase parental and community involvement, and provide more noninstructional services than traditional schools. Most community schools enjoy relationships with nonprofit partners that make service delivery possible. What’s needed to make these programs available to schools nationwide is consistent federal funding as



proposed by the Obama administration and championed by House Majority Leader Steny Hoyer (D-MD), which could greatly increase the number of community schools and the depth of services offered.

Two of the administration's hallmark education reform programs, Race to the Top and the School Improvement Grant program encourage the implementation of wraparound services at low-performing schools. Rep. Hoyer and Sen. Ben Nelson (D-NE) also introduced the Full Service Community Schools Act (H.R. 3545/S. 1655) in September 2009. The legislation aims to dramatically increase the number of community schools by providing \$200 million in annual funding to states and districts to support community school development.

These programs can help states and school districts lay the groundwork for scaling up community schools. The Department of Education can maximize the effectiveness of community schools by offering specific guidance directing districts to offer services in partnership with local social services agencies. And any community school grant program should prioritize funding for those districts that demonstrate existing collaborative efforts.

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### Create a demonstration grant specifically focused on schools

The federal interagency administrative collaborations described above have great potential and far-reaching implications for service delivery, but evaluating the effectiveness of delivering these services via schools, as opposed to other locations, should be connected to a demonstration grant. We recommend that the secretary of Department of Education, in consultation with HHS and HUD, select grantees based on the extent to which a community can demonstrate the following:

- Commitments to participate from multiple local public benefits agencies and schools
- Detailed memorandums of understanding among the various agencies involved
- Identification of other funding sources, including those available through other federal, state, and local sources as well as those made available via private entities such as foundations and corporate interests

Ultimately, this demonstration grant would encourage implementation and help with any start-up costs, assisting local agencies that may be experiencing funding and staffing limitations.

Finally, in reauthorizing each public-benefits program, Congress should seek to include new provisions that advance school-based antipoverty efforts. This could include freeing up new resources, but may also come in other forms.

The Temporary Assistance for Needy Families program, for example, is likely to be reauthorized by Congress next year. During that process, new provisions could be included that incentivize or reward TANF agencies to collaborate with schools or work with other public benefit programs to create central connection points and/or simplified application procedures.

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### State and local governments—Open up and then establish local interagency committees

For too long, schools have not viewed themselves as part of antipoverty solutions for families. School services are directed solely to students and mostly in the academic domain. Schools should capitalize on their access to students and their families and open the school space and schedule to services for adults. To successfully reach parents, schools should remain open longer and allocate space to other government agencies and nonprofit partners to assist in service delivery.

State and local social welfare agencies must also be willing to be flexible in transferring service delivery to schools. Allowing agency staff to work out of a school, or changing guidelines to expand who can screen and enroll applicants for benefits, can extend the reach of programs to the most disconnected families.

These efforts need to be standardized by establishing local interagency committees that can work with the schools and with federal public-benefits agencies to see these services are delivered effectively and efficiently. Families living in poverty come into contact with several agencies, including schools, social welfare offices, and charity organizations. Interagency committees or task forces would help in determining where appropriate linkages on service delivery can be established and the extent to which local guidelines must be changed to facilitate such efforts.

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The federal government has encouraged such collaboration through the introduction of the Promise Neighborhoods program. One specific goal of the program is to “integrate programs and break down agency ‘silos’ so that solutions are implemented effectively.”<sup>25</sup> Another useful local model is the Kent School Service Network in Michigan, which depends on the collaboration between the county government, the school district, and foundations supporting the effort. Representatives of each of agency come together monthly for planning meetings. Federal agencies could encourage this kind of collaboration by building their own successful collaborations and working together to translate their models to the local level.

# Conclusion

Research shows that children who experience poverty have worse adult outcomes in terms of educational attainment, adult poverty status, and nonmarital childbearing than children in higher-income families.<sup>26</sup> Children who grow up in poverty are therefore at high risk for becoming adults who live in poverty. But there are ways to break this cycle.

One solution is as close as the neighborhood school. We know that effective, academically rigorous schools can provide students with the skills they need to pursue college and productive careers. Schools can further increase their impact on students by also implementing school-based antipoverty strategies in collaboration with other social welfare agencies and organizations that increase family economic security and stability.

School-based strategies like the ones discussed in this paper also would help to improve the delivery of public benefits, addressing some of the problems that hinder participation and generally promoting the well-being of children and their families. That is why our recommendation about how the federal government and Congress can act to make these reforms happen more quickly and more deeply across our country are as timely as they are critical to the future of our least well off children.

# Endnotes

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- 2 National Center for Educational Statistics, "The Nation's Report Card: Reading 2009" (2009).
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- 5 See Joel Berg, *All You Can Eat: How Hungry is America?* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2008). (Detailing documentation requirements for food programs and challenges related to frequent office visits and multiple applications amongst other concerns.); Food Research and Action Center, "Access and Access Barriers to Getting Food Stamps: A Review of the Literature" (2008). (Highlighting problems such as lack of awareness of program rules and requirements, stigma, location of offices, and other concerns.); Gina Adams, Kathleen Snyder, and Jodi Sandfort, "Getting and Retaining Child Care Assistance: How Policy and Practice Influence Parents' Experiences" (Washington: Urban Institute, 2002). (Documenting problems with multiple visits, location, and other application requirements within childcare services.); and Evelyn Brodtkin, Caroly Fuqua, and Elaine Waxman, "Accessing the Safety Net: Administrative Barriers to Public Benefits In Metropolitan Chicago" (Chicago: The Public Benefits Hotline Research Project, 2005). (Suggesting access problems related to complicated verification procedures and staffing of agencies.)
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- 8 Jean Baldwin Grossman and Zoua M. Vang, "The Case for School-Based Integration of Services" (Philadelphia: Public Private Ventures, 2009).
- 9 See 7 USC § 2020 (SNAP provisions ensuring that potential participants know about program and reducing participation barriers by such means as electronic and automated systems.); 42 USC § 8624 (LIHEAP provisions encouraging effective outreach to target populations and coordination with other programs.); 42 USC § 654 (Child Support Enforcement program provisions for effective outreach); and 42 USC § 11385 (Homeless program provisions that make helping participants access other benefits and allowable activity and providing for coordination between federal agencies.)
- 10 For examples of state or local enrollment guidelines, see U.S. Government Accountability Office, "Food Stamp Program: Use of Alternative Methods to Apply for and Maintain Benefits Could Be Enhanced by Additional Evaluation and Information on Promising Practices" (2007), available at <http://www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-07-573>; and Stan Dorn and Genevieve M. Kenney, "Automatically Enrolling Children and Families Into Medicaid and SCHIP: Opportunities, Obstacles, and Options for Federal Policymakers" (Washington: Urban Institute, 2006).
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