Urban Students in High-Poverty Schools: Information and Support Strategies for Educators

BY MARY M. CHITTOORAN & SUSAN E. CHITTOORAN

Schools in large central cities—those with a population of 250,000 or more—have seen a marked increase in the enrollment of children who pose unique academic and behavioral challenges for educators. According to the Congressionally mandated report, The Condition of Education 2008 (National Center for Education Statistics), there are significant racial, ethnic, and linguistic disparities in enrollment among urban and nonurban schools. For example, of the 20% of school-age children who speak a language other than English at home, most attend urban schools. Forty-five percent of all students in schools with high minority enrollments (i.e., where 75% or more are minority) are enrolled in urban (versus suburban and rural) schools.

While many urban schools serve students from middle- and high-income families, the focus of this handout will be on urban, high-poverty schools, those where 75% of students are eligible for free or reduced-price lunches. An estimated 45% of students in urban settings are low-income; nationally, 69% of students in high-poverty districts are enrolled in urban schools. There are notable racial and ethnic differences in the enrollment of students in high-poverty, urban schools; for example, 44% of blacks, 46% of Hispanics, and 27% of American Indians/Alaska Natives attend such schools, compared with 9% of whites and 17% of Asian/Pacific Islanders.

Children in high-poverty, urban schools present educators with an array of challenges that they are typically not trained to address. The situation is exacerbated when there is a cultural mismatch between students and their teachers. For example, some statistics suggest that while more than 30% of students are from minority groups, only about 10% of their teachers are persons of color. Teacher retention in urban, low-income schools is a growing problem, with some sources reporting that up to 30% of new teachers in large urban schools leave their positions within the first 3 years of teaching. Teachers in urban schools in high-poverty areas are particularly susceptible to burnout. Numerous reasons for this phenomenon have been cited, including high-stress environments, teaching conditions that differ markedly from those they had expected, lack of academic preparation, and an inability to meet the needs of their students.

CHARACTERISTICS OF STUDENTS IN URBAN, HIGH-POVERTY SCHOOLS

While the following characteristics do not apply to all students in urban, high-poverty schools, they are more frequently associated with such schools than with those in relatively wealthy, nonurban areas.

- Chronic, generational poverty as well as short-term, situational poverty; the latter may be occasioned by job loss, unemployment, divorce, or death of family members
- Relatively poor functioning on measures of physical and emotional health, intellectual development, and academic achievement
- Significant social–behavioral problems, including extreme violence and aggression
- High proportion of culturally diverse populations
- Disproportionate number of homeless children and families
- Large numbers of students for whom English is a second language
- High percentage of children who qualify for (but may not necessarily receive) special education services
- Meals that are lacking in both quantity and nutritional quality
- Poor healthcare and irregular well-child or follow-up medical care
- Home environments that are unsanitary, unsafe, or offer inadequate supervision of children
- Dangerous neighborhoods characterized by violence and vandalism
- Crowded schools, high student–teacher ratios, and stressed and alienated faculty
- Inadequate funding, facilities, and resources, even though per pupil expenditures are higher for urban, high-poverty schools than for suburban schools

SCHOOL-BASED INTERVENTIONS

Studies have indicated that comprehensive, integrated approaches are most effective at addressing the complex needs of urban students in high poverty areas. Following are some suggestions for educators.

Establish a safe, caring school climate. Educators can build a school climate that is characterized by warmth, respect, and acceptance for all children. In fact, programs such as the Safe and Responsive Schools Project (see Recommended Resources) have shown that positive school climates that address violence proactively reduce the need for peer mediation programs. Schools can provide a safe place for students who lack safety in the world outside. Educators should address labeling, stereotyping, and discrimination and can use proactive approaches to ensure that all children feel included. Predictable routines can help introduce structure into lives that may otherwise be chaotic.

Use nondiscriminatory assessment. The accurate assessment of students' strengths and weaknesses is critical to developing and implementing academic and behavioral interventions. Such assessment must not penalize students for behaviors that may be due to their impoverished status or that may be appropriate for their cultural backgrounds. Culturally competent assessment requires that professionals use measures that are culturally and linguistically appropriate (e.g., assessment in students' native language), include interpreters and translators for children and their families, and consider cultural norms that may differ from the mainstream (e.g., limited direct interactions with authority figures; Banks & Banks, 2009).

Differentiate instruction. The great diversity of students in urban settings requires that educators be prepared to differentiate (individualize) instruction so that all students' needs are met. Culturally responsive teaching methods (Gay, 2000) and an equity pedagogy (Banks & Banks, 2009) help educators incorporate their students' cultural backgrounds into instruction and ensure that *all* students, regardless of their backgrounds, have the opportunity to reach their potential.

Some examples of culturally relevant teaching strategies include using appropriate cultural names and labels, celebrating the accomplishments of key figures from a variety of cultural groups, and developing useful class assignments (e.g., having students draw maps of their neighborhoods to help them learn map skills).

Teach appropriate social behaviors. Educators can actively teach children pro-social behaviors that may not have been taught at home and that may help them build the social networks that are critical to school success. A variety of social skills training programs such as Skill streaming (McGinnis, 2005), simulations, and role-plays may be used to teach behaviors such as taking turns, sharing information, and expressing anger appropriately.

Consider students' language. Educators must be especially careful when it comes to children who do not speak standard English, either because they speak another language or because they speak with accents or use unique dialects. Language differences are not to be viewed as deficits, and assessment and instruction must take such differences into consideration. For example, children can be taught to use language that is appropriate in school settings without having their own language or speech patterns diminished in any way or being told that the way they and their families speak in the home is incorrect or undesirable.

Provide adequate nutrition. Teachers and administrators can provide families with information about programs that offer free and reduced-price meals for eligible children, both during the school year and the summer months. Schools can also help parents who lack the requisite reading and writing skills to access such resources and complete applications for these services. Educators must remain sensitive to parents who prefer not to avail themselves of such services because of pride or shame at having to accept charity. Sometimes families are more comfortable accessing services through culturally specific agencies.

Offer comprehensive health services. Medical intervention and preventive healthcare services must be provided for students. The school nurse or other personnel may need to dispense medications when families cannot be relied upon to do so, or when medication must be taken during the school day. Teachers may have to keep extra pairs of glasses or toothbrushes on hand for children who lack supplies. Schools may need to provide students access to well-child or immunization programs. Collaboration with community health agencies is often the most efficient way to ensure adequate healthcare is available to families in the school community; such agencies may set up clinics within school buildings to provide easy access. School personnel should also be aware of appropriate referral sources for no-cost or minimal cost healthcare in the community, such as free clinics.

Involve families. Studies have shown that parent involvement results in improved academic and behavioral outcomes for children, yet getting parents in urban, high-poverty schools involved may be one of the greatest challenges facing educators. The situation may be exacerbated in the case of parents who are culturally diverse, lack education, or do not speak English. Some ideas that have facilitated parent involvement include skills based workshops; parenting groups; GED, ESL, or computer classes; day care for younger children; and transportation to medical appointments.

Build school–community partnerships. Unlike wealthier schools, urban, high-poverty schools often are not connected to the communities of which they are a part. Local agencies and businesses can help forge links between these schools and their communities.

For example, resources may be provided by corporate sponsors, hospitals and clinics, political action groups, and faith-based organizations. Local universities can form professional development school partnerships with urban schools, offer mentoring services, and provide opportunities for university students to serve as role models for children in urban, high-poverty schools. Colleges and universities could also donate computers and offer technical support and resources to local schools. Teacher education institutions (particularly those located in urban areas) could implement programs that are designed to prepare teachers for the challenges and the rewards of urban teaching.

Network with other educators. One way to help teachers in high-stress environments is to link them with others who are engaged in the same kind of work. Educators can be encouraged to share their experiences, talents, and resources with others and may benefit from interacting with others who have successfully navigated the challenges of urban teaching.

SUMMARY

Students in urban, high-poverty schools bring with them unique challenges. Meeting their needs is the collective responsibility of schools and the communities in which they are located. Educators must provide these students with academic, social, and behavioral support so they are helped to achieve their potential. Such efforts will ultimately result in successful outcomes, not only for students, but also for their families.

REFERENCES

Banks, J. A., & Banks, C. M. (2009). *Multicultural education: Issues and perspectives* (7th ed.). New York: Wiley.

Gay, G. (2000). *Culturally responsive teaching: Theory, research, and practice.* New York: Teachers College Press.

McGinnis, E. (2005). *Skillstreaming in the elementary school: Lesson plans and activities.* Champaign, IL: Research Press.

National Center for Education Statistics. (2008). *The condition of education 2008* (Report NCES 2008031). Washington, DC: Author. Available: http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2008031

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES: PRINT

Brown, D. F. (2002). *Becoming a successful urban teacher.* Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Duhon-Sells, R. (2004). *Best practices for teaching students in urban schools.* Mellen Studies in Education, No. 100. Lewiston, NY: The Edwin Mellen Press.

Kozol, J. (1992). *Savage inequalities: Children in America's schools.* New York: Harper Perennial.

Payne, R. (2005). *A framework for understanding poverty* (3rd ed.). Highlands, TX: aha! Process, Inc.

Weiner, L. (2006). *Urban teaching: The essentials.* New York: Teachers College Press.

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES: ONLINE

Children's Defense Fund: http://www.childrensdefense.org

Council of the Great City Schools: http://www.cgcs.org

ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education: http://www.eric.ed.gov

National Center for Culturally Responsive Education Systems (NCCRESt): http://www.nccrest.org

National Center for Education Statistics: http://nces.ed.gov

National Coalition for Parent Involvement in Education (NCPIE): http://www.ncpie.org

National Institute for Urban School Improvement: http://www.urbanschools.org

Rethinking Schools Online: http://www.rethinkingschools.org

Safe and Responsive Schools Project: http://www.unl.edu/srs

Mary "Rina" M. Chittooran, PhD, NCSP, is on the faculty of Saint Louis University in St. Louis, MO, where she teaches courses in multicultural issues. Susan E. Chittooran, MSSW, is a policy analyst for the Women's Bureau, U.S. Department of Labor in New York City.

© 2010 National Association of School Psychologists, 4340 East West Highway, Suite 402, Bethesda, MD 20814, (301) 657-0270, Fax (301) 657-0275