

Keeping low-income students from being throwaway kids

By: Nat Hentoff – April 3, 2013

In many cities, as well as rural areas, low-income students — not only blacks and Hispanics — very soon get to feel unconnected to school. They may figure they're stupid or they just don't care. Dropping out, more than a few get involved with neighborhood gangs and wind up in prison cells.

But, as I've reported previously in "Teachers and Education Reformers Bypass Individual Students," Richard Weissbourd, a lecturer in education at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, is showing — through active research in a range of classrooms — how teachers, principals, school boards and legislators can rescue such kids from dead-end lives before they give up on schools.

Activating the pleasures and surprises of actually learning how to learn requires teachers who know more about each student than their collective scores on group achievement tests.

In his article "The 'Quiet' Troubles of Low-Income Children" in the Harvard Education Press book "Spotlight on Student Engagement, Motivation and (individual) Achievement," Weissbourd delves deeply — and for me, alarmingly — into many teachers' lack of concern or just plain inability to recognize individual students' vision and hearing problems. He also discusses the blurringly disorienting effect sleep deprivation has on the many students who are afflicted by it.

Though I've spent many years reporting from failing classrooms around the nation, I learned a lot more from that article about those deprivations while Weissbourd also taught me about other weighty "quiet problems" of low-income students I didn't know about.

"Frequent mobility," for example. How many of you, including me, have not taken this into account concerning the dropout statistics? Weissbourd writes:

"It's not uncommon in urban schools for about 20 percent of the student body to change schools in a given year. A U.S. Government Accountability Office report revealed that 'One-sixth of the nation's third graders — more than half a million children — have attended at least three different schools since starting first grade.'

"In areas of highly concentrated poverty, that number is often far higher. As a result, students may bounce between schools that have entirely different curricula and teaching practices, putting them at risk of school difficulties and reducing the chance that they will stay in school."

Nor had I thought of “caretaking responsibility” as a considerable “quiet problem.” Weissbourd has the figures to point out the effect of “having to take care of a depressed or sick parent or look after younger siblings. One study of high school students in three studies conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics indicated that 12 percent of high school dropouts nationwide left school to take care of a family member.

Among his reports of what’s being done to turn quiet problems into real-life learning achievements, he tells of the Lee Academy Pilot (public) School in Dorchester, Mass., getting a school social worker and a school intern to conduct an action-research project on “the causes of sleep deprivation among students.”

Parents in one preschool classroom began to “track evening activities in their household from 7 p.m. to wake-up the next morning.

“About 60 percent of the parents participated. The study found that children were getting an average of 9.5 hours of sleep at night, well below the 11.5-12 hours sleep that 3- and 4-year olds need.

“Simultaneously, the classroom teacher observed and tracked the behaviors, mood and academic engagement of each student.

“She saw a connection between the amount of sleep children had and their behavior and mood. The children getting less sleep and who were sleepy when they were awakened for the morning tended to be more irritable, teary and distracted and had more difficulty controlling impulses.”

As Richard Weissbourd continues to find teachers and schools focusing on the life-diminishing troubles of the increasing number of low-income children across the nation, I’ll be reporting them here along with those I discover elsewhere.

The media’s disinterest in these vital issues for the kids involved — and for this country — was exemplified by a tiny three-paragraph story in the March 20, 2013, New York Daily News:

“In a push to target (New York) city students who suffer from mental health conditions, schools chancellor Dennis Walcott plans to open 20 new school-based health clinics ... The schools will partner with hospitals to help students and their families deal with mental health issues that ‘impede academic achievement.’” Also, how about vision and hearing?

I do congratulate the Los Angeles Times for its substantial February 26, 2013 story “Black students learning gaps start early, report says.”

At the very end of the story, Frank Gilliam Jr., UCLA professor of public policy and political science, says:

“Whatever adjective is worse than bad, this is it.” He said of lagging black students, “We’re concluding, either explicitly or implicitly, that these are throwaway kids.”

In our America, a variety of throwaway kids abound.