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### Point of View

# Nichol: Improve education while increasing child poverty - an impossible NC strategy

By Gene Nichol

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The troubling correlation between education and poverty places North Carolina reform efforts in odd posture. For the powers-that-be on Jones Street and in the governor's office, the obsession to "reform" our education system – through vouchers, charters, endless tests, performance measures and the like – is matched only by an unequaled, defining pledge to ignore and, in operation, actually increase child poverty.

We'll use every school reform tool in the arsenal except the one the entire world knows matters most: lifting kids from debilitating hardship. As if a child can learn effectively when she is hungry, sick, ill-clad, unsupported, unchallenged and unprepared.

A couple of weeks ago, some of my accomplished colleagues released an immensely distressing study that bolsters the correlation. Chapel Hill and Madison medical scholars demonstrated that poverty has a direct, potent and harmful impact on early brain development.

By age 4, kids living in economic distress show diminished brain tissue essential to processing information. Potential identifying causes included poor nutrition, sleep deprivation, lack of suitable reading materials and stimulation, parental stress and unsafe physical environments. The causal list was long and non-exhaustive. The conclusion, though, was linear and inescapable: Poor kids begin to experience diminished life chances almost immediately.

Then the Public School Forum released its 2013 figures revealing that North Carolina's highest-spending 10 counties last year spent almost \$60,000 more per classroom than our lowest-spending ones. This unholy gap exists because of the variation in property wealth across the state. The richest counties have more than \$2 million in real estate capacity available per student. Poorer counties have about \$380,000 in capacity for each school kid. The gulf widens every year.

These two distinct but linked reports touch on a much larger, undisputed and even more opportunity-crushing reality: Students from economically disadvantaged families perform decidedly less well, on average, than their peers from more advantaged backgrounds. This, of course, is the ZIP code standard. Little matters as much to a kid's success as the wealth of his family and neighborhood.

Proof of our stunning economic achievement gap is fulsome. Stanford's Sean Reardon wrote last year that the link between family income and educational achievement "may be the most robust pattern demonstrated in all of education scholarship." In other words, not only do we know wealthier kids have a giant leg up in educational opportunity, we know it more irrefutably than we know anything else about American education. Some first principle.

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**And the long-developed pattern is picking up speed.** A new national report finds that the achievement gap between children from high- and low-income families is 40 percent larger for children born in 2001 than for those born 25 years earlier. In fact, it has been growing for 50 years. The income gap is now twice as large as the racial achievement gap. A half-century ago the numbers were reversed.

International comparisons tell an identical tale. Data from the massive Program for International Student Assessment show that among 15-year-olds – both here and in each of the 13 or so countries significantly outpacing us – students of diminished economic status have much lower test scores than their more advantaged homeland counterparts. In every single nation.

As Helen Ladd of Duke University and Edward Fiske of Fiske Guide to Colleges put it: "Can anyone credibly believe that the mediocre performance of American students on international tests is unrelated to the fact that (almost a quarter) of our children live in poverty?"

The Stanford Economic Policy Institute, after sifting through the new PISA findings, determined that if the U.S. had an economic composition similar to that of the leading nations, we'd rise from 14 to 6 in reading and from 25 to 13 in math.

In other words, we do worse than our international competitors because we allow about twice as many of our kids to live in wrenching poverty. We're the richest, to be sure. But we're also content to lead the advanced world in child poverty. This creates unspeakable hardship for millions of innocent kids. It also makes it demonstrably impossible to have one of the world's leading education systems.

The marriage of poverty and educational underperformance should give pause to the many Tar Heels who claim, I can attest, that the only anti-poverty program they support is education. It's a consoling thought, perhaps.

But it is literally, quite literally, impossible to secure equal educational opportunity while 26 percent of our children – 41 percent of our children of color – live in torturous poverty.

Gene Nichol is Boyd Tinsley distinguished professor at the UNC School of Law and director of the school's Center on Poverty, Work and Opportunity. He doesn't speak for UNC.

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