

Strike highlights split over poverty's role in learning

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By Stephanie Simon
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(Reuters) - The Chicago teachers strike, which appeared headed toward a resolution Friday, has underscored a fundamental split over the biggest issue confronting America's public schools: how to provide a decent education to children mired in poverty.

Across the U.S., poverty is irrefutably linked to poor academic performance. On last year's national reading exam, nine-year-olds from low-income families scored nearly three full grade levels below their wealthier peers. The gap was nearly as large in math.

The poor performance of poor students accounts for all of the achievement gap between U.S. students and their peers in academic powerhouses such as [South Korea](#) and Finland. On the latest international reading test, U.S. teens from more affluent schools were at the very top of global rankings, while those from schools with high poverty rates were near the bottom.

To many educators, including the teachers walking the picket lines in Chicago, the inescapable conclusion is that schools serving low-

income communities can be improved only by addressing the social ills associated with poverty.

EMPTY STOMACHS, ABUSED PSYCHES

Chicago teachers speak of children coming to school hungry and unwashed, with throbbing toothaches, without proper shoes. They talk of kids, scarred by violence, who desperately need counselors in schools that have none. They note that Chicago, where 87 percent of students qualify for federally subsidized meals, spends less than half as much per student as wealthy suburbs; the union says 160 of the city's elementary schools don't even have a library.

"I am hitting it hard in the classroom, giving it everything I have," said Romanetha Walker Looper, who teaches middle-school science. "But the students at my school..." She stopped, unable to put their struggles into words. "I'm their mother, teacher, nurse and psychologist," she said.

Karen Lewis, president of the Chicago Teachers Union, bluntly attributes poor student performance on standardized tests not to teachers or school administrators but to "factors beyond our control."

Yet a rival philosophy, which first gained traction with the "no child left behind" initiative, holds that such talk amounts to so many excuses. Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel and other education reformers argue that if kids are falling behind it's because their schools -- and their teachers -- are failing them. So public education needs a radical makeover.

The reformers' agenda starts with sorting schools by test scores and taking action against the worst by firing teachers, bringing in private management or shutting the school down altogether. Another key tactic: Hold teachers accountable for raising their students' standardized test scores.

Reformers, both Democrats and Republicans, have called improving urban schools the civil rights challenge of our time, saying society can no longer tolerate such vast inequalities in opportunity and achievement.

Michelle Rhee, the former chancellor of Washington D.C. schools and a leading reform advocate, put it this way in a recent piece for the Huffington Post: "Poverty presents huge challenges in our schools. But expectations of academic success for a child should never hinge on the circumstances of his or her birth."

A COCOON OF SUPPORT SERVICES

The reform movement has enjoyed a powerful wave of bi-partisan political support in recent years, from President Barack Obama on down. Yet in a few corners of the nation, with much less fanfare, the unions' preferred approach is being tested.

In Cincinnati, for instance, the public school district and an array of corporate and philanthropic donors have spent tens of millions over the past decade to wrap nearly every school in a cocoon of support services.

Most schools in poor neighborhoods have a full-time resource coordinator on staff to connect struggling families to the help they need. Often they don't have far to go: Many schools have food banks, health clinics and counseling centers on site. The schools are open into the evening for clubs, sports, tutoring, parenting classes and support groups.

The result: Kids are staying -- and succeeding -- in school like never before. In 2000, just 51 percent of ninth-graders made it to graduation. A decade later, the graduation rate hit 82 percent, district figures show.

The impoverished mining communities in McDowell County, West Virginia, are trying a similar tactic: They've built a coalition of 80 public and private groups, including the teachers union, to boost school achievement explicitly by tackling poverty.

Linda Darling-Hammond, an education professor at Stanford University and a supporter of this approach, says it has worked before.

During the War on Poverty in the 1960s and '70s, government invested in preschool, teacher training and urban development. The gap between the reading skills of black and white high-school students

shrank by two-thirds and high school graduation rates for black students more than doubled, Darling-Hammond said.

More recently, in the late 1990s, New Jersey began investing huge sums in its poor urban schools after courts repeatedly ordered it to erase inequities. Black and Hispanic students made rapid gains in both reading and math at the fourth-grade level, according to federal testing data, though the achievement gap didn't budge for older students.

"Kids in poverty can learn at much higher rates when they have the resources they need," Darling-Hammond said. When they don't get those resources and fail, she added, "you can't land all that on the backs of teachers."

HEAVY HOMEWORK, EXACTING STANDARDS

Reformers respond that kids need help now and can't wait until society finds the will or the means to fight a new war on poverty.

Their overhaul agenda does cost money. Districts that embark on reform may spend heavily to develop new standardized tests to measure teacher efficacy. They may also hire private managers to run schools deemed in need of an overhaul.

Philanthropies such as the Gates Foundation and the Walton Family Foundation have invested hundreds of millions in priorities of the reform agenda, such as charter schools and new teacher evaluation systems.

In Chicago the district has turned over a dozen low-performing schools to nonprofit turnaround specialist AUSL, or Academy for Urban School Leadership. Before making such a handoff, the district spends up to \$500,000 renovating the school with fresh paint, new athletic fields, and science and computer labs to send students and parents a signal that they're making a fresh start, district officials said.

The district also funds an extra assistant principal position for a year, at cost of \$140,000. And it pays AUSL an annual management fee of \$420 to \$500 per student.

Officials say targeted spending like this, meant to raise achievement in a specific school, is more feasible than a diffuse commitment to help kids everywhere overcome the challenges of poverty -- especially in a struggling district like Chicago, which faces a \$3 billion deficit over three years.

As proof that poverty is not insurmountable, reformers point to the stellar test scores posted by hundreds of "no excuses" charter schools nationwide.

Charter networks like KIPP, Achievement First, Yes Prep and Noble hold their students, mostly poor and minority, to exacting standards: They have heavy homework loads, extended school days, and rigorous behavior codes that may lead to disciplinary action for infractions such as failing to sit up straight.

From the first day, teachers -- who tend to be non-union -- emphasize that they expect students to excel and go to college. A great many do.

Union leaders point out that many charters don't achieve that level of success -- and in fact post worse scores than neighborhood schools -- and note that only highly motivated kids can stick with such a strenuous program. Teachers fear the emergence of a two-tier system in which the best students go to charters while traditional public schools are stuck with the rest.

Yet fans of charters say the fact that not every student can handle a rigorous school is no reason to deny the option to those who can.

"For certain poor kids, this is a great solution -- and there aren't a lot of other solutions out there," said Paul Tough, who has written extensively about education, including the just-released book "How Children Succeed."

Chicago school officials agree; their 2013 budget ramps up spending on charters by \$76 million.

OPTING FOR BEST OF BOTH

The debate over how to boost achievement for poor kids is emotional and often nasty; it rages on Twitter and in blog posts and in rival

reports that seek to build up or tear down the near-mythical status of top "no excuses" charter schools.

Behind the sharp rhetoric, however, the two sides may not be as far apart as they seem.

Consider Spark Academy, an elementary school in Newark, New Jersey, affiliated with the KIPP network of charter schools.

Teacher expectations are set so high, kids learn to identify themselves by what year they'll be graduating from college. But it's not all "no excuses."

The school, with just over 400 students, employs two full-time social workers and a dean whose sole job is to get students the help they need so they can focus on academics, whether it's grief counseling, medical treatment or a safe place to sleep, said Ryan Hill, executive director of KIPP's New Jersey network.

"The camp that says none of this stuff matters," Hill said, "is as wrong as those who say we can't make a difference with these kids."

(Editing by Jonathan Weber and Prudence Crowther)

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