

Child Poverty and Schools

*CTF Brief Presented to the Senate Committee
on Social Affairs, Science and Technology*



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Canadian Teachers' Federation
Fédération canadienne des enseignantes et des enseignants

We welcome this opportunity to address the Senate Committee on Social Affairs on the important issue of child poverty and its impact on schools and learning. The Canadian Teachers' Federation is the national voice for teachers on education and related social issues. Our membership includes Member organizations in every province and territory representing 220,000 teachers across the country.

The Canadian Teachers' Federation has a long-standing interest in reducing child poverty. In 1989 CTF issued a report which examined the impact of poverty on children, with particular reference to how poor children fare in elementary and secondary schools. Our policy on children and poverty states that: All children, regardless of family income or circumstances, have the right to the full benefits of publicly funded education. [http://www.ctf-fce.ca/e/programs/pd/children_and_poverty/policy_5_9.asp]

CTF is an active member of various coalitions and networks working to enhance the well-being of Canadian children and youth, including the National Alliance for Children and Youth and Campaign 2000. Among CTF's priorities is to support teachers and teachers' organizations as strong advocates for social justice, with a particular focus on issues related to child poverty.

Child poverty in context

Child poverty is a tragic and shameful fact of life in a nation as wealthy as ours. The child poverty rate remains at 1989 levels, the year of the all-party House of Commons resolution to end child poverty in Canada by the year 2000. According to Campaign 2000's most recent report card on child and family poverty, "despite a growing economy, a soaring dollar and low unemployment, Statistics Canada data shows the after-tax child poverty rate is 11.7%, exactly where it was when all federal parties decided action was urgently needed."

Other findings from the report paint a bleak national picture, particularly for vulnerable groups such as Aboriginal children, children of new immigrants and children with disabilities:

- **Children live in poverty across Canada.** Child poverty rates are at double digit levels in all provinces except Alberta, Quebec and PEI.
- **More parents are working, but they're still poor.** No matter where you live in Canada, full-time work at minimum wage is not an escape from poverty.
- **Children in families that face systemic discrimination run a much greater risk of growing up in poverty.** For children of recent immigrants, racialized communities, children with disabilities and children of single mothers, before-tax poverty rates range from 28 to 49%.
- **The First Nations population is young and growing and child poverty rates are a formidable barrier.** 28% of Aboriginal children living in First Nations communities were living in poverty in 2001, as were 40% living outside First Nation communities.
- **Families still live deeply in poverty.** The average low income family needs \$9,000 to \$11,000 more in annual income to move out of poverty.
- **Children depend on food banks to have enough to eat.** 280,900 children used food banks in 2006, almost double the number in 1989.

Poverty and schools

Child poverty is of course about much more than the statistics. The Canadian Council on Social Development says that “poverty is the stark reality of everyday life for millions of Canadians.”

Given the prevalence of child poverty in Canada, its effects inevitably get played out in schools and classrooms.

Laurel Rothman (of Campaign 2000) attempts to describe that hard reality through the words of children affected by poverty – she says that:

“The impact of poverty goes beyond material deprivation and contributes to social exclusion. As Grade 4 and 5 students in North Bay told us, poverty is:

- “feeling ashamed when my dad can’t get a job.”
- “pretending that you forgot your lunch.”
- “being afraid to tell your Mom you need gym shoes.”
- “not buying books at the book fair.”
- “not getting to go on school trips.”

Rothman emphasizes that:

Teachers and schools are essential and influential partners in improving life chances for low income students. As daily mentors in children’s lives, teachers experience the impact of poverty upon children. Recently teachers in Ontario shared their observations as part of a popular education strategy to mark October 17, the U.N.-designated day for the Elimination of Poverty.

Teachers wrote about:

- students who move and change schools frequently during the school year because the family does not have enough money to pay the rent;

- students who shrink from shame or lash out from anger and who feel the stigma of poverty;
- students who continue to suffer from low self-esteem and low confidence which grows in high school;
- students who sometimes lose hope that life can be any better.

CTF’s 1989 report found that many low-income children experience reduced motivation to learn, delayed cognitive development, lower achievement, less participation in extra-curricular activities, lower career aspirations, interrupted school attendance, lower university attendance, an increased risk of illiteracy, and higher drop-out rates.

The strong correlation between socio-economic status and children’s academic performance is well established. The inequities that exist between affluent and poor families with respect to education were the subject of a Statistics Canada study published in November 2006. In analyzing five-year-old children’s readiness to learn on the basis of gender, level of household income, and a child’s home environment, it concluded that children from lower income families were less ready to learn than children from more affluent households.

The study found important links between readiness to learn and what goes on in a child’s home environment. Specifically, it found that children with high levels of positive parental interaction, children who were read to daily, and a child’s participation in organized sports and general physical activity were all associated with higher scores on various measures of readiness to learn. The study also notes that “the fact that the lower income children were less likely to experience the home environment factor may help to explain the difference in readiness to learn between the income levels.”

Recommendations for action

A recent review of the literature on poverty and schooling prepared by the Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario in collaboration with OISE/UT sums up the challenge we as educators face:

The socially just response to what we know about the relationship between poverty and schooling is not only *to work within schools* to improve the quality of schooling children receive, but also *to work outside of schools* to address the poverty that negatively shapes students' learning opportunities to begin with. Schools, in other words, are important, but they cannot do it alone. [emphases added]

As such the paper stresses that

remedies to address the negative relationship between poverty and schooling outcomes must be two-pronged. They must ... include school-based policies (curriculum, staffing, professional development, community connections) as well as broader social and economic policies (housing, healthcare, wages, labour market protection and fairness). One set of reforms without the other will be insufficient.

Strategies and policy recommendations that could have a positive impact on inequitable educational opportunities linked to family socio-economic status include:

- an increased minimum wage;
- a restoration of broad eligibility for Employment Insurance;
- a major investment in social housing;
- improved accessibility and affordability of post-secondary education and training.

According to Campaign 2000, government programs such as the GST credit, the Canada Child Tax Benefit, and Employment Insurance make a significant difference in reducing Canada's poverty rate for low income families with children – in 2005 the child poverty rate would have been a third higher without public investments.

Specific strategies for ensuring all children are better provided for include:

- a universal child care system providing high quality care for all children;
- investment in other early childhood education initiatives designed to help develop school readiness;
- support for school boards and relevant community agencies in their attempts to coordinate health, recreation, and social services at school sites.

School-level strategies to support low-income students should include providing teachers and principals with the ongoing professional development and resources necessary to support the development of effective teaching and learning in Canada's increasingly diverse classrooms.

CTF believes that the effort expended in addressing poverty-related student needs must be recognized in the determination of:

- class size and class composition;
- school resource personnel;
- school budgets.

There is growing momentum to tackle poverty. Opinion polls show that most Canadians believe concrete government action can drastically reduce poverty. In addition several provinces have taken or are planning to take steps to address poverty.

There are also important lessons to be learned from the international experience in reducing child poverty. Poverty reduction makes sound economic sense as is demonstrated by Denmark, Sweden and Finland, among the most economically competitive nations in the world – these countries have the lowest child poverty rates along with strong social safety nets.

The Canadian Teachers' Federation joins the call for political commitment to a national poverty reduction strategy for Canada. Parents should be able to provide an adequate living standard for their children – working together, governments can ensure that is possible.

Sources and further reading

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