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Since the late 1960s, a variety of federal, state, and local programs has been designed and implemented in an effort to offset the profound difficulties children from economically and socially disadvantaged backgrounds encounter when they enter our

public schools. Many of these programs prepare preschool children of low socioeconomic status (SES) for the challenges they face as they begin their education. Other programs seek to improve the achievement levels of low-SES students who are already struggling in schools that lack the resources to provide them with the special attention they need for success. The idea, of course, is to educate these students beyond their poverty, that is, to give them the intellectual tools and social skills necessary to become productive, working adults.

HOW MANY CHILDREN?

The statistics on children who live in poverty portray a picture of a nation struggling to keep up with the problem and perhaps not fully committed to solving it. The United States has a much higher incidence of child poverty than does other Western nations, and the percentage of impoverished children in the population has continued to increase during the past two decades (Cohen 1993). Although young people constitute only 25 percent of the population, they represent almost 40 percent of those persons classified as poor.
Most of these impoverished children are black (43.1 percent) or Hispanic (39.6 percent) (McCormick 1989). In 1987, 31 percent of impoverished children under the age of six lived in large cities (National Center for Children in Poverty 1990).

The price these children pay for being born poor is enormous. Carta (1991) cites several sources indicating that low-SES children living in inner cities are much more likely to have educationally damaging circumstances as part of their life experiences than are higher SES children. The dangers they face include prenatal exposure to drugs and AIDS, low birth weight, poor nutrition, lead exposure, and personal injuries and accidents. Poor inner city youth are seven times more likely to be the victims of child abuse or neglect than are high-SES children.

Any one or a combination of these factors puts low-SES students at great risk for having substandard levels of academic achievement. Not unexpectedly, these circumstances lead low-SES students to drop out of school far more frequently than their higher SES counterparts. As many as one million at-risk students drop out each year (McCormick).

WHAT ARE THE COSTS?

The costs of NOT acting to assist low-SES youth are enormous. According to one estimate, the lifetime personal income lost as a result of dropping out ranges from $20,000 to $200,000 per individual. The cumulative personal income lost nationally as a result of student dropouts is staggering; for example, lost income from dropouts from the high school class of 1981 is estimated to be more than $238 billion, with lost tax revenues of $68 billion. The initial costs of programs focused on keeping economically disadvantaged youths in school are, according to most experts, well worth the investment, yielding a long-term savings of $4.75 for every dollar spent (McCormick).

WHAT IS BEING DONE?

At the federal level, the Head Start program has made some progress in improving the preparedness of disadvantaged preschool children for entry into our public schools. Federal funds from the Chapter 1 program also help state and local education agencies establish compensatory programs, especially in math, reading, and writing, for the millions of children whose families live at or below the poverty level. State education offices and school districts have also experimented locally with programs that seek to give low-SES students better opportunities to succeed in their education. Nevertheless, the federal monies available for programs targeted to at-risk children make up at most only about 7 percent of state education budgets (Drazen 1992), and local districts in low-income areas where compensatory programs are most needed rarely have sufficient revenue to offer all the special programs their students require.

Occasionally these programs have been criticized for not being as effective as they might be, both in their educational results and in their administration. Drazen cites one study that reported that Chapter 1 services "were distributed among schools in most districts randomly with respect to poverty, achievement, and concentration of Chapter 1 students within individual schools."

Reviews of the Head Start program have been generally positive. Some data show that Head Start participants reaped immediate short-term benefits, including improved cognitive and social development, grade promotion, and better health. Gains in I.Q. measures, however, were modest and disappeared after one or two years (Drazen, McCormick).

Drazen used U.S. Department of Education data collected between 1972 and 1988 by the National Longitudinal Studies Program to study the changes in associations between student achievement levels in reading and math and such factors as SES, family income, and community income. She found few changes in the correlations between achievement and family income over the sixteen-year period. Given the nature of the social changes over the past twenty years, she notes that simply stabilizing the association between achievement and family characteristics might be counted as progress.

WHAT ARE THE LINKS BETWEEN POVERTY AND LEARNING?

One recent study revealed strong links between family income levels and children's I.Q.s. Studying a sample of 900 children born with low birth weight, Duncan found that those who lived in "persistent poverty" during their first five years had I.Q.s averaging 9.1 points lower than the I.Q.s of the children in the sample whose families were not impoverished. Duncan concluded that "there is little doubt that child poverty...is scarring

the development of our nation's children" (Cohen).
Several researchers have focused on family beliefs, values, and attitudes among low-SES households. Campbell and others (1991) found that low-SES parents who had rigid, authoritarian beliefs about rearing and educating children had a strongly negative influence on their children's achievement levels in reading. Low-SES children's participation in an early childhood education intervention program tended to modify the authoritarian views of their parents.

Datcher-Loury (1989) studied a group of low-income black children from three sites to determine if differences in academic performance were attributable "to differences in behavior and attitudes among the families." Based on the results of the students' achievement on reading and math tests and on interviews with and observations of the children's mothers, Datcher-Loury concluded that differences in family behavior and attitudes did have "large and important long-term effects on children's academic performance." Given these results, Datcher-Loury suggests that "programs aimed at altering parental behavior may be useful in helping to overcome the effects of economic disadvantage on children's scholastic achievement."

Carta reported on a study designed to assess the effectiveness of a preschool training program for low-income, inner-city children. At-risk preschoolers were taught "classroom survival skills" in preparation for their entry into regular education kindergarten and first-grade classrooms. She concluded that low-SES preschoolers need to be placed in programs that teach them to participate in large academic groups, complete their seatwork tasks independently, and make effective transitions between classroom activities.

DOES FINANCIAL EQUITY MATTER?

Low-SES students often find themselves at another disadvantage not of their own making: they generally are clustered in schools that are grossly underfunded, while other nearby schools attended primarily by higher SES students receive substantially more funding on a per-pupil basis. Although the relationship between higher levels of per-pupil expenditures and improved levels of academic performance is not clear cut (Hanushek 1989), researchers have continued to press the case that inequities unfairly penalize those living in poor school districts.
One recent study used new cost-analysis models to review spending patterns in eighty-four academic high schools in New York. For each additional $100 spent on classroom instruction, students gained as much as 18 points on the combined scores for the mathematics and verbal sections of the Scholastic Aptitude Tests after adjustments were made for student socioeconomic status and teaching experience of school staff (Harp 1993b).

Some policy-makers now argue that financial restructuring must take place to help low-SES students overcome the disadvantages built into current school finance

structures (Harp 1993a). It seems self-evident that if poor children attend poorly funded schools, they are not likely to achieve at the same levels as their counterparts attending better funded schools.

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