



## The Economy, Families and Schools

**By: Ronald Williamson**

The recession has impacted American families and the schools their children attend like nothing in recent memory. Many families continue to struggle with the impact of joblessness. The number of homeless children and youth is staggering. Families struggle with access to health care, growing hunger and greater instability in the family unit.

### **The Current Status**

Numbers fail to adequately describe the impact of the recession on American families but here is some recent data provided by the Pew Research Center and the Census Bureau. The Pew Center found that the recession impacted American's differently---those who "lost ground" (55% of Americans) and those who "held their own" (45% of Americans).

- More than 44% of Americans say the recession has led to "major changes" in the way they live.
- The number of people in poverty reached its highest level in 51 years.
- More than 1 million homeless students attended public schools in 2008-09, a 41% increase over the previous two years. Five states had growth more than double the national rate: Texas (139%), Iowa (136%), New Mexico (91%), Kansas (88%), and New Jersey (84%).
- Fewer families are moving with the number changing homes declining steadily since 2006.
- The income gap between the richest and poorest Americans last year was the largest on record.
- More than 49 million people (16% of population) live in multi-generational homes, growing by 2.6 million in the last year.
- The use of food stamps has grown 32% since 2007.

### One Recession, Two Americas

Even though economists say the recession ended more than a year ago, it continues to be defined by the differential impact on the poorest and most vulnerable Americans. Data show that people with college degrees are less likely to be impacted. Of those who “lost ground” more than 43% were unemployed compared to less than 1% of those who “held their own.” This table portrays the differences among the groups.

% in each group who . . .	Held Their Own	Lost Ground
Were unemployed during recession	1	43
Recession brought “major” changes to lives	0	44
Borrowed money from friends/family to pay bills	0	42
Trouble finding or paying for health care	0	48
Trouble paying rent or mortgage	0	35
Household finances worse now than before recession	29	64
Family income declined	14	48
Withdrew money from savings, retirement to pay bills	19	60
Avg. number of hardships	0.6	3.7

Both the PEW Research Center and the Census Bureau found that this recession was more likely to impact young people. More than 69% of those ages 18-29 “lost ground” compared with less than 30% of those age 65 or older.

### The Impact on Schools

School employees, in general, are among those groups who “held their ground.” As members of the middle class they have largely been unaffected by the recession except for when friends or family lost jobs, the decline in home values, or when confronted by students’ families who are dealing with the emotional stress involved with job loss and an uncertain future.

The recession has impacted schools in other, more tangible, ways.

- Many students are now seeking jobs, working longer hours or leaving school early to work and support their family.
- The recession has impacted student participation in athletics and other activities. In response

to declining revenue, many schools adopted fees for participation in school activities. Families under stress are less able to pay the fees. One district raised fees from \$20 to \$30 and saw participation decline by more than 20%.

- There has been an accompanying increase in requests for waiver of school fees.
- Applications for participation in the free/reduced lunch program have accelerated even at the high school level where many students are reluctant to participate. Participation rose by more than 425,000 during the last year.

There has also been an impact on school improvement efforts. Many initiatives have slowed due to uncertain funding. There are fewer opportunities for professional development and programs that do not have a direct link to a school's academic mission are vulnerable.

### **What Schools Can Do**

While there is no single strategy for dealing with these issues, several ideas have emerged that can help principals respond to the crisis.

First, recognize your important role supporting your employees as well as students and their families. Pay attention to people and encourage your staff to do the same. Work with your school counselors and social workers to provide support to everyone in need. Talk with community agencies about ways that students and families can connect to the resources they need to deal with hunger and lack of health care. For example, in Cottage Grove, OR area churches share responsibility for providing free meals every evening. The location rotates from church to church and provides families with a needed resource.

Second, identify ways that families can be connected to school events. A school in southern Michigan no longer charges for some activities but rather advertises them broadly in the community as both a point of community pride and as "no-cost" entertainment.

Third, talk with other principals in your district, and nearby districts, about how they are responding. Move the conversation beyond routine management issues to include ways to provide social support to one another and to your greater school community. Look for ways to pool resources and continue services for students.

Fourth, talk with local businesses or social service agencies about ways to create a partnership. One school in Washington state provided a room for a local clinic to use to provide free health care for students and families. A school in Utah worked with area musicians to provide lessons and other support to students in their music program.

Fifth, remain unconditionally optimistic. Don't neglect the real impact of the recession but focus on your school's achievements, the achievement of your students and the skills of your teachers.

### **Final Thoughts**

The past two years have been challenging for America's families and its schools. Despite the

negative impact it is important to recognize the potential of American schools, and their leaders, to support people during these times and to help them prepare for a more optimistic future.

**Online Resources:**

Census Bureau Data - USA Today provides an interactive site where you can access data from the Census Bureau on the economy's impact in your region.

[www.usatoday.com/news/nation/census/american-community-survey-2009.htm](http://www.usatoday.com/news/nation/census/american-community-survey-2009.htm).

One Recession, Two Americas, the report of the Pew Research Center is available at <http://pewsocialtrends.org/pubs/766/poll-one-recession-two-americas-lost-ground-held-their-own>

Critical Moment: Child and Youth Homelessness in Our Nation's Schools – From First Focus - [http://www.firstfocus.net/sites/default/files/HomelessEd\\_0.pdf](http://www.firstfocus.net/sites/default/files/HomelessEd_0.pdf)

Impact of Father's Unemployment on Adolescents (Ortiz & Farrell, 1993)– This article discusses the impact of parental unemployment on adolescents.

[http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_m2248/is\\_n112\\_v28/ai\\_14777827/](http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m2248/is_n112_v28/ai_14777827/)

Homeless Resource Exchange - US Department of Housing and Urban Development – This site provides multiple resources for addressing homelessness.

<http://www.hudhre.info/index.cfm>

Number of Homeless Families Climbing Due to Recession (Sard, 2009)– Center on Budget and Policy Priorities – Recent data about homelessness is available at this site.

<http://www.cbpp.org/cms/index.cfm?fa=view&id=2228>

Poverty Data – US Census Bureau – This site reports on the most recent poverty data.

<http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/poverty/poverty.html>

National Center on Homeless Education – SERVE Center at University of North Carolina at Greensboro – This site provides links to information and services for homeless students.

<http://www.serve.org/NCHE/m-v.php>

Families and Work Report from Family and Work Institute – This report discusses the changing workforce.

[http://www.familiesandwork.org/site/research/reports/Times\\_Are\\_Changing.pdf](http://www.familiesandwork.org/site/research/reports/Times_Are_Changing.pdf)

US Census Bureau Current Population Survey – This site links to current data on family income, poverty and health insurance.

<http://www.census.gov/cps/>

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