

Concentrated Poverty and Public Education

The biggest problem facing Buffalo's public schools is the fact that most of the students live in poverty and segregation. Western New York school districts, including Buffalo, are similar to public school districts around the nation, in that they work quite well when their students are affluent or middle income. When their students are living in concentrated poverty, however, there are innumerable barriers to academic success.

Nationally, the close correlation between poverty and educational challenge can be seen at every level.

- Over 22% of children who experience poverty do not graduate high school by age 19, compared to 6% of children who do not experience poverty.¹ Among children who experience poverty, live in areas of concentrated poverty, and are not reading proficiently by third grade, 35% fail to graduate by age 19.²
- Nationwide, 82% of students eligible for free/reduced school lunch score below proficiency in reading, compared to 52% of those not eligible.³
- Poor children are twice as likely to have repeated a grade, to have been expelled or suspended, or to have dropped out of high school, and they are 1.4 times as likely to have been identified as learning-disabled.⁴
- The states with the highest poverty levels, Mississippi (22%) and New Mexico (20%), have the second and third worst on-time graduation rates: Mississippi (62%) and New Mexico (64.8%).⁵
- The poorest cities tend to have the lowest graduation rates, as can be seen in the following table:

Of Buffalo public school children, 77.5% qualify for free or reduced price lunch.¹ At Williamsville East, 6% qualify for free or reduced price lunch.¹

<i>City</i>	<i>Poverty Rate (2010)</i>	<i>On-Time Graduation Rate (Class of 2005)⁶</i>
Detroit	38%	37.5%
Cleveland	34%	34.4%
Miami	32%	55.9% (Dade County)
Milwaukee	30%	41.0%
Fresno	30%	51.9%
Philadelphia	27%	62.1%
Baltimore	26%	41.5%
Memphis	26%	51.2%
Atlanta	26%	43.5%
Dallas	24%	50.8%

Years of research have shown that poverty is a severe educational disadvantage, and that living in high poverty neighborhoods and attending high poverty schools are **additional** disadvantages, so that, for example, a middle income student will fare much worse in a poor neighborhood and a high poverty school than a middle income student in a middle income neighborhood and middle income school. As the Poverty and Race Research Action Council summarizes the research:

- Most successful schools are those in which the middle class is the majority. Success starts turning to failure when the school becomes 50% low income.
- When half a student body is poor, then all students' achievement will be depressed.
- When 75% is poor, then all students' achievement will be "seriously" depressed.
- A district with over 60% poor children "can no longer rely solely on its own internal efforts" to avoid failure.⁷

Concentrations of extreme segregated poverty have been increasing, not decreasing, in western New York as in the nation. From 2000 to 2010, the number of people living in neighborhoods of extreme poverty grew by one third in the United States.⁸ In the city of Buffalo, 15 of 79 census tracts have poverty rates over 40% and four have rates over 50%.

Levels of educational racial segregation for black and Latino students have been increasing since the 1980s across the United States. Seventy-seven percent of Latino students and 73% of black students attend majority minority schools. In the Northeast and Midwest, roughly nine out of ten white students attend low poverty schools, while less than one out of twenty minority students attend low poverty schools.⁹

Cities, where poverty tends to be concentrated, are faring much worse than suburbs.

- As of 2009, the graduation rate in the nation's 50 largest cities was 53%, compared to 71% in the suburbs.¹⁰
- In Western New York, all of Buffalo Business First's highest ranked high schools except for City Honors are located in affluent suburbs: Williamsville, East Aurora, Clarence, Lewiston-Porter, Orchard Park, Alden, Eden, etc. The thirteen lowest ranked high schools are all in Buffalo. The next three lowest are in Salamanca, Niagara Falls, and Lackawanna, where poverty rates are also high. Of Buffalo public school children, 77.5% qualify for free or reduced price lunch.¹¹ At Williamsville East, the top ranked public school after City Honors, 6% qualify.¹²

The Buffalo-Niagara metropolitan region is not unusually poor. In 2010, the metropolitan area poverty rate was 13.8%, compared to a national rate of 15.1%. What is unusual about Buffalo-Niagara is the concentration of poverty in urban areas.

- In 2010, the poverty rate for Buffalo was nearly 29.6%, and for Niagara Falls it was 22.8%, while the poverty rate for the metropolitan area outside these two cities was roughly 8%.
- Deep poverty is even more concentrated than poverty in general. As of January 2007, of Erie County residents receiving Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF), 78.4% were in the city of Buffalo.¹³

Buffalo-Niagara's poverty is highly segregated.

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- In the metro area, 81.4% of African-Americans and 58.9% of Hispanics live in high poverty neighborhoods, compared with 10.7% of whites.¹⁴
- As of 2005, the poverty rate in the metro area for African-Americans was 32.3%, for Hispanics 29.8%, and for whites 8.7%.¹⁵
- In Buffalo-Niagara Falls Metro Area, of the 65,724 foreign born people, 24.97% are living in poverty.

If its student population were not so impoverished, the Buffalo Public School system would function much like its counterparts in Amherst and West Seneca. In fact, the top ranked public high school in Western New York is City Honors, where between 21% and 30% of the families are receiving public assistance. However, at all of the eight Buffalo public high schools ranked at the bottom for Western New York, over 60% of the families are receiving public assistance. At Riverside, East, and Lafayette, over 80% of the families receive public assistance, and at Grover Cleveland over 90% do.¹⁶

Policy Implications

If state and federal policymakers wish to improve public education, their top priority should be to reduce poverty and segregation by race and income. Fighting poverty means increasing incomes and decreasing expenses for people with low incomes. Policies such as increasing the minimum wage and the earned income tax credit will bolster incomes, while funding for public transportation, health care, and affordable housing will decrease costs for people with low incomes. While these may not appear to be “education” policies, they will dramatically improve educational outcomes.

Western New York is home to some of the worst racial and economic inequality and segregation in the nation. Wealthier residents have moved en masse to the suburbs, leaving the city and its school district with the greatest needs and the fewest resources to meet those needs. Western New York needs state and federal policies and investments that improve the incomes of city residents while also giving middle and upper income families more incentives to live in the city.

Governor Cuomo has announced a plan to bring \$1 billion to Buffalo to spur revitalization. An ideal use of that \$1 billion would be not to pay an out of state company (or two or three) to locate in Western New York, but to hire Buffalo residents to rebuild the neighborhoods around their schools.

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When it comes to educational policy, Buffalo’s public schools do not need more top-down mandates, tests, and evaluations. The relentless focus on student testing and teacher evaluation has become a distraction from the far more important problems of poverty and segregation, and it is sucking up scarce time and resources that can be better used on classroom teaching and support services. Classroom teachers, who know their students’ needs the best, must be empowered to have a greater role in running individual schools and the district as a whole. Schools should become hubs of supportive services for students and their families.

Another model of school reform is entirely possible and eminently desirable. Education scholar Diane Ravitch summarizes why Finnish schools are dramatically outperforming American schools in a recent essay:

Teachers have wide latitude at each school in deciding what to teach, how to teach, and how to gauge their pupils’ progress. Finnish educators agree that “every child has the right to get personalized support provided early on by trained professionals as part of normal schooling.” Sahlberg estimates that some 50 percent of students receive attention from specialists in the early years of schooling. Teachers and principals frequently collaborate to discuss the needs of the students and the school.

The children of Finland enjoy certain important advantages over our own children. The nation has a strong social welfare safety net, for which it pays with high taxes. More than 20 percent of our children live in poverty, while fewer than 4 percent of Finnish children do. Many children in the United States do not have access to regular medical care, but all Finnish children receive comprehensive health services and a free lunch every day. Higher education is tuition-free.¹⁷

Obviously, neither the United States nor New York State is going to become Finland overnight. But it is worth remembering that another way is possible, and that each step we take toward it will improve the lives of public school children.

¹ Donald J. Hernandez, “Double Jeopardy: How Third Grade Reading Skills and Poverty Influence High School Graduation,” Annie E. Casey Foundation (2012)

² Id.

³ Annie E. Casey Foundation, KIDS COUNT

⁴ Christy Brady-Smith et al, “Poverty and Education Overview,” Education Encyclopedia, <http://education.stateuniversity.com/pages/2330/Poverty-Education.html>

⁵ Annie E. Casey Foundation, KIDS COUNT

⁶ Christopher Swanson, *Closing the Education Gap* (Aprile 2009, EPE Research Center)

⁷ PRRAC, “Annotated Bibliography: The Impact of School-Based Poverty Concentration on Academic Achievement & Student Outcomes” http://www.prrac.org/pdf/annotated_bibliography_on_school_poverty_concentration.pdf

⁸ Sabrina Tavernise, “Study Finds Big Spike in Poorest in the U.S.,” NY Times, 11/3/11.

⁹ Gary Orfield and Chungmei Lee, “Why Segregation Matters: Poverty and Educational Inequality” (Harvard University Civil Rights Project, 2005).

¹⁰ America’s Promise Alliance, *Closing the Education Gap* (2009)

¹¹ DataPlace, Data Profile for Buffalo, NY. Electronically retrieved from <http://www.dataplace.org/place> on February 23, 2011.

¹² New York State Education Department Report Cards, see <https://reportcards.nysed.gov/schools.php?district=800000052968&year=2010>

¹³ New York State Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance, www.otda.ny.gov.

¹⁴ DiversityData & Harvard School of Public Health, *Share of Population Living in High Poverty Neighborhoods by Race/Ethnicity (For year: 2000)* (2007), <http://diversitydata.sph.harvard.edu/rankings.jsp?i=545>.

¹⁵ Irene Pijuan, “Poverty in the City of Buffalo” (2008).

¹⁶ New York State Education Department Report Cards, see <https://reportcards.nysed.gov/schools.php?district=800000052968&year=2010>

¹⁷ Diane Ravitch, “Schools We Can Envy,” New York Review of Books, March 8, 2012

Partnership for the Public Good
www.ppgbuffalo.org
237 Main St., Suite 1200, Buffalo NY 14203