

Making Sure McCleary Meets the Educational Needs of All Children

Summary:

It is clear that Washington State needs to fully fund education, but actions aimed at the K-12 system alone are insufficient, and threaten to widen the achievement gap for low-income and poor students. Research shows a strong link between family economic hardship in early childhood and poor academic outcomes (Duncan, Yeung, Brooks-Gunn & Smith, 1998, p. 406). Deep cuts to other important state services could even reverse gains made by proposed education reforms. Accordingly, a commitment to improving educational outcomes for all children – especially those from low-income families – requires a full commitment to health and social services.

What is Washington State’s obligation to our children’s education?

The constitutional obligation of the state is to, “make ample provision for the education of all children residing within its borders, without distinction or preference on account of race, color, caste or sex” (Washington State Constitution, article IX, Section I). However, in recent years, it has become clear that our state is not meeting this obligation to our children.

Therefore, the Washington state legislature passed ESHB 2261 and SHB 2776, in 2009 and 2010 respectively, which laid out a plan to improve public schools that included:

- Full-day kindergarten classes;
- K-3 class-size reduction to 17 students per classroom (from an average of 25.2 students per classroom);
- Increased funds for maintenance, supplies, and operating costs; and
- Fully funded transportation for students.

What is the McCleary ruling and how does it affect proposed education reforms?

The Washington State’s Supreme Court ruled in the case of *McCleary v State* (2012) that the state was violating the constitutional rights of children by failing to amply fund K-12 public education. The court mandated that progress must be made quicker by fully funding basic education by the 2018-2019 school year with the plans outlined by ESHB 2261 and SHB 2276. The court ruling stressed the importance of education by stating:

“Amplly provided, free public education operates as the great equalizer in our democracy, equipping citizens born into underprivileged segments of our society with the tools they need to compete on a level playing field with citizens born into wealth or privilege.”

Will the McCleary ruling affect other state services?

While improvements required by the McCleary ruling are a step in the right direction, they are not enough to give all children the resources and opportunities they need to succeed at school. We must also acknowledge the critical role of other state services that ensure children are ready and able to learn – even a world-class education system cannot guarantee academic success for children who do not feel safe and secure at home or in their communities.

Therefore, a more holistic view of education that embraces early learning, health and social services is imperative in order to fulfill the state’s obligation. If these important services are slashed to fund education alone, we cannot truly “level the playing field” for all children.

What are the risk factors for academic success that cannot be addressed by increasing funding for education alone?

Research shows that living in poverty has a wide range of negative effects on physical and mental health, and particularly adverse effects on academic outcomes, especially during early childhood (American Psychological Association, 2012). Children in poverty are more likely to experience the following adversities, which impact their ability to learn (American Psychological Association, 2012):

- **Chronic stress:** stressors linked to poverty affect children’s concentration and memory
- **Food insecurity:** hungry children exhibit 7-12 times as many symptoms of conduct disorder than their peers
- **Housing instability:** schooling for homeless children is often interrupted or delayed, with homeless children twice as likely to have a learning disability, repeat a grade, or to be suspended from school

- **Neighborhood unsafety:** exposure to violence in communities can lead to trauma, injury, and disability
- **Health issues:** children in poor communities are at increased risk for low birth weight, obesity, asthma, anemia, and pneumonia
- **Behavioral and emotional conditions:** children in poverty can experience more impulsiveness, difficulty getting along with peers, aggression, ADHD, conduct disorder, anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem
- **Child welfare involvement:** parents who experience poverty and homelessness are at greater risk for child abuse and neglect

If poverty is a major risk factor for academic success, where does Washington State stand?

In Washington, the number of children in poverty is on the rise. In 2012, 18.5 percent of children lived in families with incomes below the poverty threshold, an increase from 14.3 percent in 2008 (Kids Count Data Center, 2014). Thirty-three percent of single-parent households in 2012 were under the poverty threshold (Kids Count Data Center, 2014). Furthermore, research suggests that, on average, families need an income of about two times the federal poverty level, currently \$23,850 for a family of four (Families USA, 2014), to meet their most basic needs (NCCP, Basic Facts about Low-Income Children, 2011).

Are there other vulnerable populations that are greatly impacted by poverty?

Racial Disparities: Compared to the statewide average, 34 percent of Black or African American, 35 percent of Hispanic or Latino, and 35 percent of American Indian children are living in poverty (Kids Count Data Center, 2014). Furthermore, the academic achievement gap for poorer children is particularly pronounced for these groups compared to their White peers (American Psychological Association, 2012). In Washington, whites and Asians are ahead of other ethnic groups in most subjects and grades. Black, Hispanic, and American Indian students have made less progress than whites or Asians in reducing the percent of students not meeting academic standards (Washington State School Directors' Association, 2002).

Child Welfare-Involved Families: Child welfare research continually associates child maltreatment with poverty, demonstrating that children living in families with fewer resources are at greater risk for abuse or neglect than those from a higher socioeconomic status (Cancian, Slack, & Yang, 2010). The Children's Defense Fund reports that "children who live in families with an annual income less than \$15,000 are 22 times more likely to be abused or neglected than children living in families with an annual income of \$30,000 or more" (2005). This does not mean, however, that most poor parents maltreat or neglect their children – in fact, a small percentage of families ever interact with the child welfare system.

Still, the consequences of child maltreatment are known

to continue to extend well into childhood and youth, affecting educational outcomes and other related areas, such as mental and physical health, relationship quality, and antisocial behavior (Cancian, Slack, & Yang, 2010).

So how can we ensure that all children have equal opportunities for academic success?

The educational needs of all children cannot be met without also addressing the full spectrum of issues that children in poverty face. Though education may be the 'great equalizer', a reformed public education system is unlikely to fully achieve the desired outcomes if students' ability to learn is compromised by poverty. In order to fulfill their duty to provide quality basic education that is also fair and inclusive, the state must ensure that investments in social and health services are made so that all children, particularly those who experience poverty, have a chance to succeed. By neglecting the economic situations of families, the state will pass over students with the greatest need for support.

As the state moves forward to comply with the Supreme Court's ruling in *McCleary v State*, it is crucial for policymakers to bear in mind that children cannot succeed academically unless they are well-positioned to do so – not only at school, but also within their families and communities.

Endnotes

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