

# Learning Roundtable- Educating the Children of Poverty Summary

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September 12, 2016

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State Board of Education Chair Donna Bahorich welcomed about 200 conference attendees to the Learning Roundtable – Educating the Children of Poverty. She noted that the conference was also being livestreamed. “There is no more important conversation than the one we are having in Texas today,” she said. The conference focused on how we can all be more effective in the classroom, especially when nearly six of every 10 students “are dealing with the constant challenges that come with living in poverty.”

Mrs. Bahorich noted that Texas has seen a rapid rise in the percentage of economically disadvantaged children. In the 1987-1988 school year, 35 percent of Texas public school students were economically disadvantaged. By the 2001-2002 school year, half the state’s students or 50.5 percent came from economically disadvantaged families. By 2016-2017, that rate had reached 59 percent or 3.1 million of the state’s 5.3 million public school students. That represents an additional 1 million children struggling with the challenges of poverty just since 2001.

The conference brought together national and state researchers and practitioners to share information about practices that will make a difference. “If we get this right..., it will change lives and futures not only for the children of poverty but for our state and most definitely in our nation,” the board chair said.

Commissioner of Education Mike Morath talked about how his life changed through his Big Brother-Little Brother relationship with a Dallas student and how that relationship allowed him to see the impact of poverty. School was a refuge from this student’s home life but the young man was passed from grade to grade without much demanded of him. At age 16 when the student attempted to apply for a job, he couldn’t complete the employment application because he was functionally illiterate.

The vision of the Texas Education Agency says that all children will be prepared for a life of success but sometimes the education system falls short of that goal, Mr. Morath said. “It occurs despite the huge number of adults who spend almost all their waking hours focused on the needs of children,” he said.

But Commissioner Morath reminded the audience, “Demography isn’t destiny.” Improving the education provided to the nearly 60 percent of children from economically disadvantaged

homes is the “single biggest issue facing Texas today” because it will impact not only these students but the welfare of the whole state.

### **Turning High Poverty Schools into High Performing Schools**

Dr. William Parrett and Dr. Kathleen Budge, both of Boise State University, talked about the findings of their research, which they published in 2012 in a book called *Turning High Poverty Schools into High Performing Schools*.

They studied schools that they called “outliers,” which were high poverty schools that achieved academic performance that was high above that achieved by schools with similar demographics. Dr. Budge, the coordinator of Boise State’s Executive Educational Leadership Program, said, “We know what an effective school looks like” but often there is “a gap between what we know works and what we do.” While there is no magic list of actions to take to turn high poverty schools into high performing campuses, the educators did see certain factors over and over again as they researched the issue.

They believe a framework built around three goals helps achieve success. Those are: foster a healthy, safe, supportive learning environment, focus on learning, and build leadership capacity.

To foster a healthy, safe, supportive learning environment, they suggest:

- Eliminate blame;
- Establish a safe environment;
- Develop an accurate understanding of poverty;
- Level the playing field;
- Use structures and processes that promote relationships;
- Engage parents and families as partners.

When focusing on learning,

- Challenge the pedagogy of poverty; develop a common instructional framework;
- Teach every child to read proficiently;
- Confront and eliminate tracking and ability grouping;
- Provide additional quality instructional time;
- Offer job-embedded professional learning.

To build leadership capacity,

- Go back and find the time;
- Use effective hiring and retention practices;
- Confront and eliminate low expectations;
- Consider your budget a moral document. Does the budget reflect what you say you are doing?

Dr. Parrett, the director of the Center for School Improvement and Policy Studies, reminded the audience that it is also important for educators to build warm, caring supportive relationships with their students. Even one meaningful, supportive relationship with an adult can mean the difference between a child achieving a high school diploma or dropping out. “We must combat hopelessness,” he said.

### **Achievement and Opportunity in America: What Can We Do?**

Kati Haycock, chief executive officer of The Education Trust, looked at data from a national level. She noted that she would be discussing both poverty and race because both matter and need to be considered by policymakers.

As the first nation to provide universal access to high school education, graduation rates rose for decades but by the 1980s, she said, economic inequality started eating at progress. Instead of being the most equal, the United States now has the third highest income inequality among developed nations. In the last 30 years, it has become harder for Americans to escape poverty as adults.

At the individual level, education is the answer to improved circumstances. The country appears to be seeing some improved performance after a decade of fairly flat achievement.

Ms. Haycock noted that the country was seeing record performances on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) for 13 year old students of color. But at the high school level, NAEP performance shows that students are leaving school with weaker reading skills than students had 30 years ago, she said.

Research shows that there are gaps in achievement before children arrive at the schoolhouse door but, rather than organizing our educational system to ameliorate this problem, we organize to exacerbate the problem, Ms. Haycock said. For example, students at schools with a large minority population are more likely to be taught by novice teachers. Math classes at high-poverty, high-minority secondary schools are more likely to be taught by teachers who are not certified in mathematics.

A National Center for Educational Statistics report found that for every 100 white children who enter kindergarten, 39 percent stay in school and ultimately earn a bachelor’s degree, compared to 20 percent of African Americans and 13 percent of Latinos. Among African-American men, for example, education makes a huge difference in life outcomes. An African-American male who drops out of high school has a 68 percent chance of being incarcerated sometime in his life, compared to a 21 percent chance if he earns a high school diploma or a 7 percent chance if he earns a college degree. “That’s why what you do matters tremendously,” she told educators.

Ms. Haycock also noted that tolerating high child poverty rates is a policy choice. Although the U.S. is still the richest nation, we tolerate the second highest child poverty rate among developed countries, she said. UNICEF reported in 2013 that 23.1 percent children aged 0-17

lived in households with incomes below 50 percent of the national median income. Only Romania had a higher rate at 23.6 percent. Finland had the smallest percentage of children in poverty at 3.6 percent.

She gave some examples of efforts at specific successful schools. Don't let anyone tell you that the children and their families completely determine performance, Ms. Haycock said. She noted that programs can make significant differences in performances. The 2015 fourth-grade NAEP results showed that poor black children in Boston and Charlotte were reading three grade levels above similar children in Fresno and Detroit. In the 1990s, Texas was both the fastest improving state and a high performing state with low-income students but that progress has slowed, she said.

There are five things to learn from top performers and top gainers.

1. Good schools and districts don't leave anything about teaching and learning to chance. Research from The Education Trust shows that what is expected of children in high poverty or high minority schools is far below what is expected of students in other classrooms.
2. Good schools and districts know how much teachers matter, and they act on that knowledge.
3. Good schools and districts don't think about closing the achievement gap only as "bringing the bottom up." You can't close your achievement gap by just bringing the bottom up, she said.
4. In good schools, educators know that they have enormous power to shape children's lives.
5. Accountability systems that stretch goals for every group of children put leverage behind change-oriented leaders.

### **Learning from Schools that Succeed**

Karin Chenoweth, writer-in-residence with The Education Trust who has authored three books focusing on successful schools, said the correlation between poverty and academic achievement is so strong that we sometimes think it is unbreakable. But there are things we can learn from schools that foster high achievement even when they have a high-level of poverty among its children.

One of the schools she focused on was George Hall Elementary School in Mobile, Alabama, which has a student population that is 99 percent low-income and 99 percent African-American. But with the help of a new principal, the school moved from one of the lowest performers in the country to become what Ms. Chenoweth calls an "unexpected school" because it was dramatically exceeding expectations. Unexpected schools share 25 characteristics, ranging from "They establish an atmosphere of respect" to "They are nice places to work."

They share five processes:

- They focus on what students need to learn;
- They collaborate on how to teach it;
- They assess frequently;
- They study data to find patterns in instruction;
- They systematically build relationships.

Ms. Chenoweth said leadership is necessary to improve schools. The conclusion of a six-year study in nine states, 45 districts and 180 schools is this: “To date, we have not found a single case of a school improving its student achievement record in the absence of talented leadership.” The effect of leaders is second only to teachers. Good leaders attract and retain good teachers, while good teachers will flee from poor leaders.

“Unexpected schools have organized themselves in the service of their belief that all children can learn,” she said. The Education Trust has honored many unexpected schools with its Dispell the Myth award. You can find out more about these schools at [https://educationtrust.org/dispelling\\_the\\_myth](https://educationtrust.org/dispelling_the_myth).

### **Panel 1A: Effective Partnerships and Practices**

Members of this panel were Robert Carreon, vice president of public affairs in Texas for Teach For America; Chris Fraser, dean of Relay Graduate School of Education Texas; Kelvey Oeser, partner with The New Teacher Project; and Dr. John Jenkins, executive director of new site development for New Leaders. Each panelist provided background information about their organizations. Mr. Carreon explained that Teach For America works in partnerships with communities to expand educational opportunities for children facing the challenges of poverty. Mr. Fraser said Relay is providing high quality training programs for teachers. This school year it will have about 2,400 educators in its program. Ms. Oeser said the New Teacher Project was founded in 1997 by teachers who believed all students – particularly poor and minority students – deserved great teaching. The program is now in 33 states. Dr. Jenkins said New Leaders provides intensive training to leaders at all levels so they have the skills to improve instruction, accelerate student learning, and build a brighter future for their communities.

Asked how to create successful partnerships, Ms. Oeser said, it is important to have a real commitment on the front end to commonly agreed-upon outcomes. It is also important to reach out to community stakeholders and get their buy-in because of the frequent turnover in district leadership.

### **Panel 2A: Best Practices in Leading Diverse Schools**

Members of this panel were Dr. Lupita Hinojosa, chief academic officer from Spring ISD; Sterlin McGruder, principal of Gus Garcia Young Men’s Leadership Academy of Austin ISD; Lorimer

Arendse, principal of Grand Prairie High School of Grand Prairies ISD; and Lynn Musel, principal of Capistrano Elementary School in Ysleta ISD.

Many of the administrators talked about taking over schools in which many children had low self-esteem because of past failures or taking over a district that had seen a major demographic shift in a relatively short amount of time. Dr. Hinojosa noted that Spring ISD has moved from a suburban district to an urban district since the 1990s as growth moved out of the central Houston area. During that decade, 70 percent of the students in Spring were white. Today, it's a majority-minority district and the district took in 8,000 children largely from urban areas overnight the year that Hurricanes Katrina and Rita devastated the Gulf Coast. "Our teachers weren't prepared to teach the urban learner," she said, so creating professional development and a strategic plan with buy-in from the community were important.

Mr. McGruder said one-third of the students at his school receive special education or 504 services. Because of years of failure, he described his school as having "low academic self-esteem." Transforming into a single sex school with high expectations represented "a cultural shift." He and his staff worked out on outward and inward changes. His students are required to wear coats and ties. They are referred to as scholars. They recite a creed every day that contains goals such as "I am my brother's keeper" and "I will be a college man." They are reminded that they represent something bigger than themselves, whether it is their school or their family and they ought to act accordingly.

Ms. Musel said to pull her school out of the bottom of the academic rankings, one of the most effective things she did was to help her students and faculty build relationships with one another. Similar to Mr. McGruder's experience, she noticed that as students felt better about themselves and their school, they became better groomed.

Mr. Arendse noted that stability is an important factor for success. Grand Prairie High had experienced a frequent turnover of leadership and new programs were regularly brought in and even existing programs were interpreted differently from year to year. Now at his school, which participates in the Teacher Advancement Program which empowers teacher leaders, he said he doesn't bring in new programs until his teachers tell him something new is needed.

### **Panel 1B: High Performing Schools Models**

Members of this panel were Dr. Esperanza Zendejas, the Brownsville ISD superintendent; HD Chambers, the Alief ISD superintendent; Tom Torkelson, chief executive officer and founder of IDEA Public Schools; and Victor Obaseki, policy coordinator for the Institute for Urban Policy Research and Analysis.

Dr. Zendejas said that by next year 100 percent of Brownsville elementary schools will have an extended day program that allows them to be open until 5:30 p.m. The schools are serving breakfast, lunch and dinner, which is critically important for many students as about 95 percent of the district's children come from economically-disadvantaged families. She has also begun

sending additional teachers to underperforming schools, which she defines as those with academic passing rates below 80 percent. One middle school is being transformed into a high school of opportunity where students will be able to earn endorsements and licensures in different fields.

Mr. Torkelson noted that half of the children born into poverty never escape poverty. The best solution is to help everyone get a college degree, he said. Consequently, IDEA is very focused on creating a college-going culture. To help bolster the skills of his staff, a new teacher goes through seven weeks of IDEA-sponsored training before they ever step into a classroom. Principals go through a two-year mentorship. Mr. Obeseki discussed the close link between poverty and race. He noted that while almost 60 percent of all Texas public school students are economically disadvantaged, more than 70 percent of African American and Hispanic students come from low-income families.

Mr. Chambers said the students in Alief ISD speak 61 different languages, 65 percent live in apartments and 88 percent are economically disadvantaged. His district partners with churches and the YMCA to provide programs to help bolster academic studies. Because of the high number of limited English proficient students, all new teachers are expected to have an English as a Second Language (ESL) certification or obtain one within two years. All new teachers attend Alief University in which they are trained in three strands: meaningful work, meaningful relationships and technology. They can also work on their bilingual certification during this period. Alief also places a great deal of focus on family engagement. It has a family liaison engagement officer at every campus. Besides offering programs such as parent development sessions, the liaisons may also offer ESL and GED assistance.

## **Panel 2B: Potential of Pathways**

Members of this panel were Dr. Danny King, superintendent of Pharr-San Juan-Alamo ISD (PSJA); Dr. Susan Landry, director and founder of The Children's Learning Institute; Adam Hutchison, provost of the Texas State Technical College (TSTC) in Waco; and Dr. Luzelma G. Canales, executive director of RGV FOCUS.

During his years as superintendent in Harlingen and now PSJA, Dr. King said he has focused on connecting students to college. Out of last spring's 2,000 PSJA graduates, 65 percent had earned college hours and 20 percent earned an associate's degree or certificate. With the passage of HB 5 and PSJA's heavy use of early college high schools, his district has begun putting students in academic or career clusters in their junior or senior years. The clusters are focused on the students' areas of interests. The district is remodeling a former middle school and each wing is used for a different cluster. His district is also home to a first-of-its-kind program in which students take nursing courses and graduate with both a high school diploma and an associate's degree in nursing and are ready to take their registered nurse exams. PSJA also has academies in areas such as criminal justice, welding, automotive, and multi-media. This

approach is paying dividends as he is hiring 20-year olds who graduated from PSJA with an associate's degree, completed their bachelor's degree in 2 years and became certified teachers.

Dr. Landry focused her remarks on the HB 4 high-quality pre-kindergarten grant program. She discussed the extra credentials that each teacher teaching in this program must have, such as training for the Child Development Associate credential. While all those teaching in public schools are certified, she said many are certified in something besides early childhood education so this provides them with specialized training. HB 4 also includes a progress monitoring element and a high quality curriculum. She believes the family engagement component will also yield benefits. Although not a requirement, Dr. Landry said she is also hopeful that grantees will embrace the effort to maintain an average ratio of not less than one certified teacher or teacher's aide for every 11 students.

Mr. Hutchison said TSTC, the state's only technical college, has 56 designated college pathways. Twenty-two schools districts are partnering with TSTC and use these pathways, which cover 15 of the state's 16 career and technical education clusters. Some of the programs are academic, while others lead to certificates.

Dr. Canales said RGV FOCUS works on regional collaborative efforts. She noted that the four counties her group serves – Starr, Hidalgo, Willacy and Cameron – continue to have a higher poverty rate than the state or the United States but they are reducing the gap. Census data from 2014 shows 24 percent of the adults who are 25 years of age or older and live in the four counties are high school graduates, compared to 25 percent in Texas and 28 percent in the U.S. However the gap is bigger at the college level, with 11 percent of the adults in the region holding a bachelor's degree compared to 18 percent in both Texas and the U.S.

### **Panel 1C: Data Driven Decisions for Leadership**

Members of this panel were Susan Dawson, president and executive director of E3 Alliance; Todd Williams, executive director of Commit! Partnership; Dr. Pauline Dow, chief instructional officer of North East ISD; and Mike Feinberg, co-founder of KIPP.

All four are extensively using data to drive progress.

Mr. Feinberg said KIPP, which now has 80,000 students across the country, uses data to determine professional development decisions, especially in leadership training. A healthy schools and region framework guides the way KIPP measures its performance.

Dr. Dow said one approach that North East ISD uses is a 360 degree data view to determine theory and practice; mandates; data; and perceptions. It pairs campus administrators with district level coaches and provides continual support. Some schools will get more support than others, depending on their needs. The district ensures that staff is strategically placed based on needs, such as by placing the highest capacity staff in the schools of greatest need. Because North East is a desirable district for teachers, they found that many teachers would take an

assignment on a Title I campus for one year and then ask to be transferred. They now strongly encourage teachers to make a three-year commitment to a campus to provide stability.

Ms. Dawson described studies conducted by E3. One study looked at the reason students were absent and found that 48 percent of absences were due to acute illnesses such as the flu or cold. After confirming that the absences did correlate with flu outbreaks, E3 partnered with private companies to provide free flu shots. Their goal this year is to provide 75,000 vaccines to students in 13 Central Texas districts. The group also examined gaps in higher education graduation rates based on the highest high school math course taken. The researchers found that those students whose highest level math course was Algebra II, which is now an elective for most students were only 21 percent likely to earn a college degree within six years of entering college. However, 63 percent of students were likely to earn a college degree within six years if their highest high school math course was an Advanced Placement math course.

Mr. Williams, whose group works with the 15 school districts and 30 charter networks in Dallas County, said there is a cradle-to-career pipeline in Texas that reflects inadequate educational outcomes. He believes the problem needs to be addressed in the early grades. “We think our system completely breaks down by age eight,” Mr. Williams said. CommitI recommends full-day funding to increase pre-kindergarten enrollment; increase early childhood quality by creating an early childhood through third grade (EC-3) teacher certification; and removing rating incentives to place better teachers in upper elementary grades. The group also recommends determining who are the best educators, then providing incentives for them to relocate en masse to more challenging schools; increasing the rigor of educator and principal preparation programs and increase public transparency of results and, lastly, make a career of education more aspirational.

### **Panel 2C: How to Successfully Build School/District/Community Teams and Support Diverse Communities**

Members of this panel were Adeeb Barqawi, president and chief executive officer of ProUnitas; Marta Plata, principal of Manual Jara Elementary School in Fort Worth ISD; Alison Reis-Khanna, executive director of Texas Partnership for Out of School Time and Dr. David Vroonland, Mesquite ISD superintendent.

As a teacher in a chronically underperforming school, Mr. Barqawi saw that there were many programs available to help struggling students and families but they worked in isolation. Through ProUnitas, he coordinated and aligned the programs providing more effective help to area students.

Ms. Plata said her school Manual Jara Elementary School was constantly one of the worst performing schools in Fort Worth. She realized she and her teachers couldn’t turn the situation around alone. She created Parent University 101 in 2013. The 13-week course, which allowed no more than one absence, taught parents how to raise highly capable kids. She particularly tried to attract dads into the program because she believed they could help change the family

dynamics. “The key to the program is that it changes the parents. It changes their home life. Parents in poverty often speak at their children, not to their children,” she said. Improving communications helped the parents learn how to talk to their children about serious problems such as gang recruitment and cutting. It was so successful that the parents demanded Parent University 201, 301, and 401. Now the program is expanding into 20 additional elementaries. Ms. Plata had numerous examples of the positive impact of the programs such as a story of rival gang members who showed up at Parent University at one of the other elementaries. That school’s principal called Ms. Plata for advice. She encouraged her to follow the curriculum. By the end of the 13-week program, the gang members met outside the school and wrote each of their grudges on a slip of paper and put the slips into balloons, which they then let float away. When they walked into the schoolhouse, they were now part of a united community.

Ms. Reis-Khanna said after-school programs are important because students spend only 20 percent of their time in formal classroom learning. The vision of TXPOST is that all Texas children will have the opportunity to participate in high-quality afterschool, summer and expanded learning programs. These programs frequently offer homework assistance, reading and writing opportunities, as well as exposure to science, math, technology and engineering. The programs experienced strong parental support.

Dr. Vroonland focused on the importance of empowering teachers. “We have made teachers angry consumers of vendor products,” he said. Although Mesquite has a 93 percent graduation rate, he said, “I fear that we are graduating kids who can’t compete.” His first effort as Mesquite superintendent was to create a pre-K-second grade initiative with three strands. The district used facilitators to help each campus develop a reading program designed specifically for that school. This decentralized approach was embraced by teachers. “The teachers now have an ownership culture,” he said. The district is partnering with four private child care providers to offer classes to three-year olds. He’s also created a private district level board that supports the concept - read, play, talk. It has won strong support from businesses that encourage parents to read to their children.

### **Neuroscience Research & Solutions for Building Learning Capacity in Children of Poverty**

Dr. Martha Burns, director of neuroscience education at Northwestern University, discussed the effects of poverty on the brain and on learning. “Poverty isn’t an excuse for not learning but it does put children at a disadvantage for learning,” she said. When children of poverty enter our schools, research shows that they’ve been exposed to 30 million fewer words than their more affluent classmates. “It’s harder for them to learn on demand.” But none of this is insurmountable. “Education is the solution. Education changes brains,” Dr. Burns said.

Research published by Kimberly Noble in 2015 found huge differences in the parts of the brain that are important for learning in school when children from low-income families are compared to children from higher income families. These regions of the brain support language, reading, executive functions such as self-control, and spatial skills, such as those used in mathematics.

“The brain isn’t damaged or injured,” Dr. Burns pointed out. “It’s less mature. It has nothing to do with IQ. It’s purely experiential.” This research implies that income relates most strongly to brain structure among the most disadvantaged children, she said.

Additional research backs up this finding. Research by S. Pollack, for example, found that 20 percent of the gap in test scores between poor children and middle-class children may be a result of poor brain development in the frontal and temporal lobes.

“The brain matures based on the experiences that children have. Educators can change the way brains mature,” Dr. Burns said. “Why would poverty have this effect? Experience is part of it.” She noted that children living in poverty are often dealing with stress. “A child from poverty has what we call a toxic stress. Home is stressful and then they come to school and they aren’t performing well at school because their brain isn’t organized well for learning so school is also stressful.” She explained that “stress shuts down your brain. The brain prioritizes the need to handle stress,” she said, pointing out that fight-flight is an example of one way that the brain handles stress. These students “will respond faster to stress and stay upset longer.”

But good, supportive teachers who create a safe learning environment can take some stress out of the situation for children. This is important in both the short and long term. “This wear and tear on the brain has lasting effects.” It increases the risk of stress-related physical and mental illness later in life. But Dr. Burns said, if we can get well trained teachers who understand some neural science, this effect can be undone.

Additional research published in the February 2016 issues of Pediatrics examined adverse childhood experiences such as neglect, physical abuse, maternal depression, substance abuse and incarceration. The negative impact increased as the volume of adverse childhood experiences increased. The research concluded that children experiencing adverse childhood experiences placed students at significant risk for poor school achievement and is associated with poor health.

All the issues connected with poverty can be compounded for English language learners as standardized test scores cannot distinguish between learning disabilities and other factors such as limited prior schooling or low levels of English proficiency, she said.

Overall, early childhood education and quality pre-kindergarten programs, caring and positive relationships with adults and computer activities designed to target the skills that are impacted can turn around some of the effects of poverty, she concluded.

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Additional information, including PowerPoint presentations and videos from the conference are available at <http://tea.texas.gov/sboe/povertyroundtable/>.