



**TESTIMONY OF EDUCATION LAW CENTER
ON POVERTY AND EDUCATION
BEFORE THE ASSEMBLY WOMEN AND CHILDREN COMMITTEE**

January 27, 2016

Thank you, Chairwoman Lampitt and members of the Assembly Women and Children Committee for the opportunity to speak to you on behalf of the Education Law Center (ELC) about the connection between poverty and education.

The significant and harmful effects of poverty on the educational opportunities of children are well known and well documented. For example, in his book, *Class and Schools*, Richard Rothstein, the former *New York Times* education columnist and now a Fellow at the Economic Policy Institute, details the many challenges faced by poor children that impact their educational outcomes.

These challenges include a lack of access to adequate health care, poor nutrition, and greater exposure to lead toxins. The lives of poor children are more chaotic with more frequent moves, often to and from neighborhoods that are more violent and offer fewer services and supports. Poor children generally come from homes with fewer books and arrive at school with smaller vocabularies than their wealthier peers. Poor students are at greater risk of dropping out, less likely to attend college, and more likely to become entangled in the criminal justice system.

Children and youth do not suffer the consequences of poverty only in their present day lives. The opportunities available to them as adults are often significantly narrowed by their childhood experiences. This “opportunity gap” begins early in life with inferior childcare and preschool options and continues with under-resourced public schools, highly uneven school discipline policies and out-of-reach higher education options. These gaps in turn can affect their ability to secure gainful employment and lead productive adult lives.

While public schools cannot remedy all of society’s ills, there are meaningful steps that can be taken to increase the academic achievement of children living in poverty and help them to transition out of poverty and improve their life chances.

The need for additional interventions in our schools to address poverty has long been recognized in New Jersey. In the 1981 *Abbott II* ruling, the NJ Supreme Court underscored that the needs of children in poor communities “vastly exceed” those of children in more affluent neighborhoods. The Court noted that while those needs “go beyond educational needs” and include food, shelter and family and community support, high poverty schools must provide extra education resources “to wipe out the disadvantages” of poor children “as much as a school can.”

As early as 1981, the Supreme Court identified the need to provide early education to children in poverty. We've come a long way by providing high quality, full-day preschool to all 3- and 4-year-old children in our poor urban communities. New Jersey's nationally regarded Abbott preschool program has been shown to have clear and lasting benefits for poor children. The National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) based at Rutgers University has studied the program and found that two years of high quality preschool improves academic outcomes, reduces special education classification rates, and lowers grade retention.

This Legislature, understanding the importance of preschool, saw fit to include expansion of the Abbott preschool program to all poor children across the state when crafting the School Funding Reform Act of 2008 (SFRA). Unfortunately, that expansion was never funded. Currently, fewer than 50,000 of the 100,000 eligible 3- and 4-year-olds around the state are enrolled in the high quality preschool program. The good news is that Legislators have recently begun to talk about how to make preschool expansion happen, and ELC fully supports that effort.

Another approach successful in improving educational outcomes for children living in poverty, and indeed for their families, is Community Schools. These schools provide children and parents with in-school access to many of the social services and supports that are lacking or hard to access in their communities, including health care, social workers, and safe and enriching spaces for before and after school care. These "wraparound services" have been shown to improve not only quality of life but also academic outcomes. This model is being implemented and talked about in NJ communities, including New Brunswick, Paterson and Newark.

Access to opportunity is extremely important for children who attend schools in poor communities. While schools in affluent neighborhoods are able to offer a rich curriculum with ample preparation for college and career, schools in poor neighborhoods often do not have the resources they need to provide the same level of academic opportunity. Well prepared teachers, support staff, adequate guidance and other counseling, materials for advanced courses, technical education – all of this costs money but can provide a solid foundation for children from disadvantaged backgrounds.

The Legislature recognized the additional educational needs of poor children when designing and enacting the SFRA in January 2008. One of the guiding principles of the SFRA is that poor students require more resources, and the need for resources grows as school poverty becomes more concentrated. But the formula has not been properly funded since 2009, depriving schools of the resources needed to support students, especially those most at risk.

One other point must be made: from 2009 to 2015, the number of low-income students in NJ schools grew 20% to a total of over 500,000 children. The overall poverty rate in the state climbed from 30% to 37%. In 2009, about one-quarter of NJ students were enrolled in school districts that were heavily concentrated with poor students – these are districts with "free and reduced price lunch" rates over 40%, which the NJ Department of Education classifies as "high need." Now more than a third of NJ children are enrolled in high need districts. But few if any districts have received increased funding to address the needs of these students, while many districts have actually seen their available resources shrink.

It's time to redouble our efforts to address the extra educational needs of children living in poverty, without regard to where those children live. We recommend three major strategies: expanding the Abbott preschool program statewide, launching a community schools initiative in high poverty school districts, and getting the SFRA back on track towards full funding, beginning with the FY17 State Budget.

We stand ready to work with the Legislature to help New Jersey regain its national leadership in affording all of our disadvantaged children an opportunity for the thorough and efficient education they are entitled to and so greatly deserve.