



## Meeting the needs of children in poverty

In the U.S., where more than half of students are considered poor, schools provide more than education

By Pamela Davis Smith

In a perfect world, every child would have access to food, shelter and clothing. They would have loving, attentive parents. They would arrive at school eager, focused and ready to learn. Unfortunately, our pre-K through 5 school, like a growing number of U.S. public schools, does not reside in that world. At Highland View Elementary in Bristol, Virginia, more than 99 percent of students are economically disadvantaged. We're situated less than 2 miles from the Tennessee border, which means that families are constantly moving in and out of the district. About one-third of students who enter our school don't stay through the year. But while they are with us, our goal is to not just make a difference; it's to be the difference in students' and families' lives.

### Feed students' brains

Before we can feed students' brains with knowledge, we first must feed them with nutritious food. In Virginia, more than 300,000 children live in food-insecure households. Thanks to state and federal programs, we now provide all of our students with three free meals at school and a weekend snackpack.

### Treat students like own children

Another challenge is that many students arrive at school feeling stressed out or traumatized by their home environment. That makes it difficult to learn.

## By spotting problems early, we can address them before they create issues in the classroom.

So when students step onto campus, we look to see who's smiling and who's upset, hurt or in need of support. By spotting problems early, we can address them before they create issues in the classroom. Sometimes that means we need to provide medical attention or counseling, or call social services. Sometimes we need to wash their clothes using the washer and dryer we keep in a storage room. Other times, we just need to provide a kind word or a hug.

Each day we ask ourselves, "What can we do to help our children be successful? How can we make school the best part of their day?"

### Close gaps

One-third of students who enter our school are one or more grade levels behind in math and reading. This means that we have to help them achieve more than a year's worth of academic growth in one school year.

Having a pre-K program is essential to fill in gaps and prevent issues for children in poverty. It's also vital to provide interventions to help children's brains work more effectively so they can catch up to where they need to be. By building foundational skills such as memory,

attention and processing speed, we can set the stage for children's brains to absorb everything that comes their way. Without that focus and attention, we lose them before we even begin an intervention.

In addition, we provide a comprehensive after-school program. Here, students spend 15 minutes on reading, 30 minutes on homework, and 1 hour and 15 minutes on intervention or enrichment activities such as STEM projects, makerspaces, city library visits and karate. This gives students opportunities they might not have otherwise.

### Be the difference

In 2014, we reduced the failure rate on our state assessment by 10 percent. In 2015, more than 70 percent of our students passed the Standards of Learning exams in English, math, science and history. In 2016, however, our test scores dropped a bit. During the school year, approximately 40 new students entered our school and 40 students left. Having that many children in transition—in a school of only 200 students—interrupts teaching and learning, and makes it difficult to sustain that momentum. But we keep striving and the students who are with us do show growth.

To best serve our students, it's vital to educate and strengthen the whole child and empower the family. We work toward those goals every day so we can be the difference in their lives. **DA**

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