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Poverty is pervasive in Santa Fe schools, but educators say it's a challenge — not an excuse

Robert Nott | The New Mexican
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Sweeney Elementary School Principal Theresa Ulibarri leads a visitor through a portion of her school still under construction -- a vast, empty space of concrete floors, construction materials and debris, without warmth or light.

"I'm taking you this way to see this because it looks a lot like some of the home visits we do," she said.

Just one day before, Sweeney school counselor Dolores Lopez glued and taped a young boy's sneakers together because his toes were sticking through the open front ends.

On this day, the staff is still dealing with the ramifications of a fight between two girls. The instigator never caused trouble before. She was upset because her mother is home alone, not working. Dad is in jail.

A call comes in over Ulibarri's walkie-talkie from a fifth-grade teacher who is asking the school nurse if she has any clothes for a student. Ulibarri listens to the conversation as the nurse replies that she has two large polo shirts that might work.

These are the issues that arise when children in your school are poor, Ulibarri said. "Our kids are in crisis, and when a kid is in crisis, there is a meltdown that can cause a classroom disruption or a fight or bullying, or they just shut down. This is life to them. They've become desensitized."

According to district statistics, about 86 percent of Sweeney's nearly 600 K-5 students are considered economically disadvantaged, based on the number who qualify for reduced-price lunches. The number is even higher -- 90 percent to 99 percent -- at César Chávez Community School and Ramirez Thomas and Salazar elementary schools. In fact, of the district's 25 schools (not including charters), 14 have economically disadvantaged student populations of 65 percent or more.

Clearly, there is a correlation between the district's poor academic showing overall and the economic situation of most of its students. At the same time, poverty doesn't entirely explain why New Mexico's Public Education Department gave Santa Fe Public Schools a preliminary grade of a C -- and a number of its schools D's and F's -- and the district's high school graduation rate is at 56.5 percent.

The link between test scores and poverty rates

Bill Carson, executive director of Santa Fe for Students (formerly The Salazar Partnership) -- which builds community support to help fund literacy and health programs at both Agua Fría and Salazar elementary schools -- said the idea that poverty influences academic achievement is not an excuse but a reality.

Michelle Rios Rice, a case manager at the district's Adelante program, which serves homeless students in Santa Fe Public Schools, puts it this way: "When you are hungry and tired, how can you learn?"

Indeed, a number of reports suggest that students from low-income homes perform at a much lower level than students from economically stable or affluent backgrounds.

A recent study by Stanford University School of Education sociology professor Sean Reardon -- "The Widening Academic Achievement Gap Between the Rich and the Poor: New Evidence and Possible Explanations" -- found that the achievement gap between those two groups is about 40 percent higher now than it was some 25 years back. Some of this has to do with the growing economic gap between rich and poor in the country.

Looking at the district's reading and math achievement scores, it would be easy to assume that the number of economically disadvantaged students in certain schools impacts academics.

Wood Gormley Elementary School, where the poverty rate is 19 percent, and Acequia Madre and Carlos Gilbert elementary schools, with poverty rates in the low 30th percentile, are among the few schools to make AYP at least once in the past few years. Wood Gormley rated an A in the school-grading system; Carlos Gilbert and Acequia Madre garnered B's.

But at Ramirez Thomas, Salazar and Sweeney elementary schools, the percent of students proficient in reading and math at all grade levels ranges between the teens and the low 50s. Ramirez Thomas, which is undergoing a school reform initiative utilizing a federal turnaround model, earned an F in the school-grading system. Salazar and Sweeney netted D's.

"Yes, [poverty] impacts learning, because if kids are focused on getting home to baby-sit because their parents are not home because they are working several jobs, they are not focused on doing their homework," said Ortiz Middle School counselor Jessica Mauler.

No excuses

But Mauler is skeptical about tying low income to bad grades. "There are many kinds of poverty," she said. "Emotional poverty, familial poverty, kids who don't have parents. Poverty is not just about money."

That is a point echoed by Peter Winograd, director of The University of New Mexico's Center for Education Policy Research. He -- along with Ulibarri and most of the roughly 20 educators interviewed for this story -- said it is unwise to just play the poverty angle when trying to explain mediocre academic results.

"I think poverty is too broad a term and too emotionally loaded and gets used as an excuse too much," he said. "You have to be careful ... when you talk about poverty to ensure you are not talking about an impoverished social or cultural life, but rather major disparities or challenges in economic equalities in education, health and social support.

"The biggest danger is that poverty becomes a sweeping generalization, and we deal with the stereotypes and the conversation never goes anywhere."

Winograd argues that there are many factors revolving around academic failure, and not all of them directly correlate to poverty: the teen birth rate, the number of students living in single-parent families, drug use among teens, and whether a community is addressing the problem -- by, for example, offering child care and pre-kindergarten classes to improve a student's chances for academic success.

Robin Noble, principal of Ramirez Thomas Elementary School, agrees. "You can't use [poverty] as an excuse for a lack of academic achievement," she said. "It's definitely a hurdle, but we can only complain a little bit, get over it, tackle the problem head-on and move on. We have to believe that all kids can learn."

Working with her staff members, including counselor Cynthia Fulreader and parent liaison Antonio Gonzales (who is bilingual), Noble is working to open up Ramirez Thomas as a community center where parents and family members are encouraged to come in for morning discussions with staff members and teachers. All three said school personnel help parents locate resources to deal with issues that arise from poverty.

Schoolwide assemblies are used to discuss the issue. On Thursday mornings, a coffee/refreshment session is available to all parents. The school offers English lessons for Spanish-speaking parents and a weekly Parent University, where staff members talk to parents about helping their children with their education. These classes include teaching parents how to assist their children with their math homework.

The experience can remind parents that educational achievement provides a path out of poverty. "You have to study so that you don't work like me, cleaning tables," said Maricela Brooks, a Parent University mother, of her desire to support her child.

Fulreader meets with the students in small same-gender clusters at lunchtime to find out what's going on at home. Five out of seven boys in a recent session express concern that they will soon be homeless. "That anxiety doesn't help at school, but giving them a chance to talk about it can help clear the table and get them back to doing math," Fulreader said.

"Poverty doesn't have a color or a face or a race," Antonio Gonzales said. "But with poverty comes negative elements. It's not just about not having enough on the table. With poverty comes dysfunctional family units, drug and alcohol abuse, domestic abuse and multigenerational family

members all living in one household. And this is nationwide."

Down but not out

Gonzales was born and raised in Santa Fe. His dad was a custodian who dropped out of elementary school; Mom cleaned houses. He didn't encounter inside plumbing until he was 15. Where was he raised?

"710 Canyon Road!" he said with a laugh. "But we never went hungry. We worked hard." The youngest of seven, he is proud to note his parents pushed him to do well in school regardless of the economic challenges. Six of the seven graduated from high school; many of them have earned master's degrees. "When you are poor and you live that way as a matter of course, you do not know you are poor."

At Ortiz, counselor Mauler and her colleague Jennifer Cosban find that to be the case. "They don't tell us, 'I'm poor,' " Cosban said of her students. "They say, 'Do you have any crackers? I didn't eat breakfast this morning.' "

Like their counterparts at both Sweeney and Ramirez Thomas, the duo believe the problem should be addressed with a communal effort. "You cannot believe that just because they come from an impoverished background that you cannot reach them," Mauler said of her students. "Don't set goals out of reach for them, but show them that they have options to move forward."

Other challenges exist, including within generational poverty, where traditions -- good and bad -- are passed down the family line as survival, personal connections and entertainment take precedence over schooling.

"Parents don't always see education as a way out of poverty," said Ortiz Principal Denine Mares. "They often look for sports or talent or a 'gotta hit it big' [lottery] attitude to get their family out of their situation. And when they do gain some financial footing, what do they do with the money? It goes into 'stuff.' "

Santa Fe High School history teacher Ernesto Cruz -- who used education to escape his own impoverished background in Elgin, Ill. -- said, "Part of the discussion missing when we talk about the impact of poverty is the issue of prioritization. Right now there is a big push to get kids summer reading books. The students tell me they don't have the money -- $8, $10, $11 -- for the books, but they have an iPhone." He believes the district can do more.

His mother is one of many social workers employed as a family/school liaison for the Chicago

school district. "She is shocked to learn that there is nobody with that kind of job here at all the schools," he said, noting that only one Santa Fe school -- Ramirez Thomas -- employs a community liaison.

Others note that parents may have to make tough choices when it comes to the welfare of their children. Israel Haros, liaison to the homeless at the Adelante program, said he sees student priorities sometimes being necessarily stacked up like this: "Are you getting enough to eat? Do you have a place to sleep? Do you have a jacket to keep you warm? And then, are you getting an education?"

What can be done? According to the experts, school leaders should do more to let parents and students know what resources are available -- including free breakfast and lunch, donated school supplies and tutoring. Cosban and Mauler would like to see the school board organize a task force next semester to study the impact of poverty and find solutions. They say early childhood learning centers can make a difference in preparing students from poor families for school. And sex-education classes and support services for teen mothers are also needed.

Partnering with community support services can make a difference. At Sweeney, for instance, connections with The Food Depot, State Farm Insurance, Blaze Christian Fellowship, Christus St. Vincent Regional Medical Center employees and Wings for Hope Motorcycle Ministry help the staff provide food, clothes and school supplies for students.

Students have to play their part, too, Cosban said, and understand that education can provide the key to success.

"They have to make choices to improve their lives. It's always about empowering them: What do you want? How do you get there? What are the roadblocks? How can we remove them?

"No coat? We'll call Adelante. No food? We have free lunch and breakfast."

She thinks about her grandparents coming through Ellis Island to America from Italy. They arrived with nothing.

"They didn't have an excuse. They had a dream."

POVERTY AND EDUCATION AT A GLANCE

• Under the federal definition, a family of four with an income of $22,314 was poor in 2010.

• According to a 2011 U.S. Census Bureau report, 46.2 million people live in poverty in the United States -- the highest such number in more than 50 years. Twenty-seven percent of blacks, 26 percent of Hispanics and just under 10 percent of whites live in poverty.

• According to the Census Bureau, 18.4 percent of New Mexicans and 14.8 percent of Santa Feans live below the poverty level (2006-10 data).

• Twenty-two percent of children who have lived in poverty do not graduate from high school, compared to 6 percent of those who have never been poor, according to *Double Jeopardy: How Third-Grade Reading Skills and Poverty Influence High School Graduation*, by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2011.

• The gap in standardized test scores between affluent and low-income students has grown by about 40 percent since the 1960s, according to a recent study compiled by Stanford University sociologist Sean F. Reardon.

• A child from a low-income family enters kindergarten with a listening vocabulary of 3,000 words, whereas a child from a high-income family enters with a listening vocabulary of 20,000 words, according to a May 2011 "Reading is Fundamental" report.

• Between the late 1970s and mid-1990s, the college graduation rate of American youth from families in the top quarter of the income distribution increased by 21 percentage points, from 33 percent to 54 percent. During that same period, the college graduate rate of American youth from families in the bottom quarter of the income distribution increased by just 4 percent, from 5 percent to 9 percent, according to a March 2012 presentation to the U.S. Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee by Richard J. Murnane of the Harvard Graduate School of Education.

• New Mexico ranked 46th in the nation in terms of child well-being in an overall ranking of the 2011 *Kids Count* report published by the Annie E. Casey Foundation.

• More than 28 percent of households with children in New Mexico are uncertain about where their next meal will come from, according to a 2011 UNM Center for Education Policy Research report.

• About 8 percent of Santa Fe Public Schools' students -- some 1,050 -- are considered homeless (meaning they do not have a reliable place to live or sleep on a regular basis), according to the district's Adelante program.

Percentage of economically disadvantaged students in Santa Fe Public Schools
Based on the percent receiving free or reduced-price lunches:

Acequia Madre Elementary School -- 34 percent
Agua Fría Elementary School -- 84.5 percent
Amy Biehl Community School -- 73 percent
Aspen Community Magnet School -- 79 percent
Atalaya Elementary School -- 38 percent
Carlos Gilbert Elementary School -- 34 percent
César Chávez Community School -- 98 percent
Chaparral Elementary School -- 60 percent
E.J. Martinez Elementary School -- 60 percent
Eldorado Community School -- 18 percent
Gonzales Community School -- 56 percent
Kearny Elementary School -- 78 percent
Nava Elementary School -- 78 percent
Piñon Elementary School -- 65 percent
Ramirez Thomas Elementary School -- 99 percent
Salazar Elementary School -- 98 percent
Sweeney Elementary School -- 86 percent
Tesuque Elementary School -- 78 percent
Wood Gormley Elementary School -- 19 percent
Capshaw Middle School -- 61 percent
De Vargas Middle School -- 83 percent
Ortiz Middle School -- 81.5 percent
The Academy at Larragoite -- 66 percent
Capital High School -- 70 percent
Santa Fe High School -- 48 percent