

STOP Punishing Poverty in Schools



Many school policies increase disadvantage for economically marginalized students. School leaders must recognize and change that pattern.

Paul Gorski

clusion is like a commodity here,” Tina said. “You can literally purchase it.”

We were sitting—Tina, several other economically marginalized students, and I—in a meeting room tucked behind Park Run High School’s media center. “How do you purchase it?” I asked.

Another student, Aiden, grew animated. “You own your band instrument, you buy the school hoodie.”

Tina nodded. “And you definitely don’t ride the bus to school, not as a junior or senior.”

I asked why some juniors and seniors had to ride the bus.



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them of opportunities their wealthier classmates took for granted.

These are conditions that we, the caring adults, too often perpetuate in schools. I presume most educators don't want to perpetuate them. But if you work at a school, conditions like these likely are operating there *right now*. They can be difficult to recognize for people who don't know how it feels to be injured by policies or practices that perpetuate barriers. And if we're unable to recognize inequitable conditions, we can't fix them; that makes us complicit. So we must practice this *recognizing*. We can begin by identifying which students in our schools are priced out of belonging and denied equitable access, and how.

Four Ways Schools Punish Poverty

Unfortunately, for many students experiencing poverty, being priced out of inclusion is only the tip of the inequity iceberg. If I had to capture that iceberg with a single phrase it would be: *Schools punish poverty*.

That sounds harsh, I know. Perhaps you're thinking that I'm making the problem out to be too deliberate. No part of me believes that educational leaders go out of our way to pile disadvantage onto students and families experiencing poverty—not most of us, anyway. But if we dig beyond intention and examine our *impact*, it's difficult to deny.

We can't fix individual or institutional equity blockages that we're unwilling to name honestly. In that spirit, I detail here four ways schools exacerbate disadvantage for economically marginalized students, and consider how we might reimagine our actions to be more just.

"I can't afford a car," Tina explained. "But even if I had a car, I couldn't pay the \$100 a year parking fee."

I haven't managed to stop those words from rolling around in my head. *Inclusion is a commodity*. Belonging is, too. Many students are priced out of it at school.

When I ask school leaders what they perceive to be the biggest challenges their students experiencing poverty face in school, they almost always point to concerns about peer approval. But Tina, Aiden, and their peers didn't seem concerned about how their classmates saw them. Their concern was how the adults perpetuated school practices that made them feel they didn't belong and that robbed

1 Marking Students as Deficient

Students experiencing poverty often contend with the harsh impacts of economic injustice outside of school. They might not have access to preventive healthcare or stable housing. They might struggle to find reliable transportation. Their families likely can't afford professional tutors. When those students come to school, they often face additional barriers, from teacher bias to policies and practices that fail to respond to the impacts of economic injustice. For example, research has shown how, on average, students experiencing poverty are subject to less engaging curricula and teaching than their wealthier peers and are disproportionately assigned to more remedial academic tracks.

Sometimes, when we think we're measuring ability or potential, we're really measuring the impact of access and opportunity disparities. This especially happens if we embrace a deficit ideology, a worldview that attributes educational disparities to supposed "deficiencies" within the cultures, behaviors, or attitudes of economically or otherwise marginalized students and families (Phyak, 2021).

We live in the United States, after all. Everybody has equal access if we work hard and take advantage of the opportunities afforded us, right?

Wrong. Eight-year-olds don't control whether their parents can refill their lunch accounts or afford tutors. Their parents have no control over the scarcity of living-wage work or the costs of preventive healthcare.

Due in part to this sort of ideological blockage—which may cause us to ignore the impacts of inequity and presume a fair distribution of access that doesn't exist—schools often respond to outcome disparities caused by inequities with initiatives meant to fix something about economically marginalized people. Perhaps we offer parenting classes while failing to transform family-engagement opportunities to ensure they're accessible to all families. Maybe we provide lessons on grit, not realizing that our most economically marginalized students often tend already to be our most resilient students. When we focus on

adjusting those people, we risk failing to attend to our equity failures.

If we hope to eliminate the potential for this particular "punishment," we must commit to never letting deficit ideology survive in our schools. In equity literacy parlance, we call this the *fix injustice, not kids* principle (Gorski, 2018). Watch for times when conversations about equity veer toward how we need to "fix" people: *If only those students cared more about their education. If only they had role models at home. How can we convince their parents to take school seriously? When we hear these sorts of sentiments, we must realize we are off the equity track, and bring the conversation back to, "What are barriers, inequities, and biases people experiencing poverty face?" "How are we perpetuating them?" "What can we do differently to distribute access equitably?"*

2 Treating Kids Equally and, Therefore, Inequitably

Imagine that you have a student, Candace, who is experiencing poverty. She excels in class but struggles to complete homework on time. Name one reason Candace might make a responsible decision rather than an irresponsible one not to complete her homework.

Economically marginalized students are more likely than their wealthier peers to care for younger siblings or elders after school or to work after school to support their families. Perhaps Candace is assuming one or more of these roles. A student responsible enough to take on these duties does not need lessons on responsibility, and neither do parents who miss family-engagement opportunities to work a second or third job.

Let's be clear. Students who are experiencing poverty don't need us to teach them responsibility. From an equity perspective, this savior-ish presumption is among the most troubling aspects of institutional culture in many schools, especially if we, the adults in those schools, aren't embracing our responsibility to eliminate the inequity with which students contend. What students do need from us is equity. Not equality, but equity.

A second common way schools exacerbate



Allowing families to purchase learning opportunities for their children that are inaccessible to other students is the *epitome* of inequity.

inequity for students experiencing poverty is by claiming a commitment to equity, then offering equality as though it were the same thing. The key distinction between equity and equality is that equity accounts for context. Equality presumes a level playing field that never existed. With this in mind, it has been heartening recently to watch many schools transform homework policies, partially to strengthen equity efforts and also in response to recent research on homework's effectiveness. For example, an *equal* homework policy might be based on the idea that teachers assign all students the same homework, so they all should be held equally accountable for completing it. By contrast, we would base an *equitable* policy on the idea that students' contexts differ, that some, like Candace, contend with barriers with which others don't. We realize it's irresponsible and unjust on *our* parts to pretend those barriers don't exist.

If your school has moved the equity needle on your homework policy, apply the same equity spirit to other

policies or practices. Start with the many day-to-day policies that ignore context, such as \$100 parking fees that might be manageable for some families but are clearly unaffordable for others. All school fees are inequitable, really. Despite being equal, they have disparate impact; they risk elevating harm for the students already experiencing the most harm while elevating opportunity for those with the most opportunity.

I understand, of course, that many leaders working in cash-strapped schools use fees to help pay for essential resources for students. When we consider bigger contextual factors like inadequate school funding, we realize that perfect equity solutions can be elusive. The key is to remember that those bigger factors have the harshest effects on the students already contending with the most

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inequities. So, we should be careful not to respond in ways that exacerbate those inequities. Maybe we can't eliminate all fees immediately. But that is what we ought to be working toward.

We can find similar dynamics in many common policies and practices. Here are a few:

- Policies requiring a note from a physician to prove a student is unwell. Obtaining a note requires time and money that families experiencing poverty are less likely than other families to have. Choose, instead, to believe families. Err on the side of building positive relationships rather than the side of inequity.

- Afterschool detention as a discipline response. Families experiencing poverty are less likely to have the transportation and work schedule flexibility necessary to pick up a child who is held after school.

- Extracurriculars scheduled after school, making participation more accessible for students from families in which economic resources and schedule flexibility are in good supply. Try to schedule most extracurriculars during the school day.

Be alert to temptations to slide back to *equality*, to redefine fairness around that concept, when equity efforts raise the ire of families accustomed to enjoying the benefits of disparate access. In my experience, the most vehement advocates for “equality” tend to be people bent on sustaining their children's advantage. They shouldn't influence our equity efforts.

3 Humiliating Children Through Everyday Practices

When I insist that fees are inequitable, education leaders sometimes counter-insist that they've solved the fee problem by waiving most fees if the student or family lets the school know they can't

afford them. I appreciate this effort at equity. But this “solution” requires students to ask, perhaps over and over, for what we already *ought* to be guaranteeing: equitable access.

“It's humiliating,” Tomás, an 8th grader in a historically wealthy but increasingly economically diverse school, explained to me. “I constantly have to remind my teachers I'm poor just so I can do what other kids are able to just do.” Like many students, Tomás is forced to “perform his poverty” in exchange for access to field trips, extracurriculars, and other opportunities. When I asked Tomás what happens when he doesn't have the energy to let somebody know he can't afford the fees for something, he answered, “I sit that one out.”

In an elementary school in the same district, 4th grader Elise fought back tears while describing how adults shamed her in the lunch line because her family “ran out of money” after her father passed away. Her mother didn't have the resources to replenish her lunch account. I shared Elise's story with the principal, who sympathized, but then said, “I wish she had told us what was going on.” Elise was nine. She had just lost her father, then she was humiliated by adults who should have been protecting her. But *she* was the one who was supposed to take responsibility?

In far too many schools and districts, rules that force adults to single out or embarrass children because they can't pay for something are encoded into policy. In my organization's work doing school equity policy analysis, I've often come across language in policy documents like *After three days of an empty lunch account, the student will receive a cheese sandwich for lunch. Or, A student otherwise eligible to graduate who has unpaid library fees will not be allowed to participate in the graduation ceremony.* I find it difficult to type these examples without quivering.

Whatever financial or other reason a school, district, or state might have for adopting these sorts of policies, there's no way to jibe codifying a requirement that we humiliate children in these ways with anything educationally positive or equitable. Even if we never actually deny students access to the graduation ceremony or make them go hungry, the presence of these policies sends a message about who deserves access.

These aren't the only ways economically marginalized students can be humiliated at school. For some students, common practices like show-and-tell and dress-up days can create anxiety and the potential for humiliation, as they may expose economic hierarchies and even contribute to troubling consumerist culture.

When I've spoken with elementary-school families experiencing poverty about what practices they find most embarrassing at their children's schools, they most often point to book fairs. "They march my son around that book fair so he has to watch wealthier classmates buy books and toys and trinkets and feel ashamed he can't afford anything," one mother told me. "Then I'm humiliated, too, because he comes home upset, asking why we can't afford a book." Parents of older students usually refer to fundraisers, especially ones requiring students to compete with one another to sell, say, chocolate bars or wrapping paper.

The solutions here are straightforward: Find ways to raise money that don't require students to compete over whose families and neighbors can afford the most chocolate bars or wrapping paper. If we're going to host book fairs, let's structure them around the joy of reading, not the sale of books and trinkets.

For all that is good and equitable, let's eliminate any policy or practice that could humiliate children for conditions that might be tied to their families' economic hardship or for any conditions at all. And let's work vigorously toward ensuring we're fulfilling public education's promise of free access.

4 Pricing Them Out of Learning

In my conversation with Tina, Aiden, and their peers at Park Run High, I asked whether they ever missed out on learning opportunities in which they wanted to participate because their families couldn't pay for them. Cindy sighed, then described "senior trips" the school sponsored every spring break. "This year there's a trip to study ecology in

Costa Rica. It costs \$1,800."

Lin added, "Those trips aren't for us."

Cindy agreed. "A lot at this school isn't for us."

When I shared the students' concern in a meeting with their school's leadership team, Jason, the principal, responded, "It's a shame some students can't afford these trips. But should we stop offering them, denying the opportunity to students who get a lot out of them because some

Mapping Costs for Learning, Joining, and Belonging at Your School

This exercise has two purposes. First, it provides an opportunity to practice identifying inequitable conditions—in this case, how families experiencing poverty can be priced out of equitable educational access. Second, it demonstrates the potential *accumulative* impact of day-to-day educational practices when it comes to equity and opportunity.

- First, make a list of all the basic material resources and resources for which parents must pay so their children can attend and participate in your school: things like immunizations, book or technology fees, and school supplies. Estimate the cost of these things for a single school year (remembering that some families have more than one child).

- Next, list the sorts of things parents don't *have* to pay for, but which can expand learning opportunities for their children if they can afford to purchase them. These might include band equipment, a computer in the child's bedroom, or costs associated with dual enrollment programs. Again, estimate the total cost.

- Finally, list and estimate costs associated with experiences that might not have obvious learning value, but could improve students' social experiences or sense of connectedness at school, like costs for dances, hoodies and other school swag, and yearbooks.

What is the total cost across these categories? What might be the impact of this total cost on families experiencing poverty?

—Paul Gorski

students can't afford them?"

Jason wasn't some sort of devious oppressor. He was committed enough to doing better by economically marginalized students to arrange for me to talk with a group of them and report back candidly. But ideologically he was stuck, and he wouldn't be able to lead for equity unless he had the humility and courage to look at some things very differently.

I pointed out to Jason that allowing families literally to purchase learning opportunities for their children that are inaccessible to other students is the epitome of inequity. It's a perfect inequity, expanding access for those who have the most access while deepening disparities for people already contending with economic barriers. As we examined other ways in which access and opportunity were for sale at his school, Jason embraced a deeper understanding of what equity required of him.

Like many school leaders, he was in a tough spot. He knew the ire he would face from wealthier families if he messed with those senior trips. He also came to realize that, in some ways, he'd conditioned himself to be more responsive to that anger than to the most marginalized students in his building.

Eventually, Jason came to believe that if he denied learning opportunities to his most economically marginalized students, then in a sense the school should deny them to all students. All of this *denying* sounded negative at first. But he realized that this policy change could be understood, and even described to parents, more positively, as "investing the school's resources, instead, into learning opportunities everybody can access." From an equity leadership point of



Reflect & Discuss

Do any policies at your school "punish poverty" as Gorski describes?

How does your school raise funds? Do you see any way these methods might cause embarrassment or a feeling of exclusion for some students or families? What could you do differently?

What steps could you take to "institutionalize equity" in your school or district?

view, these changes are *expansions* of access, not *denials* of access.

This work of expanding opportunity, of institutionalizing equity, isn't easy, of course. It can elicit blowback from families accustomed to disproportionate access. (In a 2020 blog post, Marceline DuBose shared suggestions for responding to this eventuality.) The key is not to pick one or two obvious instances of inequity and imagine our work is done when we've solved them. We can dig deeper, mapping out all the ways this sort of inequity operates so we can address its root causes and adopt more equitable policies and practices. I suggest beginning with a mapping exercise (see "Mapping Costs for Learning" p. 27).

Past Time to Cultivate Change

The worst of inequity happens when we perpetuate conditions that harm the most harmed students and

advantage the most advantaged students. I encourage all of us, as educational leaders, to take a deep, humble look at the ways we might uphold conditions that punish poverty and, as a result, amplify inequity. But let's not just admire the problem. Let's cultivate institutional and ideological change.

Yes, let's stop humiliating children in lunch lines, right now. But let's also examine how any of us, as caring educators, ever embraced a practice like that. Let's uproot our own ideological blockages about poverty and equity. And let's change whatever we need to change, from hiring practices, to procedures for creating school policy, to how we view a struggling student, to ensure that sort of thing never happens again.

Author's note: all names of schools, students and teachers are pseudonyms.

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