



Doc H's Blog

Kentucky Education Commissioner
Terry Holliday



March 2, 2012

Poverty: Helping to Succeed vs. Believing in Success

Last week I was struck by the title of a blog entry that I saw on my Twitter account – “The Poverty Myth Persists.” That blog can be found at <http://educationnext.org/the-poverty-myth-persists/>. What really caught my interest were the first few lines of the blog.

Every time I see a “poverty and education” story I think of the famous line from the New Testament in which Jesus says, “The poor you will always have with you, and you can help them any time you want.”
So, with education. Want a convenient scapegoat for our problems? Poverty. It’s there, it’s handy.

The author, Peter Meyer, makes the case that quite often, educators and politicians blame poverty as the reason why schools in large urban and rural settings are failing to educate children. The achievement gap between students who don’t receive free and reduced-price meals and those who do receive free and reduced-price meals has widened in the last decade. Historically, education has always been seen as the path to the “American Dream.” Education is the great equalizer. However, our ability to provide an education to children in poverty is going in the wrong direction.

As Commissioner of Education, I believe there are two reasons for our inability to close achievement gaps based on poverty. It is either we do not know HOW to help children in poverty achieve at high levels or we do not BELIEVE that children in poverty can achieve at high levels.

If we do not know how, then that is something we can work hard to address. We can engage parents and communities in developing social capital that will help the community to value education and support educators. We can provide professional development to help teachers and administrators understand the challenges of homelessness and poverty. We can provide professional development on how to be more culturally responsive to the needs of students. We can provide resources needed to help children reach success. We know the HOW, and there are many examples of schools all across the nation and world that are helping children in poverty achieve at high levels. If educators make excuses for poverty and do not BELIEVE that children in poverty can achieve at high levels, then there is really nothing we can do other than coach these educators into other professions.

While I do not always agree with the positions of the [Fordham Institute](#) or the author of the blog, I thought the blog and articles cited were very thought-provoking. I also was reminded of the wonderful work that organizations like our own [Prichard Committee](#), the [Education Trust](#) and the [Children's Defense Fund](#) do in showing the HOW of helping children in poverty achieve to high levels.

The final sentence in the blog was perhaps the most thought-provoking – “Let’s resolve to quit blaming the poor for the poor education they receive.” Indeed, in Kentucky, let’s commit to never blame the poor, but commit to work with parents, communities, educators and government to collaborate on closing the achievement gaps and ensuring that education is the pathway to a brighter future for our children and the Commonwealth.

Terry Holliday, Ph.D.