



## Poverty and Education in a Low-Income Suburb

It is outrageous that large numbers of children starting school in Winnipeg year after year are so poorly prepared that they are, relative to other kids, behind the “start line” from the beginning. In a great many cases they never catch up. Their lives are forever adversely affected.

Many believe that solutions lie within the walls of our schools—different math curricula, or better use of technology, for example. What goes on in the classroom, and especially the quality of teaching, is of course of great importance.

But equally if not more important is what is happening with kids at home and in their neighbourhoods. Those growing up in poverty experience many more barriers to educational success than children growing up in families and neighbourhoods where they do not experience poverty. Poverty and its associated challenges cause poor educational outcomes, as demonstrated in endless studies over many decades and in many countries. If we want to improve educational outcomes, and if education is to offer the equalizing individual and collective impacts that it has traditionally promised, we have to act on the challenges to education that poverty presents.

An exciting initiative aimed at improving educational outcomes by addressing the impacts of poverty head-on is underway at three elementary schools in the Louis Riel School Division.

### Suburban Poverty

It is still commonly believed that poverty in Winnipeg is an inner city phenomenon. This is only partially true. Poverty is highly concentrated in Winnipeg’s inner city, but far more poor families live in the suburbs than the inner city. Deep pockets of poverty are scattered throughout Winnipeg’s sprawling suburbs, including around three elementary schools in south St. Vital. At one of these schools the poverty rate is almost double that in the inner city, and about five times the rate for the suburbs as a whole. Rates at the two other schools are almost as high, and large numbers of the students live in Manitoba Housing and in low-income, single-parent families.

There are also many strengths in the neighbourhoods surrounding these schools, including healthy individuals and families, and community-based organizations with decades of experience working with children and youth, as well as the skilled and

### CCPA-MB

205-765 Main St.  
Winnipeg, MB  
R2W 3N5

### PHONE

204.927.3200

### EMAIL

CCPAMB@  
POLICYALTERNATIVES.CA

### WEBSITE

WWW.  
POLICYALTERNATIVES.CA

### BLOG

WWW.POLICYFIX.CA

### TWITTER

@CCPAMB

effective approaches of the three schools themselves.

## **What We Learned About the Schools**

Over the past year we have been doing research at these three schools, where levels of poverty and related problems are high, and educational outcomes are comparatively low.

The research has included lengthy interviews with 48 parents of children at the three schools, 31 teachers plus the three Principals and three Vice-Principals and six staff members at Family Centres in the three schools, as well as one Assistant Superintendent. We have also met with 12 community-based organizations that work with children and families in the area, and have participated in a community session at which the results of our research were presented and discussed.

Overwhelmingly, parents told us that the three schools in question are doing great work. Teachers and administrative staff are proactive in learning about and addressing poverty-related challenges that affect their students. The Family Centres and their staff in these schools are similarly skilled, passionate and effective. Yet educational outcomes at these three schools are lower than the School Division as a whole. Why? It's because of the poverty.

## **What We Learned About the Effects of Poverty on Children and Their Families**

Families described their experiences of poverty in such a way as to enable us to identify three groups with some commonality of experience: Indigenous families; refugees; and immigrants with post-secondary and sometimes graduate-level educational qualifications. We heard about trauma from intergenerational cycles of violence, rooted in Canada's colonial history. Recent immigrants described challenges in adjusting, and especially in finding employment, but expressed confidence in a better future for

their children. Refugees described difficulties with children accessing basic programming, and lamented the lost opportunities and sense of exclusion this perpetuates. Importantly, however, these categories also obscure the truths of different families' lived experience, and leave some families out entirely. Individual families' experiences need to be carefully appreciated to properly address their challenges, and to identify and engage their strengths, in this project of improving collective outcomes.

A challenge common to all these families is poorly managed Manitoba Housing properties. Parents repeatedly told us about major problems with bedbugs, violence, illegal drug dealing, lack of safety, for example. Teachers and support staff confirmed these problems and their adverse effects on children's schooling. One teacher broke into tears when describing the impact of bedbugs on her students. None of this need be happening—recent developments at Lord Selkirk Park in Winnipeg's North End make it clear that, if the right steps are taken, Manitoba Housing can create good places to live (Mauro & Silver 2017).

Many children at these schools experience serious health problems. For example, recent dental checks at one of the schools identified 82 children with "visible carries." Seventeen needed immediate emergency dental care—i.e., within 24 hours. Such situations cause children pain, which adversely affects their schooling.

Many parents disclosed impacts of trauma including anxiety, lack of self-esteem and self-confidence, addictions and family dysfunction. Many men in the community are detached from the labour force and from their families and, said one community worker: "they're almost invisible in our community... like, they float, they're back with the mom and then they leave again because there's conflict or whatever, the domestic violence, all that stuff happens" (Silver and Sjoberg 2017). Family crises, including domestic violence, mean that children often come to class straight from conflict, making learning particularly difficult.

## **A Whole Community Approach**

Feedback from research participants favours a “whole community” response to these poverty-related problems—an approach that prioritizes cooperation between the School Division, community-based organizations and other institutions, and families in the area. Driving this approach is the knowledge that engaging everyone to contribute and work together will support better educational outcomes, while producing many other benefits.

The primary strength of this community is the families themselves. Intersectional oppression creates isolation and disempowerment, resulting in the common mistake, when attempting to act in response to poverty, of “doing for,” rather than engaging, learning, taking direction and actively building collaboration. Every parent talked about what they are already doing in their families and community, and what they could contribute. Among the parents were bannock makers and language teachers, football coaches and math teachers, a physiotherapist, a plant specialist, artists, gardeners and school volunteers. These skills, together with those of the community organizations and the schools themselves, need to be appreciated and harnessed to build healthier families and communities.

This “whole community” approach consists of a wide range of initiatives grouped into three broad categories: high level advocacy; filling service gaps in the community; and maximizing the engagement of parents and students.

### **High level advocacy**

One example of high level advocacy is work with senior Manitoba Housing and other provincial government officials aimed at improving conditions in Manitoba Housing. Goals of this work include: proactive and responsive management; better funding for the highly effective Family Resource Centres located in two of the neighbourhoods; a new Resource Centre where one

does not now exist; improved safety; improved property maintenance and bed bug remediation; and efforts to engage residents in building community in their neighbourhoods.

### **Service gaps**

These three communities are located far from the city centre, where many critical services are located. This dramatically reduces accessibility—a major problem exacerbated by recent increases in transit fares. One example is the need for more Indigenous cultural activities for children and families. LRSD is moving on this, developing relationships with Indigenous organizations and working with Indigenous staff and an Elder. There is also a need for more addictions facilities, after-school and sports programming, and childcare.

LRSD has partnered with community-based organizations to work towards meeting these needs. Efforts are underway to locate a new childcare centre in a facility attached to one of the three schools. Red River College is interested in collaborating on the Abecedarian approach to childcare that has been so effective in Lord Selkirk Park (Mauro and Silver 2017). Adult education opportunities will be located near the childcare centre. LRSD is also working to improve access to health care, broadly defined, and to related services.

Filling these gaps will strengthen families, build healthier neighbourhoods and, in due course, create the conditions in which children do better in school.

### **Deepening engagement of parents and children**

Deepening the engagement of parents and children in their communities and schools is a major objective of the “whole community” approach. Many parents are already involved

at each of the schools, volunteering and participating in programs, and some are advocating regularly—for example on housing issues or access to health care. LRSD is building on the existing strengths of the Family Centres to facilitate more parent and grandparent organizing and action. Skilled facilitators are working with men to increase their engagement in the community. LRSD will also soon launch an exciting program offering parents learning opportunities in the classroom, alongside students.

### **The Road to Improved Educational Outcomes**

We have written a report (Silver and Sjoberg 2017) that sets out the issues and makes recommendations for a 5 to 10 year plan to strengthen families and neighbourhoods. The Louis Riel School Division is bringing these recommendations and other good ideas to life. There are no simple solutions, and no quick fixes. But challenging though it will be, this work outside the schools is essential if school outcomes are to improve. Though the challenges of poverty are intense, there are many skilled individuals and organizations that are eager to be part of this initiative, and optimistic that meaningful gains can be made.

Manitobans periodically express concern when international ratings such as the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) are released. “What is wrong with our educational system,” people ask when Manitoba ranks relatively poorly. We maintain that the issue is less “what is wrong with our educational system,” than “why do we allow such very high levels of poverty to persist,” when the evidence is so absolutely clear that poverty produces poor educational outcomes.

The Louis Riel School Division, like others in Winnipeg, has had the good sense and the vision and imagination, to collaborate with the wider community and address the challenges caused by

poverty in these schools’ catchment areas. We anticipate that within a year much of the whole community approach will be in place, and within 5 to 10 years these changes will be reflected in improved educational outcomes.

This is an exciting and promising initiative that is well worth watching and supporting. If it proves successful, as we anticipate will be the case, it will be yet another example of how concerted action can overcome the worst effects of poverty, create stronger and healthier neighbourhoods, and make meaningful change in children’s educational prospects.

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Mauro, Ian and Jim Silver. 2017. *A Good Place to Live: Transforming Public Housing in Lord Selkirk Park* (Winnipeg: University of Winnipeg and Manitoba Research Alliance, September). This film can be accessed at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Kr6h-m\\_-1vM](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Kr6h-m_-1vM)

Jim Silver and Kate Sjoberg. 2017. *A Whole Community Response to Improving School Outcomes: The Case of Lavallee, Victor Mager and Victor Wyatt Schools*. Winnipeg: Report to the Louis Riel School Division. September.

#### **CCPA-MB**

205 - 765 Main St.  
Winnipeg, MB  
R2W 3N5

#### **PHONE**

204.927.3200

#### **EMAIL**

CCPAMB@  
POLICYALTERNATIVES.CA

#### **WEBSITE**

WWW.  
POLICYALTERNATIVES.CA

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