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A New Take on 'No Excuses' -- Tackling Poverty to Provide Meaningful Opportunity

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We all know that factors related to poverty can limit learning in a number of ways. Lack of quality early-childhood care and education impedes healthy development and kindergarten readiness. Inadequate access to preventive and basic remedial health care substitute sick days and emergency room visits for classroom time and reduce student awareness and focus in class. Hunger makes it hard for kids to concentrate. And a dearth of enriching, stimulating activities after school and over the summer drains away much of what is gained between 9 a.m. and 3 p.m. from September to June.

So-called "no excuses" education reformers distort this fundamental reality by claiming that Broader Bolder advocates and their allies don't believe that poor children can learn. They misrepresent the extensive evidence to suggest that those who understand the struggles wrought by living in poverty believe that parents' bank accounts are the bottom line. They have to engage in such trickery because the link is so logical, no one with common sense would suggest otherwise.

Last week's Capitol Hill briefing by three national experts -- Sean Reardon from Stanford University, Peter Edelman of the Georgetown Law Center, and David Sciarra from the Education Law Center in Newark -- brought the realities of poverty's impact on education into stark relief. Mr. Reardon cited findings from his chapter in the recent Russell Sage compendium *Whither Opportunity* to demonstrate that our record and growing income gaps, combined with a tattered social safety net, fundamentally threaten the American Dream. Current U.S. education policies compound, rather than alleviate, these massive income disparities, putting equality of opportunity even further out of reach for large numbers of low-income American students.

Mr. Edelman summarized decades of uncontested evidence from education scholars, economists, and others showing that "out-of-school" factors -- in particular, those associated with family and community poverty and lack of employment opportunity -- collectively, drive the majority of the achievement gap between well-off and low-income students:

"School reform is a crucial strategy toward ending poverty, but it is utterly unrealistic to think that we can close our persistent achievement gaps without tackling full-on the poverty that gets in the way of learning for so many children."

Mr. Sciarra documented the history of fiscal inequities that divide schools in wealthy, white and low-income and minority neighborhoods, in New Jersey and across the country. He discussed the major impact that programs and policies to alleviate those inequities can have, based on the state's Abbott decision and resulting shifts in resources to lower-income schools and districts:

"Most states officially sanction inequality in funding public education. Only a handful of states, including New Jersey, provide equitable school funding. The states that have regressive school finance systems, denying resources to low-income children, are bringing down the educational attainment of the entire nation."

Fine, the "no excuses" crowd says, maybe poverty does matter. But we aren't going to eliminate child poverty, and right now it's getting worse, not better. What do you suggest we do? Eric Rafael Gonzalez of the NAACP Legal Defense and Education Fund set forth a coherent set of effective, proven policies: stabilizing and improving the teacher and leader workforces in low-income schools, along with quality early-childhood education, health and nutrition supports, and after-school and summer enrichment.

It's time to take apply the "no excuses" doctrine to systems reforms. In a country this rich, there is absolutely no excuse for any child to come to school, or to go to bed, hungry. There is no excuse for compelling U.S. kindergarteners whose first experience with formal education is at age 5 to "compete" with peers in other Western countries who have enjoyed a high-quality, enriching early-childhood education. There is no excuse for any child to lack a basic medical home, or access to the counseling he or she needs to deal with the stresses of daily life, let alone daily life in poverty. There is no excuse for schools serving low-income students to exacerbate that impact of poverty by limiting that student's, or their teacher's or school's access to resources, experience, and richness of curriculum. There is no excuse for suspending or expelling students when there are more educationally sound ways to address discipline challenges. There is no excuse for failing to leverage the arts, music, recreational, and sports programs, and the museums, zoos, and universities we have in spades to provide all children with the horizon-broadening experiences that build on and expand what they learn in class.

We must stop excusing what we at the Schott Foundation for Public Education termed in our recent report "Education Redlining," which promotes failure and the massive school closures that the Anennberg Institute highlighted in its recent report. We must stop excusing what Pedro Noguera asserts is akin to "Apartheid." Let's be broader, bolder, and provide a real opportunity to learn for all.