Middle Grades Student Achievement and Poverty Levels: Implications for Teacher Preparation

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INTRODUCTION

In a time of increased accountability measures and volatility of educational policy, public and legislative bodies have become increasingly focused on student achievement as reported in statewide standardized test scores. Having all students take the same standardized test is like saying that we have “standardized” children and that we all expect them to learn in the same ways and exhibit this learning in the same way—through these standardized assessments. What these “one-size-fits-all” assessments fail to take into consideration, however, are the varied backgrounds of our students. Many factors play an important part in a student’s academic success, like special needs or environmental factors; this study focused on students’ socioeconomic status and how this affects student achievement. This paper discusses the implications of this research on current and future teacher preparation programs in higher education at the undergraduate level.

STANDARDIZED TESTING

Popularity in standardized testing has risen dramatically after the publication of A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform by the Reagan administration in 1983; this report portrayed the American educational system as a failing entity and proposed that its only way to redemption was through stricter accountability measures (i.e., increased standardized testing) (“Is the Use of Standardized Tests Improving Education in America?,” n.d.). The use of standardized testing has become controversial as these tests have become “high-stakes” for students and school faculty and administrators. Why do legislators and the general public care about standardized test scores? Numbers are the easiest data to analyze, and “educational attainment is well recognized as a powerful predictor of experiences in later life,” policymakers and the public assume that standardized testing data provide accurate reflections of student achievement (Brooks-Gunn & Duncan, 1997, p. 61). However, as the push for increased accountability through standardized assessment gained momentum it left many students falling through the cracks; standardized tests do not take the varying experiences of our students into consideration when it comes to test results, and as a result, achievement gaps became the norm for many subgroups but most noticeably for our economically disadvantaged children. Additionally, the recent downturn in our nation’s economy has resulted in a greater income gap between our schools’ wealthy and disadvantaged children: “...the Great Recession wreaked havoc among working-class families’ employment. This has led to greater residential segregation and homogenously poor neighborhoods, leading to a higher concentration of poor students in certain schools” (Neuman, 2013, p. 18). The time frame that our nation experienced the Great Recession coincided with No Child Left Behind’s deadline of having all children test as proficient in math and reading (according to standardized tests) by 2014; our nation did not meet this benchmark.
There are perspectives in favor of standardized assessments, in general, standardized tests are inclusive and non-discriminatory because everyone has to take them, regardless of race, gender, or ability. These tests can provide an indication of students’ ability on a variety of topics while identifying areas of strengths and weaknesses, and they can also be a useful tool for assessing the schools themselves. (Brown & Hattie, 2012, p. 289). Moreover, high advocates of standardized assessments argue that these tests make certain that schools and faculty members are held accountable to taxpayers for their instruction and that many parents and teachers approve of these tests (Is the Use of Standardized Tests Improving Education in America?, n.d.).

Concerns regarding standardized testing include placing too much emphasis upon scores, student testing anxiety, “teaching to the test,” cheating concerns, and sociocultural and economic bias (Brown & Hattie, 2012; Olson, 1999). Part of the concern regarding standardized testing comes from concern that there is too much emphasis placed upon them, leading to concerns about student testing anxiety, “teaching to the test,” skewed test results, and possible cheating concerns (Olson, 1999; Brown & Hattie, 2012, p. 289). Because these tests are considered “high-stakes,” poor student performance can lead to negative consequences for students and teachers alike; to protect both the test-takers and test administrators, “testing and measurement of psychological safety to make effective use of assessment, so too do teachers and school leaders need protection from negative consequences” (Brown & Hattie, 2012, p. 289). Some argue that the more important these tests become “in terms of being the basis for promoting or retaining students, for funding or closing down schools—the more that anxiety is likely to rise” (Brown & Hattie, 2012, p. 289) and that it ultimately “drives good teachers and principals out of the profession” (Kohn, 2000, p. 3; Renzulli, 2013, p. 1). Because the stakes of these tests are so high, test anxiety is now a common ailment amongst students across the nation; the Stanford-9 standardized exam, for example, even comes with instructions as to what actions the test administrator must take if a student vomits on a test booklet. This adds to the public sentiment that these tests are inflicting serious harm to children, both academically and emotionally, and these assessments do not result in improved cognition. (Horn, 2003; Popham, 2001). Furthermore, despite the avalanche of funds allotted to standardized testing, there exists a 2003; Popham, 2001). Furthermore, despite the avalanche of funds allotted to standardized testing, there exists aelah sentiment that these tests are inflicting serious harm to children, both academically and emotionally, and these assessments do not result in improved cognition. (Horn, 2003; Popham, 2001). Furthermore, despite the avalanche of funds allotted to standardized testing, there exists a nehmen sentiment that these tests are inflicting serious harm to children, both academically and emotionally, and these assessments do not result in improved cognition. (Horn, 2003; Popham, 2001). Furthermore, despite the avalanche of funds allotted to standardized testing, there exists alation that these tests are inflicting serious harm to children, both academically and emotionally, and these assessments do not result in improved cognition. (Horn, 2003; Popham, 2001). Furthermore, despite the avalanche of funds allotted to standardized testing, there exists antiment that these tests are inflicting serious harm to children, both academically and emotionally, and these assessments do not result in improved cognition. (Horn, 2003; Popham, 2001). Furthermore, despite the avalanche of funds allotted to standardized testing, there exists aven that these tests are inflicting serious harm to children, both academically and emotionally, and these assessments do not result in improved cognition. (Horn, 2003; Popham, 2001). Furthermore, despite the avalanche of funds allotted to standardized testing, there exists aen that these tests are inflicting serious harm to children, both academically and emotionally, and these assessments do not result in improved cognition. (Horn, 2003; Popham, 2001). Furthermore, despite the avalanche of funds allotted to standardized testing, there exists aing sentiment that these tests are inflicting serious harm to children, both academically and emotionally, and these assessments do not result in improved cognition. (Horn, 2003; Popham, 2001). Furthermore, despite the avalanche of funds allotted to standardized testing, there exists a
There are perspectives in favor of standardized assessments, as they measure what is measurable. However, many of these assessments are considered “high-stakes,” poor student performance will lead to labels, test at proficient levels by 2014. However, a study on student achievement and SES at the middle level plateauing at the high school level shows the “cognitive effects of wealth” are indirect and even gestational exposure to cocaine (2014). In every state in the nation the economically disadvantaged subgroup never outperforms other nonlabeled students regardless of the grade level or subject area, supporting that the variable of the standard test score is socioeconomic status; correlations between SES and student achievement range from .10 to .80 (Tenen, 2010; White, 1982). In a meta-analysis of research regarding students who have AD/HD. The World’s largest test, the Stanford-9 standardized exam, for example, even comes with instructions as to what actions the test administrator must take if a student vomits on a test booklet or answers a question with a stuffed toy. This adds to the public sentiment that these tests are inflicting serious harm to children, both academically and emotionally, and these assessments do not result in improved cognition (Horn, 2003; Popham, 2001). Furthermore, despite the avalanche of funds allocated to standardized testing, there exists a great deal of evidence that standardized tests do not improve student learning or achievement. According to NAEP (the National Assessment of Educational Progress), American children are actually performing worse after the implementation of No Child Left Behind accountability measures (“Is the Use of Standardized Tests Improving Education in America?”, n.d.).

Perhaps most important is what is being assessed but rather what is not being assessed, as what we measure is both invalid and misleading because student achievement depends on multiple factors that cannot be readily assessed, like ability, behavior, and socioeconomic status (Brooks-Gunn & Duncan, 1997; Wiggins, 2012). Because these examinations are designed to assess what is easily measured, they are inherently incapable of assessing what cannot be measured. These tests cannot ascertain “initiative, creativity, imagination, conceptual thinking, curiosity, effort, irony, judgment, honesty, good will, ethical reflection, or a host of other valuable dispositions and attributes” (Kohn, 2000, para. 45). This supports one of Albert Einstein’s most famous assertions: “Not everything that counts can be counted, and not everything that can be counted matters.”

**SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS AND STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT**

With regards to this study, socioeconomic status is viewed as a lens through which one measures student achievement. Correlational studies show a strong relationship between high poverty and poor academic performance (Sirin, 2005; White, 1982; White et al., 1993). This correlation begins at the beginning of a child’s academic career and even before, in some cases. Pawloski stated that poverty is more influential to academic performance than even gestational exposure to cocaine (2014). In every state in the nation the economically disadvantaged subgroup never outperforms other nonlabeled students regardless of the grade level or subject area, supporting that the variable of the standard test score is socioeconomic status; correlations between SES and student achievement range from .10 to .80 (Tenen, 2010; White, 1982). In a meta-analysis of research regarding students who have AD/HD. The World’s largest test, the Stanford-9 standardized exam, for example, even comes with instructions as to what actions the test administrator must take if a student vomits on a test booklet or answers a question with a stuffed toy. This adds to the public sentiment that these tests are inflicting serious harm to children, both academically and emotionally, and these assessments do not result in improved cognition (Horn, 2003; Popham, 2001). Furthermore, despite the avalanche of funds allocated to standardized testing, there exists a great deal of evidence that standardized tests do not improve student learning or achievement. According to NAEP (the National Assessment of Educational Progress), American children are actually performing worse after the implementation of No Child Left Behind accountability measures; the study cited that the reason for this projected failure would be due to the poor results from limited English proficiency students and high poverty students (“Is the Use of Standardized Tests Improving Education in America?”, n.d.).

Unfortunately, NAEP data also supports this prediction; the National Association for Educational Progress reported in 2005 that nearly 50% of all immigrant, minority, and low income children finished not high school and that in the nation’s largest cities, more than 30% of the lowest-income students landed in the lowest percentile rankings on standardized assessments in reading and mathematics (Renzulli, 2003). Even the founder of the Educational Testing Service, Henry Chauncey, has been quoted as saying “if there is anything in heredity (such as tall parents having tall children), one would expect children of high socioeconomic group parents to have more ability than children of low socioeconomic group parents.” In other words, according to the architect behind this billion dollar standardized testing company, public schools are now a Darwinian model of survival of the fittest—perhaps the richest ("No Child Left Behind" n.d.).

**ACADEMIC STANDARDS**

After the implementation of No Child Left Behind, state standards (and standardized assessments aligned to these standards) became the norm to meet accountability measures of this legislation. However, there was a common argument that states cannot compare data to one another because each state’s expectations were different from one another; hence came the impetus for the Common Core Standards, which is a national set of standards that are measured in the same way for all states who adopted them ("In the States," 2012). Like standardized testing, there exists a great deal of controversy surrounding the national implementation of these national standards.

In 2009 the National Governors Association, the Council of Chief State School Officers, and the organization “Achieve,” all led by the organization “Student Achievement Partners” and the head of the College Board Orgnahizer (Colman) and Coleman, tract the new standards. In their additional study on student achievement and SES at the middle level is crucial as “the [cognitive] effects of wealth [are] indirect and must accrue over time” (Willoughb, 2012, p. 34). Accountability measures were put into place to ensure a decline in achievement gaps between low income and higher income students; No Child Left Behind legislated a goal of 100% of students, regardless of identify, to score at proficient levels by 2014. A 2008 study forecast “nearly 100% failure” of California schools to meet these accountability measures; the study
on Innovation: Why One National Curriculum is Bad for America,” 2013). In Tienken’s (2011) research on the growing body of evidence supporting the Common Core standards, he discovered a lack of empirical evidence supporting these standards; this assertion was based on the 2010 Benchmark Marking for Success report, which was also written by the same group that created the standards. Of the 138 references used in this report, Tienken asserted that many of them are repetitive sources and that only four could be considered truly empirical studies directly related to national standards and student achievement (2011). The standards themselves are also a source for dispute. College professors who have reviewed the standards at length argue that they are oddly worded and leave much open to interpretation, much like this English Language Arts standard: “The process of reading aloud is a cornerstone of the classroom as a whole, and is essential to the development and personalization of each reader” (Carmichael et al., 2010). Other issues surrounding the standards themselves vary. Complaints expressed about English Language Arts are that they focus more on metacognition than content, they are too focused on informational texts (at least 50% of texts in grades 6-12 must be informational), and they convey vague expectations and reading lists (Carmichael et al., 2010; Liebeck, 2013). Frustrations regarding mathematics standards include an avoidance of standard algorithms, fractions, and basic arithmetic skills, vague expectations for when to use a calculator, and the introduction of concepts before they are ready (as cited in Strauss, 2013). Given that this steep decrease in test scores is across the general population of students, it only follows that these assessments will hurt students with disabilities, economic disadvantages, and limited English proficiency even more (Ravich, 2013). Given the fact that many states are opting out of paper-and-pencil assessments in favor of online assessments, this leads to technology and additional funding concerns by states (Koeker & Rentner, 2012). U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan has been vocal in his regard to concerns over the precipitous decline in test scores, arguing that “white suburban moms” are upset about the new Common Core standards, and that they were” (as cited in Strauss, 2013, para. 2). As a result of the tremendous decline in scores and related concerns, many as 10 states are now delaying implementation of Common Core assessments, and the board of New York’s teachers recently unanimously voted to withdraw its support for the Common Core standards (Ravich, 2013). Principals who withdrew their support in New York testified that “many children cried during or after testing, and others vomited or lost control of their bowels or bladders. Others simply gave up. One teacher reported that a student kept banging his head on the desk, and wrote, ‘This is too hard,’ and I can’t do this,” through our test booklet” (Bidwell, 2014, para. 9).

Inevitably, growing constituencies of opponents are voicing their concerns that a “one-size fits all” curriculum is counterintuitive and counterproductive in a society that values individualization, differentiation, and customization and that it may place too much emphasis on standardized testing while discouraging teacher autonomy (Stancill, 2013; Westerwelt, 2014; Tienken & Zhao, 2010). Furthermore, it ignores various subgroups like learning disabled students as well as disagregates parent and teacher input in educational policy (Westerwelt, 2014). Having a single set of standards is myopic in that it assumes that all students start and end at the same academic ability while overlooking student diversity (Tienken, 2011). This diversity has historically been viewed as a mark of strength in our educational system, and it is unfortunate that student diversity is now being viewed as negative as our system attempts to fit every student to the same constricted, standardized mold (Liebeck, 2013). Opponents of a nationalized, standardized curriculum often draw the comparison of a doctor practicing medicine: would a person want a one-size-fits-all approach to one’s medical treatment? Tienken and Zhao (2010) argued: “Why would you allow your child to receive programmed, standardized, one-size-fits-all instruction? We would not allow that for our children and we do not see any evidence that standardizing instruction will improve education for other peoples’ children” (p. 7-8).

Furher undermining confidence in the Common Core movement has been its effect on standardized testing, the related decline in test scores. Ravitch, who has made herself a vocal opponent of Common Core standards, reportd that the dramatic drop in test scores was intentional through testing design. In every state where these tests have been implemented test scores have dropped by approximately 30%, which on NAEP assessments has translated to less than 4 in 10 students being labeled as proficient using the new Common Core standards (Gewertz, 2013). Given this steep decrease in test scores is across the general population of students, it only follows that these assessments will hurt students with disabilities, economic disadvantages, and limited English proficiency even more (Ravich, 2013). Given the fact that many states are opting out of paper-and-pencil assessments in favor of online assessments, this leads to technology and additional funding concerns by states (Koeker & Rentner, 2012). U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan has been vocal in his regard to concerns over the precipitous decline in test scores, arguing that “white suburban moms” are upset about the new Common Core standards, and that they were” (as cited in Strauss, 2013, para. 2). As a result of the tremendous decline in scores and related concerns, many as 10 states are now delaying implementation of Common Core assessments, and the board of New York’s teachers recently unanimously voted to withdraw its support for the Common Core standards (Ravich, 2013). Principals who withdrew their support in New York testified that “many children cried during or after testing, and others vomited or lost control of their bowels or bladders. Others simply gave up. One teacher reported that a student kept banging his head on the desk, and wrote, “This is too hard,” and I can’t do this,” through our test booklet” (Bidwell, 2014, para. 9).

With a sudden reversal of state support for the Common Core, the future of the Common Core is uncertain at best. Although most states that originally adopted the initiative are still implementing the standards and their respective assessments, with the opposition growing, the effect of the standards on student learning is still undetermined at this time (Strauss, 2013).

At this point, after several years of research, development, and a nearly-nationwide implementation of the Common Core standards, abandoning the movement mid-

implementation may be disastrous. As the change process dictates, all implementations have an implementation dip where the process becomes more difficult before true, lasting change takes place. Several researchers believe that the Common Core standards implementation should continue through this “dip” but that some changes are necessary to make it succeed. These researchers believe that rather than as a tool for high-stakes testing, it should be used as a “low-stakes” tool to use for curriculum development and professional development. Furthermore, these researchers argue that Common Core standards and assessments should be subjected to field testing and revisions before using these standards for high-stakes assessments (Mathis, 2010).

**RESEARCH FINDINGS**

This nonexperimental quantitative study with secondary data analysis was designed to determine how socioeconomic status and student achievement on high-stakes assessments are related. The study was focused on middle grades students in North Carolina public schools during the 2012 and 2013 end-of-grade state assessments. Comparisons were made between the 2012 assessments (pre-Common Core implementation) and 2013 assessments (post-Common Core implementation).

In this study the level of socioeconomic status of the student was used as an independent variable, the grad of the Common Core assessments, and the board of New York’s teachers recently unanimously voted to withdraw its support for the Common Core standards (Ravich, 2013). Principals who withdrew their support in New York testified that “many children cried during or after testing, and others vomited or lost control of their bowels or bladders. Others simply gave up. One teacher reported that a student kept banging his head on the desk, and wrote, “This is too hard,” and I can’t do this,” through our test booklet” (Bidwell, 2014, para. 9).

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### Research Question 2

Is there a significant difference between 2012 and 2013 academic achievement scores on standardized tests for middle grades students?

HO: There is no significant difference between 2012 and 2013 academic achievement scores on the reading standardized tests for middle grades students.

A paired-samples t-test was conducted to evaluate whether a significant difference exists between academic achievement proficiency scores on mathematics standardized tests for middle grades students between 2012 and 2013. Mathematics achievement scores were significantly lower in 2013 than in 2012. The results indicated that the mean proficiency score (M = 81.54, SD = 18.07) was significantly higher in 2012 than in 2013 (M = 34.83, SD = 15.74), (t(1088) = -187.61, p < .001). Therefore, the null hypothesis was rejected because test scores were significantly higher in 2012 than in 2013. The standardized effect size index, d, was 3.26, which is a large effect. The 95% confidence interval for the mean difference between the two years’ scores was 45.86 to 47.56. A plot comparing the means of these scores is shown in Figure 13.

**Figure 1 MEANS OF MATHEMATICS SCORES IN MIDDLE GRADES STUDENTS COMPARED BY ACADEMIC YEAR**
A paired-samples t test was conducted to evaluate whether a significant difference existed between academic achievement proficiency scores on reading standardized tests for middle grades students between 2012 and 2013. Reading achievement scores were significantly lower in 2013 than in 2012. The results indicated that the mean proficiency score (M = 70.40, SD = 12.65) was significantly greater in 2012 than in 2013 (M = 43.06, SD = 14.09), t(1088) = 76.86, p < .001. Therefore, the null hypothesis was rejected because test scores were significantly higher in 2012 than in 2013. The standardized effect size index, d, was 2.30, which is a large effect. The 95% confidence interval for the mean difference between the 2 years’ scores was 26.63 to 28.04. A plot comparing the means of these scores is shown in Figure 14.

Research Question 3
Is there a significant difference between proficiency levels in both reading and mathematics standardized tests when compared by the schools’ economic levels in 2012 and 2013 for middle grades students?

HO1a: There is no significant difference between proficiency levels in both reading and mathematics standardized tests when compared by the schools’ economic levels in 2012 and 2013 for middle grades students.

A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was performed to determine whether significant differences existed between students’ proficiency levels in reading and mathematics standardized tests when compared by the schools’ economic levels for middle grades students on the 2012 North Carolina state report card. The factor variable, the socioeconomic descriptor of the student population, included four levels: 1%-40% economically disadvantaged, 41%-60% economically disadvantaged, 61%-80% economically disadvantaged, and 81%-100% economically disadvantaged. The dependent variable was the percentage of economically disadvantaged students passing both the reading and mathematics end of grade test for 2012 in each of these SES levels. The ANOVA was significant, F(3,359) = 57.99, p < .001. Therefore, the null hypothesis was rejected. The strength of the relationship between economically disadvantaged proficiency levels and the four socioeconomic levels as assessed by h2 was medium (.33).

Because the overall F test was significant, post hoc multiple comparisons were conducted to evaluate pairwise difference among the means of the four groups. A Dunnett C procedure was selected for the multiple comparisons because equal variances were not assumed. There were significant differences between the means of students passing both the reading and math standardized assessments at every socioeconomic level. Schools with more students on free or reduced cost lunch scored significantly higher than schools with fewer students on free or reduced cost lunch. Schools with 1%-40% of students receiving free or reduced cost lunch scored significantly higher than schools with 41%-60% of students receiving free or reduced cost lunch, and the 41%-60% socioeconomic bracket scored significantly higher than schools with 61%-80% of the student population receiving free or reduced cost lunch. Likewise, schools in the 61%-80% socioeconomic bracket scored significantly higher than schools with 81%-100% of the student population receiving free or reduced cost lunch. The circles on the box plots denote outliers that are farther than 1.5 interquartile ranges (and closer than 3 interquartile ranges), and the star on the box plots denote outliers that are farther than 3 interquartile ranges. The numbers next to the circles and star indicate the case number of the outlier. The 95% confidence intervals for the pairwise differences, as well as the means and standard deviations for the four socioeconomic levels, are reported in Table 13, and a box plot comparing the means between the groups is reported in Figure 15.

HO1b: There is no significant difference between proficiency levels in both reading and mathematics standardized tests when compared by the schools’ economic levels in 2013 for middle grades students.

A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was performed to determine whether significant differences existed between students’ proficiency levels in reading and mathematics standardized tests when compared by the schools’ economic levels for middle grades students on the 2013 North Carolina state report card. The factor variable, the socioeconomic descriptor of the student population, included four levels: 1%-40% economically disadvantaged, 41%-60% economically disadvantaged, 61%-80% economically disadvantaged, and 81%-100% economically disadvantaged. The dependent variable was the percentage of economically disadvantaged students passing both the reading and mathematics end of grade test for 2013 in each of these SES levels. The ANOVA was significant, F(3,359) = 50.78, p < .001. Therefore, the null hypothesis was rejected. The strength of the relationship between economically disadvantaged proficiency levels and the four socioeconomic levels as assessed by h2 was medium (.30).

Because the overall F test was significant, post hoc multiple comparisons were conducted to evaluate pairwise difference among the means of the three groups. A Dunnett C procedure was selected for the multiple comparisons because equal variances were not assumed. There were significant differences between the means of economically disadvantaged students passing both the reading and math standardized assessments at every socioeconomic level. Schools with more students on free/reduced cost lunch scored significantly lower than schools with fewer students on free or reduced cost lunch. Schools with 1%-40% of students receiving free or reduced cost lunch scored significantly higher than schools with 41%-60% of students receiving free or reduced cost lunch, and the 41%-60% socioeconomic bracket scored significantly higher than schools with 61%-80% of the student population receiving free or reduced cost lunch. Likewise, schools in the 61%-80% socioeconomic bracket scored significantly higher than schools with 81%-100% of the student population receiving free or reduced cost lunch. The circles on the box plots denote outliers that are farther than 1.5 interquartile ranges (and closer than 3 interquartile ranges), and the stars on the box plots denote outliers that are farther than 3 interquartile ranges. The numbers next to the circles and stars indicate the case number of the outlier. The 95% confidence intervals for the pairwise differences, as well as the means and standard deviations for the four socioeconomic levels, are reported in Table 14, and a box plot comparing the means between the groups is reported in Figure 16.
After analyzing these data, it becomes apparent that student socioeconomic status and academic achievement continue to be negatively correlated, supporting earlier research by Sirin (2005) and White (1982); that is, the higher the poverty level within a school, the lower the academic achievement based on standardized test scores. However, the question still remains regarding the relationship between the new Common Core curriculum and standardized test scores. Although test scores with the new curriculum were significantly lower in 2013 than the previous North Carolina Standard Course of Study, five-year trend evidence would provide appropriate evidence for the effects of the Common Core curriculum on middle grades students.

Additionally, those in control of the educational system must not continue to ignore the host of research that suggests students in socioeconomically integrated schools performed better in mathematics achievement testing than nonintegrated schools (2013). It is important to note that because poverty is an issue that exists outside the control of our schools, “...no policy improves socioeconomic status” (Duncan & Magnuson, 2005, p. 35). However, there are several ways schools can positively impact our students.

Wiggins (2012) pointed out that there are always outliers regarding standardized testing trends. There are some high poverty schools that score much higher than schools of similar demographics, and occasionally, there are low poverty schools that do not score as well as other wealthy schools. It is crucial that researchers study the high poverty outliers—that is, those schools that outperform schools with similar demographics, in order to determine which measures or programs educational leaders ascribe to the school's academic success.

One such outlier, Grassy Fork School in eastern Tennessee, became acclaimed for its academic turnaround because of its focus on differentiated instruction, differentiated (and quality) professional development, and attitude in its school leaders that changed the culture and climate in the school (Thomas, 2009). As a result, this school went from nearly being taken over by the state department of education to an example of the rest of high poverty schools’ strive to follow. Educators and policymakers must stop being tolerant and accepting of the link socioeconomic status and student achievement by referring to it as a truth of our system (Wiggins, 2012).

Lastly, but perhaps most importantly, schools cannot effectively improve student academic achievement without dealing with one of the most critical issues in our schools today: student poverty. Just as a doctor cannot treat a patient’s symptoms without attacking the infection, teachers cannot improve academic achievement in students with- out addressing the underlying economic issues that affect the student and family. Schools in high poverty areas already have difficulty in hiring and retaining high quality teachers due to the inherent difficulty in these positions and cycle of low expectations and poor performance (Porter 2013). When the deck is already stacked against high poverty schools and students, high quality instruction is paramount.

Some researchers suggest introducing socioeconomic inte- gration by busing, much like what was implemented during the Civil Rights movement, to bring in better teachers and enhance parent engagement. A 2010 meta-analysis suggested that students in socioeconomically integrated schools performed better in mathematics achievement testing than nonintegrated schools (2013). It is important to note that because poverty is an issue that exists outside the control of our schools, “...no policy improves ‘socioeconomic status’ directly...good policy is based on an understanding of causal relationships between family background and children outcomes, as well as cost-effectiveness” (Duncan & Magnuson, 2005, p. 35). However, there are several ways schools can positively impact our high poverty students to address issues that stem from a low socioeconomic level:

- Provide access to high quality, experienced teach- ers;
- Provide access to school resources (both at school and at home);
- Maintain high expectations and high quality cur- riculum;
- Provide parent education and assistance from social services;
- Facilitate community services provided to families through the school (i.e., free dental clinics, parent education workshops, food pantry for families, etc.);
- Focus on early education programs (like Pre-Kin- dergarten/Head Start programs) and interventions for all at-risk students;
- Provide specialized training and high quality pro- fessional development for faculty and staff in best practices for high poverty students;
- Focus on the school becoming a community of learners;
- Improve parent involvement;
- Improve relationships between school and commu- nity;
- Increase school funding from local, state, and federal agencies;
- Offer summer enrichment and summer school programs; and
- Maintain for small school and class size (Brooks- Gunn & Duncan, 1997; Jensen, 2009; Mujs, Har- ris, Chapman, Stoll, & Russ, 2009; Reardon, 2013; Sirin, 2005).

While this list is not all-inclusive, it provides a beneficial starting point for schools that have a large population of high poverty students. However, improving academic achievement in the high poverty school is often an uphill battle.

Sally, the founder of the Educational Testing Service, Henry Chauncey, has been quoted as saying “if there is anything in heredity (such as tall parents having tall chil- dren), one would expect children of high socioeconomic group parents to have more ability than children of low socioeconomic group parents” (“No Child Left Behind?,” n.d.). In other words, according to the architect behind a multi-billion-dollar standardized testing company, pub- lic schools are now a Darwinian model of survival of the fittest—or perhaps the richest. If this is the mantra behind standardized testing and accountability in our country, our schools, and therefore our nation's future, are in dire straits.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHER PREPARATION PROGRAMS

The Common Core movement, along with what we know as educational reform, has targeted high poverty students for student achievement, has a significant impact on how we are preparing our future teachers as undergraduate stu-


Reardon, S. (2013). The widening income achievement gap. Educational Leadership, (70), 8, 10-16.


