



Connecting People

Communication  
Across Barriers

# LEADERSHIP THAT MAKES A DIFFERENCE

**Poverty** has been the unspoken diversity issue in our educational systems for more than 100 years. Students from poverty are the least likely to gain an education and it is worse today than it was in the 1940s. Faced with an environment of increasing numbers of students experiencing poverty, it is imperative that education leaders have the knowledge and skills for systemically addressing the impacts of poverty on learning outcomes. **Educational leaders have the power to create systemic change** and ensure our schools work for all students, but we cannot do what we have always done and expect different results.

*“True compassion is more than flinging a coin to a beggar; it comes to see that an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring. We are called to be the Good Samaritan, but after you lift so many people out of the ditch, you start to ask, maybe the whole road needs to be repaved.”*

~ Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.



*“We cannot ignore poverty. It comes to school with our students and follows them home. Our goal is to address the barriers of poverty and work together to improve educational outcomes.”*

~ Dr. Donna M. Beegle

*“Systemic change does not miraculously bubble up from a change of heart. It is intentional, stemming from a precise and rigorous examination of present conditions and an understanding of the consciousness and spirit from which those conditions have emerged.”*

~Dr. Sharif Abdullah

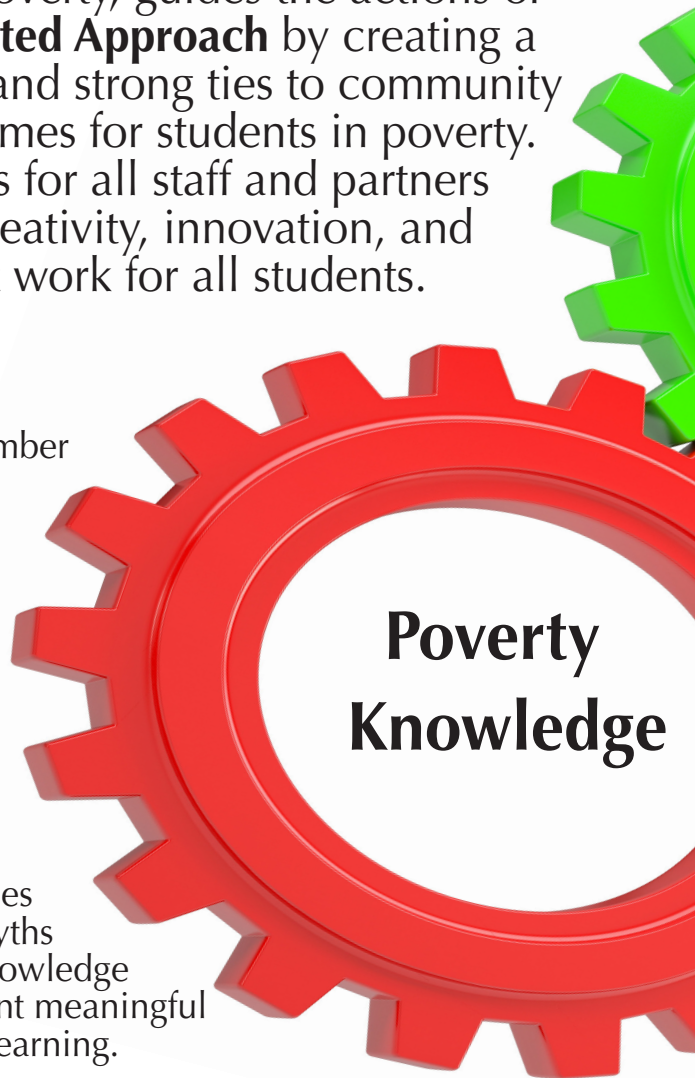
## In this Learning Guide:

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# A Foundation for Breaking Poverty Barriers

Leaders have the power to cultivate education systems that work for students living in poverty. Those that are successful in improving outcomes for students in poverty have three common practices: 1) Leaders ensure all staff are educated on **Poverty Knowledge** and the history that has created our nation's current reality; 2) **Dialectical Thinking**, a thought process that considers the complexity of poverty, guides the actions of all staff; and 3) Leaders facilitate a **Connected Approach** by creating a unified vision among a collaborative staff and strong ties to community resources that improves educational outcomes for students in poverty. Leaders can work to build these three skills for all staff and partners to unlock an organization's potential for creativity, innovation, and collaboration to create school systems that work for all students.

**Poverty Knowledge:** The media is the number one teacher of poverty, providing extreme cases, dramatized examples, and sensationalized stories. This results in deeply held attitudes, beliefs and values about students and families in poverty. Having poverty knowledge means knowing the definitions of different life experiences called "poverty" (generational, immigrant, working poor, and situational poverty), and understanding the historical perspectives of how we arrived at our current thinking about poverty. Our current actions are shaped by the history of poverty in the United States. A Poverty Knowledge base introduces local and national facts about poverty to dispel myths and stereotypes. When educators have Poverty Knowledge they are empowered to work together to implement meaningful solutions that eradicate the impact of poverty on learning.



**Gain poverty knowledge: A deeper understanding of poverty and its impacts are essential for breaking educational barriers.**

**Dialectical Thinking:** Scholar Kenneth Burke says Dialectical Thinking empowers people to understand that any situation can be defined in any number of ways, depending upon how you frame it. Most situations involving students and families in poverty are framed from a middle class perspective. Scholar Herbert Gans finds that we continue to ask people in crisis to “act” middle class when they have no capacity to do so. Poverty is full of unpredictable obstacles that do not neatly fit into schedules and plans. Dialectical Thinking empowers educators to use a flexible approach to meet students where they are and not where we want them to be.

Professionals are sometimes trained to think dualistically, an either or thought process. Dualistic thinking does not allow educators to consider the complexities of poverty and how it might impact students. It does not allow for consideration of the bullets regularly hitting students and families in the war zone of poverty (utility shut-offs, hunger, homelessness, stress, parents working more than one job, loved ones sick, cars breaking down, no money for repairs, childcare needs, no one to help with homework, etc). Educators who practice Dialectical Thinking seek to understand the “why” behind behavior and work for solutions. This approach reduces discipline referrals, improves communication, relationships and educational outcomes.



**Dialectical  
Thinking**



**Connected  
Approach**



**Connected Approach:** Educators and other helping professionals have the greatest impact on poverty barriers when there is a clear commitment to develop strong internal and external connective approaches. Leaders can set the tone that fighting poverty improves learning and requires all staff to share expertise and networks of support. However, educators alone cannot fight the complexities of poverty. Educational leaders can foster relationships with community partners with the goal of providing resources and opportunities necessary for educating students in poverty. It has never been more important for educators to build their “Resource Backpacks.” They should be able to support each other and work together to connect families to community partners.



# Where Does Your Organization Stand?

How well does your organization educate students in poverty and connect with their families? The three functions of a poverty competent organization (introduced on the previous page) illuminate the big picture of successful organizations. Here we provide a breakdown of the specific areas critical for working with students and families living in crisis. Take the time to examine your organization through the lens of each of the questions and topics below.

- 1. Education and Awareness of Poverty and Its Causes:** Is the history of poverty taught in your organization? Are staff members trained on poverty competencies necessary for serving those living in poverty? Are poverty issues on the agenda at all staff meetings?
- 2. Organizational Policies and Procedures:** Have you examined organizational policies and procedures through the lens of poverty to see if they serve those living in poverty? Are policies and procedures responsive to poverty conditions?
- 3. Partnerships and Resources:** Does your organization have enough community partnerships to provide a comprehensive approach to address poverty barriers (clothes, supplies, utilities, housing, food, jobs, legal help)? Are staff members knowledgeable about poverty neighborhoods? Are there sidewalks? What kinds of businesses exist? How are people treated in their community? What resources are available?
- 4. Staff Buy-In:** Do you have staff buy-in for increasing the success of students in poverty? Is there a shared vision and clearly stated goal on how to serve people in poverty?
- 5. Collaborative Relationships:** Have you developed a collaborative program? Does your organization have professional development teams who discuss and share best practices for serving people in poverty? Do staff help individuals form peer (helping) relationships (i.e. student-to-student, parent-to-parent)?
- 6. Effective Communication Skills (oral culture training):** Does your organization have a program to address vocabulary/grammar/oral culture language



**Examine organizational actions and policies to ensure that you are considering the realities of poverty that people face.**



differences and help individuals gain middle class vocabulary and skills of print culture while honoring and learning from the wealth of skills people from oral culture bring?

- 7. All Staff as Mentors:** Are staff in your organization able to act as mentors? Do they believe in the person and believe there is a way out of poverty? Are they aware of the history of poverty and local poverty conditions? Do they introduce people to their network? Do mentees see how they are like the mentor and vice versa? Do staff members self-disclose personal stories and/or examples of how they learned and how they reached success?
- 8. Resiliency and Positive Self-Concept:** Do staff know how to build positive self-concepts among those in poverty situations? Can they remind an individual what is special about him/her?
- 9. Exposure and Opportunities:** Do those from poverty have opportunities to become exposed to adventures that will increase their awareness of possibilities (e.g. trying new foods, visiting new places, and meeting professionals in a relaxed setting)?
- 10. Motivation, Value of Education, and Planning for the Future:** Can staff help people from poverty externalize the blame and raise their awareness about external barriers that challenge their progress towards success? Can they empower and motivate them to challenge those barriers and aim for success?
- 11. Welcoming Families and Reaching out to the Community:** Do staff know how to set up a welcoming climate for people in crisis? Do they reach out to the community to understand the social context that surrounds the people they are trying to serve?

# Characteristics of Effective Leaders

There is no clear definition of an effective educational leader. Each school and community is unique in its own demographics, resources, and needs. However, in research on leaders who improved outcomes for students living in the crisis of poverty, eight common characteristics of effective leaders were identified that worked in all environments:



**Use Your Power.** Power and responsibility are connected. If you do not personally take responsibility for educating students in poverty, you cannot have the power to close the achievement gap. It is in your hands.

**Lead by Action and Examples.** Leaders must “walk the talk” to create a school culture committed to success. Show staff how inaction or status quo heightens the challenges. Do your actions and behavior say every student can learn? Do you provide enough educational supports so all students can reach their potential? Do you regularly visit classrooms? Do you visit student’s homes? Do you select students for special jobs? Do you review data that reflects the struggles and successes of students in poverty?

**Foster Unity.** Your interests are connected to the interests of students and families in poverty. Understand that students and families in poverty are not “other.” They are people living in the context of poverty.

**Support Staff with a Connected Approach.** Ensure that knowledge about resources and opportunities are part of professional development to prevent staff from being overwhelmed by the impacts of poverty on student learning.

**Challenge Staff.** Call upon staff to examine their comfort zones and to implement new ways of reaching out and educating students in poverty. When educators believe students cannot learn because of poverty, they create barriers. When educators believe students can learn with the right supports, they find ways to overcome barriers.

**Consider Perspectives.** When making leadership decisions, think about what is best for students and families in poverty—from their perspectives.

**Believe in the Good of People and Their Unknown Potential.** See students and families in poverty as people who want to learn and have quality lives, but who may not know how to or may not have the supports to make that happen. We cannot know the potential of a student, but low expectations can limit it.

**Set Effective Policies.** Policies are meant to serve. Examine all policies and school rules to ensure students are not being punished for their conditions in the war zone of poverty.

# Critical Steps for Educating Students in Poverty

Communication Across Barriers (CAB) has carefully examined aspects of schools through the eyes of students and families in poverty and is able to develop actions that make a difference. These principles can guide you in implementing best practices for breaking poverty barriers. Below are concepts that assist leaders to create a climate for change.



- 1. Build a Common Sense of Purpose In-house and With the Community:** Effective leaders use specific communication practices designed to forge a common sense of purpose from conflicting values and differing points of view in their organization and with community partners.
- 2. Demonstrate Why Change is Needed:** Systemic change happens when members see a direct benefit and have tools and skills to implement desired change. Leaders who work to create a system where benefits for addressing poverty barriers are a priority and are explicit (increased educational success, reduced discipline, improved attendance, etc.) have more success in creating educational environments where students in poverty succeed.
- 3. Make Relationships a Priority:** Build relationships based on common ground. Students need to identify with educated people who use their credentials to earn a living. Identification happens when students see they are more “like” educated people than different. The definition of a role model is “someone I can be like.” Encourage staff and community members to find ways to help students see they are more alike, than different.
- 4. Create Effective Policies That Serve All Students:** What is your homework policy for students in poverty? What do you call homework when you have no home? How do you get help when you are more educated than the people in your home? Explore options and find alternative ways for students to do homework in places where there are adults who are not in crisis and know the curriculum, and there are lights, heat and needed supplies.
- 5. Take a Strengths Perspective Approach:** Leaders must cultivate an environment where educators work with and build on the strengths of students from poverty and work to alleviate the obstacles to learning that poverty presents.
- 6. Develop In-House Poverty Experts:** Target a minimum of three staff leaders to become certified in-house Poverty Coaches. They can lead discussions about what is working for students in poverty and identify areas for growth. Poverty Coaches provide trainings, serve as mentors to new staff, provide ongoing professional development, and can lead the development of a Poverty Competency Action plan with measurable goals (folded into the school improvement plan).
- 7. Take a Whole Family Approach:** Build staff’s knowledge of community resources so they can share information with families. Create ways for staff to connect with families in fun ways to build relationships and reduce fear and mistrust. Encourage carnivals, school family reunions and home visits.

**Set a tone that everyone has knowledge and skills to build on.**

# Creative Ideas Implemented in Schools

Communication Across Barriers (CAB) has worked with schools and community organizations for 23 years. Below are actions developed by districts that completed CAB's Poverty Competency trainings. Their schools are practicing the principles we teach. Build on this list by soliciting other ideas from students and families who face poverty, as well as staff who serve them.

- Change tardy slips to "We're glad you're here!" Provide food even if students arrive late.
- Develop a new student orientation program to assist students in learning expectations, norms and resources, with student leaders as mentors.
- Maximize opportunities for students to be successful. Examine what time of day most students get referrals. Provide extra mentoring and support activities during those times.
- Create a "new student" parent-interview process that asks parents information about their child.
- Address the issue of transportation. Find community volunteers to resolve this barrier.
- Implement student-led conferences with teachers who guide and add to the student's presentation.
- Compile a list of help needed at school (publish on website) and recruit people from the community and families in poverty to help. People want to help, but need to know how.
- Create a team strategy (similar to an IEP, but not a legal document). This approach ensures all areas where students are struggling are addressed.
- Revisit eligibility for activities and athletics and provide support rather than discipline.
- Recruit police, fire, and security to work with students on tutoring.
- Develop a "buddy" phone call system. When a friend is not at school, a student can call the home of the absent student from the office and update the student on assignments.
- Sponsor a community night with food and daycare. Involve parents in the planning.
- Expose students to people who have benefited from education; make connections to people in the community.
- Develop a health program via the school nurse or community agencies.
- Provide snacks and water before assessment sessions.
- Use local, state and federal grant monies to support staff training such as: poverty competency, communicating across poverty barriers, engaging families in poverty, motivating students in crisis, teaching/learning strategies, and becoming an Opportunity Community (a community-wide approach to supporting families in poverty).
- Use local businesses, state and federal resources to build supports and programs, such as field trips to expose students to middle class experiences, tutoring, before and after school activities and other creative programs.



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