

# POTTSTOWN CITIZENS FOR Responsible GOVERNMENT

## Bringing children out of poverty

Gov. Tom Corbett has called for innovation, competition and choice in our education system. The following is one of a series of articles about different approaches to education.

Jeff Sparagana, assistant superintendent of the Pottstown School District, calls it the most influential book on education he's ever read. Reed Lindley, superintendent, is another fan.

In fact, these administrators think so highly of Ruby Payne's book, "A Framework for Understanding Poverty," that they made the book required reading for district teachers.

Ruby Payne, Ph.D, is a former teacher and principal who has researched ways public schools can help bring children out of poverty. Considering that 65 percent of Pottstown students come from low income families,

her analysis is particularly pertinent to us.

### "Generational" versus "Situational"

Payne makes a clear distinction between "situational" poverty, which describes formerly middle class families who become poor because of a divorce, or the breadwinner dies or loses a job, and "generational" poverty, which describes families who have been poor for two or more generations.

Children in generational poverty aren't simply lacking the financial resources of the middle class. They live in an entirely different culture that obstructs learning and success in school.

The problem is not intelligence, Payne writes. Poor children are just as bright as middle class children. But they come to school with a system of thought processes and behavior that are entirely different from the middle class.

For example, middle class families value work and achievement. They believe education is crucial to success, and by working hard, students can succeed in school and achieve a better future for themselves.

On the other hand, Payne says, people in generational poverty value education in the abstract but don't think it applies to them. They are far more interested in the present than the future, because they believe fate, not their actions, governs their destiny. Some other attributes of generation poverty:

- At home, the TV is always on, and there is no personal space as in a middle class family, where most children have their own room. The only way poor children can defend their turf is physically, which is why fighting is acceptable and even necessary.



Commentary by  
Thomas Hylton

- In conversation, the most important information is not what is said, but in non-verbal cues and gestures.

- Discipline is about penitence and forgiveness, not about changing behavior.

- Organized society is viewed with suspicion.

- Love and acceptance is conditional, based on whether a person is liked.

People in generational poverty speak differently than those in the middle class, who use what Payne calls "formal register," consisting of a good vocabulary and proper sentence structure and syntax.

Middle class children are immersed in proper language almost from birth, whereas

children from generational poverty do not hear it until they come to school. By that time, it is much more difficult to learn.

Because formal register is used in school, testing, and job interviews, poor children frequently fail and stop trying.

### A different approach

School provides the only hope for most young people to move from generational poverty to the middle class.

But this requires much more than just academic achievement. First, it means young people must leave the culture in which they were born, and most of the people in it. This is terribly difficult.

Teachers must do more than teach subject matter. They have to be role models. Without being judgmental about the culture of poverty, Payne suggests, they have to show students the rules they will have to follow if they want to join the middle class.

"When students who have been in poverty (and have successfully made it into the middle class) are asked how they made the journey, the answer nine times out of ten has to do with a relationship — a teacher, counselor or coach who made a suggestion or took an interest in them as individuals," Payne writes.

Payne suggests schools should be organized to allow teachers to stay with the same students for two or more years, so they can build long term relationships.

"The key to achievement for students from poverty is in creating relationships."

*Thomas Hylton is a member of the Pottstown School Board. However, the thoughts expressed are his alone and not those of the school board or administration.*