

## **Strategies for Meeting the Needs of Economically Struggling Students**

**Julie Landsman**

1. Assume all students can learn and can learn complicated and creative material
2. Build a classroom and a school that gives control to students as much as possible while at the same time maintaining safety and structure. Allow their voices and interests to drive your curriculum.
3. Check on your own assumptions about poor kids or their parents: do not assume they are not as smart as other kids, that they do not want to learn, that they cannot learn in creative and unusual ways. Do not assume they all learn in one way or must be taught in a rote method, at the expense of teaching them ways of thinking critically, writing creatively or learning the scientific method, the Pythagorean theorem.
4. Think of the assets students who live in poverty bring to the classroom, not always the deficits. Resiliency, perseverance, flexibility, compassion and even hope are just a few of the things some of these kids and their parents have learned.
5. Do not believe in stereotypes of poor students, or generalize about them. Use information and data to understand situations yet be careful of assuming behaviors or states of mind for any whole group. This becomes dangerously close to stereotyping.
6. Become reflective and self reflective about why kids are without so much in our cities and neighborhoods. Don't be afraid to question the assumptions of others about these kids and their families. Be willing to speak up when destructive or negative comments are made about any whole group. Avoid the poison of the teacher's lounge if that is the way it is in your school.
7. Ask yourself: What do I control? Who are my allies? And go from there. Understand you cannot change the world, but can work within your classroom and community to create change. Be willing to really look at what you control: the building itself, the curriculum, the presence or absence of music as part of your curriculum?
8. Support teachers and colleagues who are challenging students and who are finding ways to reach them. Build a support network for those teachers in your building. Find ways for them to connect even if it is once a week by email, or in the media center talking about "what went right this week" each Friday. Be imaginative about this support.
9. Remember, deciding on what to do in schools does not mean making the decision between treating kids like human beings versus academic and skill achievement.
10. Keep your own boundaries clear when working with students in trouble or who are in need of so much. Maintain your "other life" so that you can go into the classroom whole heartedly, ready to meet kids with your heart and mind and without resentment. This is what they need from you the most.
11. Expand the notion of school functions: can schools provide evening support groups for parents? Can they develop evening classes for both students who need credits and parents who also want to learn or get high school credit? Can they provide child care for parents who want to come to conferences, transport parents

- to meetings, or even hold conferences in another building? Can teachers visit the neighborhoods from which their students come? The list here is endless.
12. Find ways to provide the basic necessities: a place to wash clothes, a drive for coats for the winter for students, breakfast, snack and lunch programs, funding from businesses for supplies, computers, keyboards, art materials.
  13. Do not assume all kids have: computers, phones, a regular place to live, access to pencils, books, supplies, enough food, a place to wash clothes, a feeling of safety when they go home, a place to fall asleep when they are tired.
  14. Look in the community for the resources for kids: small churches that can provide a place to do homework, a community leader the kids respect, a shop where kids parent's go to talk and hang out.
  15. Find a way to survey students at the beginning of the year or your class time with them. In this way you will learn a lot about their home situation.
  16. Ask students to do jobs for you, making them feel important and also in control of something in their lives.
  17. Do not single kids out or even indicate in front of others that you know they are homeless or poor, yet make yourself available for them to come in and talk with you. Refer them for help when this happens.
  18. While you do not want to coddle students, you may also "cut deals" with some of them. If they do not bring their homework in some day because they have been out at night trying to find a place to sleep, figure out a time to help them get the homework done in school. Thus you are not letting them get away with not doing it at all but you are making a deal with them about how to get it done.
  19. Convince students, in whatever capacity you hold in a building: "I mean business, I believe you can learn and I will listen to you, giving you meaningful work to do." Provide them with a way to work at their level to achieve a grade, helping them increase skills without frustrating them. Make assignments open ended.
  20. Counsel out teachers who do not believe all students can learn.