

'Kids are a treasure': 18 percent of Cayuga County children live in poverty



MAY 15, 2014 6:00 AM • [CARRIE CHANTLER](#) | CARRIE.CHANTLER@LEE.NET

Childhood is precious.

It's fleeting. When in it, however, it's a time that can seem to take ages to pass.

Imagine, then, how long a school day is when empty stomachs steal concentration and focus. Or when there aren't coats big enough to weather a polar vortex, or when untreated illnesses make children feel confused and miserable.

These are only some of the circumstances Cayuga County's children living in poverty face. Compounding the issue for some is unstable housing, domestic abuse and illiteracy, which some see as a root cause of poverty.

"So much happens in those early years and stressors like living in poverty impact a child's healthy development," said Nancy Tehan, community coordinator of the E. John Gavras Center.

In the last dozen years, she's seen the number of Cayugans in poverty increase. Tehan is the director of Success by 6, the early childhood development program that encourages parents to read to their children. Since 2006, the program has placed 156,000 books into home libraries across the county.

Despite such resources as the Nurse/Family Partnership, WIC (Women, Infants and Children) and Head Start, the economic downshift of the last few years has stretched the ability of these programs to provide assistance for those they serve.

"It's beyond our control," Tehan said. "The need is just greater."

The federal government's poverty line for a one-person household is \$11,670 and for a four-person household the line is drawn at \$23,850. According to 2012 U.S. Census data, 17.9 percent of Cayuga County residents under the age of 18 are living in poverty.

Early childhood development

For working parents trying to climb out of poverty, finding affordable, safe, early-education and after-school programs for their children can be a catch-22.

Those who receive subsidies for childcare programming often find they lose the benefit when their salaries rise due to bouts of overtime or when they take a second job, said Kelly Guy.

Guy is the executive director of The Neighborhood House in Auburn. The child development center serves 121 children year-round, ages 6-weeks to 12 years, in 10 sunny classrooms, a nursery and three outdoor playgrounds.

The nonprofit center and its educational programs are primarily funded through local, state and federal grants, and as such is audited closely. Roughly 60 percent of the children served receive scholarships or assistance. When these salary-based subsidies are compromised because of small bumps in parents' income, by law, the children served by Guy's professional staff stop receiving instruction and care.

"It's not fair for parents," she said. "Here they think 'ah, I can get a little bit ahead,' but then they are no longer eligible for service."

The center's learning-through-play curriculum promotes a child's development toward standard milestones. A checklist follows each child as they grow from saying "mama" or "dada" by 9 months to reciting colors, their own name and the name of a friend by the time they're 2 or 3.

If children lag reaching some milestones, conversations with parents are had about how to support home conditions that aid a child in mastering them.

"I think (some people) see us babysitters," said Guy, a former first-grade teacher. "The value of education in the early years is very clear."

She says "you just know" when a child arrives and is hungry. Cranky, sulky moods prevail and "they have a sunken look" that gives them away.

All children who attend the center receive, depending on their schedules, breakfast, lunch and an afternoon snack prepared and cooked on premises.

When Guy started at The Neighborhood House four years ago, she got rid of chicken nugget lunches and nutritionally questionable snacks. Hot breakfasts and gluten-free choices took their place and she established a relationship with Central New York Food Bank. Now, she said, menus consist of whole wheat bread and cereal, fresh vegetables and fruit.

The switch netted behavior changes, she said.

Emotion filled Guy's eyes when she described how a 3-year-old's unruly behavior shifted once his intake of white flour and excess sugar was limited at the center.

"He's 5 now and in kindergarten and doing wonderfully," she said. "He was my big win."

When situations don't improve, Guy is mandated to report signs of abuse and neglect, the least favorite part of her job.

"When we lose them, that's the worst-case scenario," she said. "We lose connection completely."

She tells of a child whose bedbug-bitten body was not attended to despite a parent intervention. Left with no choice but to call the Children Services Division of the county Child Protective Services, Guy worried she'd lose touch with the youngster if circumstances involved

removal from her center.

Instead, the division stepped in and paid for an exterminator, replaced the child's bed and bedding and the child didn't have to leave the center.

"We need more of this," she said.

Elementary and secondary education

When schoolchildren start kindergarten and progress through high school, the challenge of poverty can follow.

"Research shows that kids who are connected with school do better in school," said Karen Burcroff, principal of Union Spring's A.J. Smith Elementary School.

In her school, Burcroff uses a multi-prong approach to work with children who arrive to school ill-prepared for the day. The top task, she says, is for students to know that the school building is a safe and secure learning environment.

"No matter how unsettling things are at home, we are their rock-solid base," she said. "(We're) always there for them."

In addition to the district's instructional programming, with its emphasis on literacy and vocabulary building in early grades, district employees deduct money from their paychecks to fund Project HOPE.

"This allows us to help families with gas money who need to get to the doctor, buy a mattress for a kid who has been sleeping on the floor or couch, pay the electric bill so a family has heat during the winter," she said.

A strong indicator of poverty, or those living close to it, is how many students avail themselves of a school's free and reduced lunch program.

Since 2011, the number of meals served in the free and reduced lunch program in the Auburn Enlarged City School District rose from 40.11 to 45.26 percent among students in its schools, which includes a very small number at Cayuga Community College.

"There's a low end of the middle class that is approaching living in poverty in that they're living week-to-week, month-to-month with stressors that are in the home that weren't present in past years where there was more stability in the middle class," said William Speck, district superintendent of the Cayuga-Onondaga BOCES.

Speck points out stress is felt by the children of parents kept from home responsibilities because of working multiple jobs, that could evaporate at any time, to cover the bills.

"Where there is stress and unpredictability in a family or in a student's life there is less engagement during the primary function of the school day," he said. "For example, if a child happened to come to school and realized that there was no breakfast for them and missed the breakfast program or was not eligible, they're thinking about that rather than the math lesson of the day."

Sometimes there is more stability in a living situation for the person living in poverty rather than on its precipice. Regardless of intermittent poverty or long-term poverty, teachers and school administrators help children and families cope, Speck said.

Kimberly Campagnola is a 20-year educator at the Cayuga-Onondaga BOCES and supervises special education instruction in its nine component school districts.

"What bothers us the most is when kids are hungry," she said.

Campagnola knows of students who sleep in homes with parts of roofs missing, who have no hot running water and borrow electricity from neighbors by stretching lengths of extension cords across yards.

She tells of one high-schooler whose pride prompts her to decline the donation of necessities that every teenager could use. Campagnola and her staff sneak them into her backpack anyway, she said.

Schoolchildren with needs related to poverty are often helped by their classmates who show up to school with extra snacks or clothing, many educators said.

"You know, the issue comes down to resiliency in children," Speck said. "And if we were really to peel back the lives of some of the kids that walk into our schoolhouse we would say that they are truly heroes to be able to come and take on the task of learning with so much that's on their plate and get through that with a sense of optimism, hope and encouragement for others around them."

Resources for children in poverty

For more information about the agencies mentioned in this article, visit:

Success by 6

E. John Gavras Center

182 North St.

Auburn, N.Y. 13021

(315) 255-2746

sbs@gavrascenter.com

Human Services Coalition

17 E. Genesee St.

Auburn, N.Y. 13021

(315) 253-9743

<http://www.human-services.org/index.php>

Neighborhood House

81 Wall St.

Auburn, N.Y. 13021

(315) 252-5741

<http://neighborhoodhouse.vpweb.com/>

Cayuga-Onondaga BOCES

1879 West Genesee Street Road

Auburn, N.Y. 13021

(315) 253-0361

http://www.cayboces.org/pages/Boces_Cayuga-Onondaga

Child Protective Services

160 Genesee St.

Suite 4

Auburn, N.Y. 13021

(315) 253-1338

<http://www.cayugacounty.us/LivingWorking/HumanServices/CHILDRENFAMILYSERVICES/Prot>

Students in poverty

The percentage of enrolled students living in poverty by school district, and where that district ranks among 455 districts in upstate New York, according to Census Bureau data:

Skaneateles: 8.93 percent of students in poverty, 56th

Union Springs: 9.32 percent of students in poverty, 68th

Weedsport: 9.98 percent of students in poverty, 75th

Port Byron: 14.8 percent of students in poverty, 165th

Moravia: 16.22 percent of students in poverty, 213th

Jordan-Elbridge: 16.56 percent of students in poverty, 226th

Southern Cayuga: 19.77 percent of students in poverty, 303rd

Auburn: 20.82 percent of students in poverty, 322nd

Cato-Meridian: 21.44 percent of students in poverty, 336th

Join the discussion

To conclude this special series on poverty in Cayuga County, we're holding an online town hall meeting with a group of local experts on the frontlines of the War on Poverty. Head to auburnpub.com at noon Friday to take part in this interactive forum.