

DAVID WILCOX'S EXPERIENCE AT POVERTY SIMULATION

## Wilcox: What it was like to be poor for 60 minutes



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Work was the easy part of being poor.

I could sort of relax during the few minutes that represented a 40-hour week in yesterday's poverty simulation event at West Middle School. So during each of the event's four simulated weeks, I got one moment of repose.

I and the other participants randomly selected to be wage-earners spent that time sorting cards — by suit, by number, by whatever arbitrary order

was imposed on us. The fourth week, our last instruction was to do all that and then shuffle the deck before picking a random card and reporting it to our boss — a final reminder that minimum-wage work is often minimum-brain work, as well.

When I wasn't working, I was sweating — literally and figuratively. With 100 others inside the school gym on a 75-degree morning, the struggle to make ends meet was intensively simulated for me. The numbers were cutthroat. After subtracting my family of four's monthly budget from my wage, our Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program benefits and my step-father's disability, we cleared \$6.

Figuring out just how to pay those bills was its own headache. Every trip required handing transportation passes to the employer, the bank, and so on, so those sometimes had to be resupplied before we could do anything else. Speaking of the bank, I waited through a five-person line the first week just to find out I didn't have an account into which to deposit my first paycheck. The banker took my transportation pass anyway.

The consequences of failing to pay our family's bills and buy food weren't quite immediate, either. My family went without food for three weeks — and we only figured that out, on our own, in the third week. Those who didn't pay their rent, on the other hand, returned to overturned chairs.

So, logistically, the simulation wasn't the smoothest. Then again, I guess poverty isn't, either. Whether our confusion was part of the point or not, it worked. More than ever, my heart goes out to the people for whom this maelstrom of scarcity and frustration is a reality every minute of every day.