



Addressing Poverty

At the Fall Regional Meetings, we touched on a topic that is affecting every school district in Wisconsin in one way or another — growing levels of student poverty. The emphasis on improving student performance and narrowing achievement gaps in the new state accountability system (and on new state report cards) makes this topic all the more relevant.

At the Regional Meetings, we shared statistics and graphics that illustrated dramatic job losses in the state in industries that have traditionally provided family-supporting, high-wage jobs; the growing income gap; and the rising number of Wisconsin students who qualify for free or reduced-priced meals. During the 2000-01 school year, 26 percent of Wisconsin students qualified for free or reduced-price meals. Last school year (2011-12), that percentage rose to 42.5 percent and continues to climb.

While these numbers reveal some disturbing trends, I doubt school leaders need to see graphs or statistics to know that poverty has become one of the biggest challenges to public schools in Wisconsin. You see it most every day.

While this is a tough topic to

discuss, I think we agree that students in poverty deserve the same opportunities as other students but also they deserve to be challenged and held to the same standards. As school leaders, we need to help ensure that every child gets the message that they can be successful if they're willing to work hard, learn from their mistakes, and continue to work hard. We can teach resiliency.

Dr. William Parrett, a nationally respected education researcher and professor, who's considered a leader in providing ideas and strategies on how to support economically disadvantaged students, will be sharing his ideas during a special Pre-Convention Workshop on Tuesday, Jan. 22. His session, "Turning High-Poverty Schools into High-Performing Schools," will provide strategies for reversing some of the practices that perpetuate poverty and discuss how to foster a safe, supportive culture of high achievement for all students.

Dr. Tony Wagner, one of our keynote Convention speakers, will speak to how to get the most out of our brightest students who often feel unchallenged in today's schools. Dr. Wagner recently accepted a position as the first Innovation Education Fellow at the Technology

& Entrepreneurship Center at Harvard University, and his latest book, *Creating Innovators: The Making of Young People Who Will Change The World*, has just been published by Simon & Schuster.

In addition, our final Convention keynote speaker — Chef Jeff Henderson — uses his life story as a backdrop to motivate others to overcome the barriers standing in the way of success. A major drug dealer by the age of 19, Chef Jeff discovered a passion for cooking and turned his life around while in prison. Today, he's a successful chef, author and Food Network personality who understands first-hand the power of potential in all our young people.

Whether it is an economically disadvantaged student, a gifted and talented student, a non-English speaking student or a student who is all of the above — we can't lose focus on pushing all students to achieve at their highest potential. Providing the right kind of support for every Wisconsin student should remain our most important priority. I look forward to seeing you at the State Education Convention in January where we will explore these and many other issues! ■

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