

Poverty in Kansas Affects Educational and Life Opportunities

by Tammie Benham, Assistant Director, Kansas Parent Information Resource Center

Educators, early childhood and information professionals, parents, and administrators gathered in Junction City in February to gain information on the experience of those who live in, or are raised in, poverty in Kansas. Participants engaged in a workshop with the goals to:

- Raise the consciousness of those who work with families who live in poverty; and
- Provide opportunities to examine attitudes and existing prejudices related to families who live in poverty.

The workshop, which was sponsored by Kansas Parent Information Resource Center (KPIRC), consisted of a half-day poverty simulation followed by a full day of information, research and statistics related to individuals who live, work and attend school while dealing with poverty.

The half-day poverty simulation assigned each person a role to play, either as a family member living in poverty, a service-agency employee, or a community member such as a law enforcement officer. A scenario was then given to each family, which was characteristic of problems faced by families who find themselves living below the poverty level. Experiences of the “family members” included children being left at daycare, banks and utility companies being open only during hours when the family could not pay their bills and the subsequent disconnection of these services, eviction, being fired from their jobs and not having enough money to purchase necessities such as food for their family.



Conference Participants Study Poverty with Dr. Paul Gorski

At the conclusion of the simulation, participants were asked to share their reaction and experiences. Many people shared the frustrations they had trying to get through the day. Teachers were faced with lack of basic supplies and the reactions of their students to things like evictions and lack of food and adequate sleep. All agreed that it was an eye-opening experience.

Listening to the recollections of those engaged in the simulation was powerful. However, perhaps the

most powerful impression was shared by an individual who was assigned to be a criminal. This individual was able to steal an identity, money, a house, and transportation passes. He was also able to kidnap and “murder” a member of the community without anyone suspecting him.

The “criminal” reported that he was very surprised with how easy it was for him to move through the community and that not everything he did was of a criminal nature. He gave money away to those he felt were in need and helped individuals in other ways while trying to sell their children “drugs” (sugar packets).

Individuals who had gained a shared sense of community during the poverty simulation gathered again on the second day to hear Dr. Paul C. Gorski from Hamline University in St. Paul, Minnesota. Dr. Gorski is an internationally known scholar and activist on social justice issues. Gorski began his day by explaining that while he was presenting, the audience members were likely to experience “cognitive dissonance” as their existing attitudes were challenged.

Gorski then presented research and information that challenged the popular “Culture of Poverty” myth coined by Ruby Payne and Aha! Press, proving that those who exist in poverty are no more “all alike” than those of other subgroups in the United States, such as “all women,” “all Asians,” or “all people over 50 years old.” He went on to discuss the experience of American children who live in poverty. Demonstrations convinced participants that when children are not given the same opportunities in school as their more prosperous peers, this leads to limited opportunities in later adult life.

Existing myths, such as, “Poor people work less, use drugs more often and commit crime more often,” were examined and dismissed as facts demonstrated that the poor often work more than the middle class due to lack of a living wage, and drug use and criminal activity occurs equally among all classes, but is more visible among the poor.

Links to the PowerPoint of Dr. Gorski and contact information for the Poverty Simulation can be accessed through the KPIRC website at www.kpirc.org.

KPIRC is a federally funded grant through “No Child Left Behind” that provides information, training and technical assistance on parent involvement in education, birth through high School. Tammie Benham, Assistant Director for Kansas Parent Information Resource Center, will present a session on the importance of parent involvement in education during the upcoming Kansas Library Conference.