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BELOW the LINE

Poverty in York Region

Part 3: Education — The vicious circle

Challenges at school for poor children

BY CHRIS TRABER
Staff Writer

The more education you have, the less likely you are to be poor. The poorer you are, the harder it is to get an education.

Sixteen per cent of those with less than Grade 9 education are considered low income, compared to 8 per cent of those with post-secondary education, according to A Profile of York Region's Low Income Population.

But if you are poor, chances are you will struggle in the classroom, too.

And, if one in 10 York citizens is in a low-income bracket and almost 25 per cent of this group is 14 or younger, there are approximately 23,000 poor kids in our schools.

Their challenges range from being unable to afford the same materials as other students to emotional issues of conformity and peer pressure.

Children are most often the innocent victims of poverty, Melanie Piehl, a single 34-year-old Keswick mother of three children said. It's something her daughter knows too well.

"It's degrading," she said. "Kids would pick on her, she skipped classes. She was enrolled in a dance class and we couldn't afford the shoes."

"In Grade 8, she was on the honour roll. After we went on social assistance, she started failing. She's in Grade 10 now and struggling with many issues."

What students need is a level playing field, says Poverty Action for Change Coalition in York Region chairperson Tom Pearson.

For example, more homework assignments require in-home computer and Internet access.

"Seventy to 80 per cent of school kids have computers at home," he said. "It's not fair for those who don't. And access to computers at school isn't always available. The school boards shouldn't

just assume students have computers at home.

"The stigma for kids is huge at school. For example, when you add it all up for the grad dances, the shoes, clothes, it's expensive.

"But, you do your best and then they show up and see the others pull up in limos. It's not easy for a lot of kids."

The York Region District School Board held a poverty and classism conference in partnership with front-line service agencies.

"It is now a front-burner issue," field researcher Scott Milne said, adding the board has a three-part plan, including student achievement, a safe and supportive school environment and parent, family and community engagement.

"We have to go beyond our own walls because (impoverished) parents and kids are the hardest to reach," he said.

The public board relies on a network of community partners to communicate with families living in poverty, Mr. Milne said.

But programs, whether breakfast clubs or specialized literacy programs, are never restricted to low-income students.

"The worst thing you can do to the poor is target them," he said. "Programs have to be inclusive so that families and children aren't stigmatized further."

The York District Catholic School Board's policy is not to allow a child to be excluded due to financial hardship, communications manager Chris Cable said.

But that's sometimes easier said than done.

"Families don't usually come forward," she said. "So how do you know? Teachers and counsellors have become astute at identifying needs, although, at times, parents will approach us."

The Catholic board has contingency budgets to help students who can't afford field trips or uniforms.

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