

The Relationship Between Poverty and School Performance in South Carolina

Fan Pan, Tammiee S. Dickenson, Kara Bown, Xumei Fan,
Gina M. Kunz, & Thomas E. Hodges
University of South Carolina | June 2021

In the United States (2018), approximately 12.6 million children under age 18 were in families living in poverty (National Center for Educational Statistics). Poverty is a significant problem, affecting educational opportunity, health, and security for many children. Numerous studies (e.g., Olszewski & Corwith, 2018) have demonstrated the relationship between poverty and development of children's academic performance, classroom environment and student behaviors. Measuring the relationship between poverty level and different levels of K-12 education (i.e., elementary, middle and high school) is also very important. Researchers (e.g., Olszewski & Corwith, 2018) concluded that students' performance in the elementary, middle, and high school levels were highly influenced by poverty level. Fortunately, research indicates that social supports for students can moderate the impact of poverty and its associated stressors. Specific interventions are needed if students in high poverty schools are to be ready for college and future career success. By understanding differences in educational outcomes between levels of poverty in schools, how they play out in different grade levels, and by understanding protective factors, educational leaders and policy makers can help make decisions that hold promise in mitigating some of the negative effects of poverty on educational outcomes.

This study focused on South Carolina data and illustrated an overall picture of the relationships between poverty levels and state report card information. This research employed 2019 school report card data from the South Carolina Department of Education and excluded schools with special characteristics. The state report card variables included in this research were categorized into four key areas: academic achievement/outcomes, student engagement, classroom environment, and student safety. This study conducted separate analysis for elementary, middle, and high schools.

Specifically, this study was intended to address the following research questions:

- How do high poverty and low poverty elementary schools differ on multiple school performance indicators?
- How do high poverty and low poverty middle schools differ on multiple school performance indicators?
- How do high poverty and low poverty high schools differ on multiple school performance indicators?



KEY FINDINGS

- For all three school types, achievement in English and Language Arts (ELA) and mathematics was significantly greater for low poverty schools than for high poverty schools with very large differences.
- Compared to teachers from high poverty schools, teachers from low poverty schools reported significantly greater satisfaction with the following school climate indicators: school learning environment, social and physical environment, and school-home relations.
- Large differences were identified between high-poverty schools and low-poverty schools on indicators including chronic absenteeism rate (high-poverty schools having much higher rate of student absentee), teacher retention for elementary schools (high-poverty schools having much lower teacher retention rate), parents' views of school safety for elementary and middle schools (high-poverty schools having much lower percentages of parents reporting feeling safe), and college career readiness for high schools (high-poverty schools having much lower percentages of students graduating in four years or being college or career ready).

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study provided a holistic picture of the relationship between different poverty levels and various categories of school performance as reflected in the school report card in South Carolina. These findings are consistent with previous studies conducted nationally, particularly regarding significantly different test outcomes between students in low and high poverty schools. Student engagement variables (e.g., absenteeism, teacher satisfaction with home-school relations) likewise align with established national patterns and point to a more stable environment (regarding the attendance of students, return of teachers, etc.) in low-poverty schools. Finally, the sharp differences in the sense of school safety between low and high poverty rates indicates concerning, broad trends across all levels and among students and teachers about the lack of a healthy environment for learning. The gaps between high and low poverty schools differed based on school type (i.e., elementary, middle and high school), and this might be helpful in navigating funds to different types of schools to make improvements.

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The findings can help inform policy making and potential interventions that are designed to improve school performance and student achievement. First, while this study is meaningful because we included multiple variables from school accountability measures deemed important by policy makers, we recommend further research using alternative analysis approaches to examine longitudinal and multivariate trends. We also recommend that future studies use other methods, such as multiple regression or MANOVA, and qualitative research.

This study also leads to several policy recommendations. Advised changes align along the 4As: availability, access, adaptability, and acceptability (Tomaševski, 2006). We recommend the following:

- Expanding the availability and number of school care staff particularly counsellors, psychologists, and nurses.
- Opening access to higher-level (e.g., AP, IB) courses should be prioritized especially at the middle and high school levels to provide opportunities to learn with the most experienced teachers and to be academically challenged.
- Adapting and transforming the school climate into one where students feel safe, accepted, and supported as an intervention to improve academic outcomes and home-school relationships.
- Inviting the community to dialogue about possible changes can generate a grassroots' investment and insight into ways to make schools acceptable and prioritized in communities.



ABOUT SC-TEACHER

The South Carolina Teacher Education Advancement Consortium through Higher Education Research (SC-TEACHER) is funded by the Commission on Higher Education as a Center for Excellence. SC-TEACHER will examine the broad landscape of teacher recruitment, preparation, and retention practices in South Carolina—and build and deploy a state-centric, longitudinal database system to understand statewide issues and best practices for establishing protocols and to maintain a data infrastructure necessary to answer key questions posed by policymakers and practitioners. SC-TEACHER's work will inform educator preparation programs, serve as an education research resource center, and provide evidence of effective teaching practices.

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