

Education



Gaining education is not the singular factor in personal success, but an education is a critical requirement in our culture and a key factor for success in life. According to *The State of Literacy in America*, among adults with the lowest level of literacy, more than 40% live in poverty while only 4% of literate adults live in poverty. Education directly impacts public safety and overall economic growth of a community.

According to the National Children’s Reading Foundation, more than 75% of juvenile crimes are committed by high school dropouts, and the cost to the nation for each high school dropout over his or her lifetime is estimated at \$260,000 according to a study (October 2005) by the Teacher College at Columbia University. The Alliance for Excellent Education reported in 2006 that “if the male high-school graduation rate were increased nationally by 5%, the nation would experience a \$4.9 billion savings in crime-related costs.”

Public education is in crisis all across the nation, with most urban schools struggling to serve an ever-increasing population of children living in poverty and families living in crisis. According to a study from Columbia University’s National Center for Children in Poverty, more than 35% of our nation’s children live in poverty. The 2008 study estimates that more than 28 million children have parents who are unable to meet their families’ basic needs. Obstacles abound nationally and locally to the provision of a quality education for those who need it most.

The Shalom Education Committee examined many factors affecting education in Memphis, especially focusing on the issues and challenges of the school systems which serve the under-resourced children of our community. Our goal was to better understand the current educational climate, both its successes and its challenges, and to identify key areas of need. Relying on professional experience, available data, and personal knowledge of the greater Memphis community, the committee explored the educational environment with a focus on how local churches might be effective in providing resources and assistance to the school district, the neighborhood church, and especially the children, who need loving hearts and hands involved in their lives.

Memphis City Schools operates as a single district with more than 188 schools, comprised of 35 high schools, 36 middle and junior high schools, and 112 elementary. With more than 105,000 students, MCS ranks as one of the largest urban school systems in the United States. There are more than 6,000 teachers and the operating budget is estimated at \$888 million per year. Students receiving free or reduced cost meals total more than 85%, which is an indicator of poverty levels. Shelby County Schools operates in a similar manner and has 48,000 students in a total of 51 schools comprised of 8 high schools, 14 middle schools, and 29 elementary. There are more than 3,000 teachers. An estimated 53% of the students receive free or reduced cost meals in the SCS system.

Educational Challenges:

Like the rest of the nation, Memphis schools certainly have serious challenges. The Shalom Education Committee focused on the factors most relevant to education and attempted to determine the greatest obstacles to quality education in Memphis. The committee discovered multiple challenges, categorized into the following major areas of concern:

Early Childhood Years

Governors across the nation recognize that shifting the odds for children in the first five years is a necessary and critical step towards closing the persistent achievement gap in America.¹ According to Ed Week, the New York Times wrote that, “Driving the [early education] movement is research by a Nobel Prize-winning economist, James J. Heckman, and others showing that each dollar devoted to the nurturing of young children can eliminate the need for far greater government spending on remedial education, teenage pregnancy and prisons.”²

Parents are a child’s first teachers, and the quality of early childhood experiences closely follows the economic and educational status of a child’s parents. Children of well-educated and economically secure parents perform at predictably higher levels. Memphis parents in total fall well below all statistical averages in both education and economic welfare. What occurs in the very first years of a child’s life contributes to that child’s ultimate achievement in school. Educational achievement, in most cases, will determine success in life. Today many children arrive at school with a significant head-start on learning. That makes it much more difficult for children from impoverished backgrounds to catch up. They are behind on the first day of school and fall further behind each day, as the following statistics confirm.

- 79.6% of the children who currently attend Memphis City Schools are classified as Economically Disadvantaged³ (earning less than \$37,000 for a family of four). The Federal Government considers poverty itself to be an impediment to learning.
- Before entering kindergarten, the average cognitive scores of preschool-age children in the highest socioeconomic group are 60% above the average scores of children in the lowest socioeconomic group.⁴
- At 4 years of age, children who live below the poverty line are 18 months behind what is normal for their age group; by age 10 that gap is still present. For children living in the poorest families, the gap is even greater.⁵
- By the time children are 3, trends in amount of talk, vocabulary growth, and style of interaction are well established and clearly suggested widening gaps to come.⁶
- By the age of 4, an average child in a professional family has accumulated experience with almost 45 million words, an average child in a working-class family has accumulated experience with 26 million words, and an average child in a welfare family has accumulated experience with only 13 million words.⁷
- Poor and low-income children are most likely to be enrolled in early learning programs that are of lower quality overall than those of higher-income families. In fact, a recent study found that early learning classrooms comprised of about 60% of children from low-income homes were rated significantly lower in quality indicators of teaching, teacher-to-child interaction, and provisions for learning than classrooms with fewer low-income children.⁸
- Only 30% of Shelby County’s childcare centers are “Three Star-Rated.” This rating validates that a center meets or exceeds Tennessee’s standards for child-to-adult ratios, curriculum, safety, and teacher qualifications.⁹
- Of the 1,067 childcare centers operating in Shelby County in 2008, only 23 were accredited by the National Association for the Education of Young Children.¹⁰
- The racial makeup of children in the City of Memphis is nearly opposite that of the State of Tennessee. Slightly more than half of all black children in Tennessee live in Shelby County. Six out of every seven black children in Shelby County live in the City of Memphis.¹¹ Black children are disproportionately impacted by the achievement gap.
- 50% of children in Shelby County are born to single mothers,¹² and children born to unwed parents are at a greater risk of suffering economic hardship and a range of obstacles associated with financial insecurity.¹³

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School Years

Elementary

- Due to these deficits in the early childhood years, economically disadvantaged students are not prepared to enter and excel in elementary school. As an example, The Handbook of Early Literacy Research suggests that the ratio of books per child in middle-income neighborhoods is 13 to 1 and in low-income areas the ratio of books per child is 300 to 1.
- 79.6% of MCS students being economically disadvantaged results in a disproportionately high level of transience. This transience makes it impossible for a child to remain enrolled in the same school or school district and to establish meaningful and secure relationships within a particular community.
- The academic impact of transience and other issues related to economic hardships are seen in the following academic performance of third graders. (Third grade is the first year that the TCAP is administered. The Writing portion is only administered in the fifth grade. Please note, however, that the proficiency rate in Reading does not correlate with the Proficiency rate on the Writing test; Writing scores are significantly lower.)

Percentage Scoring Below Proficient – Elementary

	Reading	Math	Writing
3rd Grade MCS	16.3%	24.9%	NA
3rd Grade State	7.9%	11.3%	NA
4th Grade MCS	15.7%	18.3%	NA
4th Grade State	8.8%	9.6%	NA
5th Grade MCS	7.5%	10.8%	17.6%
5th Grade State	4.7%	6.2%	18.4%

- In 2006 MCS only graduated 35% of its black male students¹⁴. The most recently reported (2008) overall graduation rate from MCS is 66.9%.¹⁵ This is 24.1 percentage points lower than the state goal of 90%.
- African American students received 22,306 of the 23,495 suspensions issued. Of this total, males received 14,675 of the suspensions.¹⁶
- African American students received 200 of the 213 expulsions.¹⁷

- MCS classrooms are increasingly impacted by economic hardship. In a classroom of 30 students in 1969, five children would have been eligible for today’s free or reduced-price lunches. In a classroom of 30 students in 2007, 18 children were eligible.¹⁸
- Multiple studies show that economically disadvantaged students suffer from the word gap, insufficient supplies, family and housing instability, increased dropout rates, and higher risks for teenage pregnancy.

Secondary

- The gains that appeared to be made by the end of the fifth-grade year are not sustained throughout the secondary phase of education.

Percentage Scoring Below Proficient - Secondary

	Reading	Math	Writing
6th Grade	10.2%	14.4%	NA
7th Grade	16.3%	17.0%	NA
8th Grade	11.7%	17.8%	NA
9th Grade	8.5%	33.2%	NA
11th Grade	NA	NA	20.5%

- MCS high-school students are not being adequately prepared to enter and excel in four-year colleges and universities, as evidenced by the following ACT Comparison Chart.

Average ACT Score Comparison Chart

	MCS	State of Tennessee	National Average
Composite	17.5	20.7	21.1
English	17.3	20.8	20.6
Math	17	19.9	21.0
Reading	17.4	21.1	21.4
Science/Reasoning	17.6	20.3	20.8

Dropouts

- As stated earlier, 50% of births in the city of Memphis are to single mothers, many of whom have low income. This increases the chance of the child dropping out by 2.4 times the average middle-income household and 10.5 times that of the average high-income household.
- According to the Memphis Regional Chamber of Commerce, the graduation rate in Memphis is actually 48%.¹⁹
- 85% of the Memphis City School District students are black.²⁰ Black students are disproportionately represented in suspensions, expulsions,²¹ and absenteeism. These trends feed into dropout rates.
- More than half of Memphis City Schools (MCS) high school students and 40% of MCS middle school students reported having tried cigarettes. Tobacco is considered to be a gateway drug that may lead to alcohol, marijuana, and other illegal drug use.²⁸
- High school students in Memphis and Shelby County say they are more sexually active than their counterparts across the state. Also, a higher percentage reports first intercourse before age 13 and having sex with multiple partners. The negative consequences of teen sexual activity can be seen in the high rate of sexually transmitted diseases, pregnancy, and early parenting among adolescents in the Memphis area.²⁹

Parental Education and Involvement

We know that not all children have access to the same early environment and experiences. Many children in our community grow up in fractured families made vulnerable by poverty. Parents with low levels of education, especially those who have not completed high school, have higher barriers to steady employment than do better educated parents. They are more likely to be impoverished and to rely on public assistance to supplement their family incomes. Parents' education levels also correlate closely with childrens' academic success and overall well-being. Children reared in poverty spend less time reading with their parents and caregivers than do their more affluent peers.²²

- The percentage of children born to teenage mothers under the age of 17 in the City of Memphis is double the national average.²³ A teenage parent is traditionally financially insecure and is more likely to be psychologically and emotionally insecure.²⁴
- 1 of 4 single mothers who gave birth in Shelby County in 2006 did not have a high school diploma.²⁵
- 37% of children born in Shelby County in 2006 will be raised by a parent whose education stopped in high school.²⁶

Behavioral Issues

- Adolescent alcohol and drug use contribute to motor vehicle accidents, unintentional injuries, homicide and suicide, all of which account for 71% of deaths among persons 10 to 24.²⁷

- As stated earlier, African American students received 22,306 of the 23,495 suspensions issued. Of this total, males received 14,675 of the suspensions.³⁰ African American students received 200 of the 213 expulsions.³¹

Conclusions:

From a purely human perspective, the challenges seem overwhelming and insoluble. The sheer number of children in distress in our schools is overwhelming. However, the situation is not hopeless. During the last twenty years, many successful church and parachurch ministries, agencies, and charter schools have demonstrated success can be achieved through focused efforts which have touched the lives of children in our community and established dramatic and measurable improvements. In large measure the faith-based, gospel-centered ministries of hope and healing have been at the forefront of this success. Across all the agencies the results have been similar. A few examples illustrate the commonality of the improvements.

Jubilee Schools initiated a program several years ago which addressed parochial school offerings in the core city with the revitalization of elementary and middle schools. Catholic High School was revitalized in the process. Currently, Catholic High School is graduating 100% of its students who arrived in the parochial school system with achievement rates in the 25 to 45th percentile. Upon graduation these students from seemingly hopeless backgrounds are achieving test scores in excess of 90% and going on to college and success in life.



Charter schools are demonstrating very similar results. There are 23 charter schools in the Memphis area. One successful example is the Memphis Academy of Science and Engineering (MASE), which graduated its first senior class last year. When the charter school legislation passed the state legislature in 2003, the only students allowed to attend were failing students from failing schools. The first class of seventh graders arrived from Vance and Humes Middle Schools and the testing scores of those students were well below 50%. By graduation six years later, their performance had increased and the students were performing at a level greater than 90% proficiency. Another successful example is Circles of Success Learning Academy (COSLA). It is a K-through-5 charter school located on the campus of St. Andrew's AME Church on South Parkway in South Memphis. Since COSLA's inception in 2003 this excellent school has served economically disadvantaged students from the neighborhood. The current enrollment of 170 students is comprised of African-American children, and 90% of those students qualify for free or reduced-cost lunches. For 2008-2009, the achievement test scores in the major testing areas were 90% for reading/language arts and 96% for math. Attendance was 97%. COSLA is the only charter school in the state with a SACS accreditation and is a 2009 No Child Left Behind Title I Distinguished School Award Recipient.

Likewise, six resourced suburban churches have adopted urban schools under the MCS Adopt-A-School Program. The administration of the city schools has noted a singular factor in improved test scores at those six schools: the involvement of the church adopter.

Teach for America (TFA) has shown dramatic improvements across the community in classroom after classroom among those students, in some cases, abandoned as impossible by other teachers. In many instances the test scores have followed the sub-50% competency when TFA's work commenced. After a relatively short time period students under TFA's corp member have consistently achieved greater than 90% test results. With a teacher that cares and requires maximum effort, kids can and do learn.

The Memphis Teacher Residency (MTR) program was started in 2009 and has graduated 24 masters-level teachers with a distinctively Christian focus to teach in an urban school environment. Funded by the Poplar Foundation, the second-year class has another 24 students.

MTR has received more than 225 applications. MTR has plans to train more than 400 teachers in the next decade. New Leaders for New Schools is another high-level training opportunity for school administrators. Bill and Melinda Gates have expressed confidence in the trajectory of the city schools by making a performance-based grant of \$90 million. Other foundations, including the Poplar Foundation, Hyde Family Foundation, the Assisi Foundation, and Plough Foundation have made significant and ongoing grants to agencies and efforts aimed at an improved educational performance.

The secular and faith-based programs have proven that children in poverty can and do learn when given an environment and opportunity to do so. Research has demonstrated clearly that the single greatest program variable in academic success is a long-term relationship with a caring adult. Currently, there are 20-plus faith-based organizations which daily serve at-risk kids in our community. A rough estimate would suggest these organizations are reaching 40,000 kids each week. Estimates differ, but there are approximately 110,000 children enrolled in Memphis City Schools, and it is estimated there are more than 85% in the free or reduced-cost lunch plan, which is an indication of living at or below the poverty level. A Search Institute study shows that fewer than 30% of middle schoolers participate in structured activities outside of school more than three times per week. Most of the organizations dealing with at-risk kids can document that children involved in the programs on a consistent and regular basis over an extended time period do, in fact, graduate from high school, and that many go on to technical school or college.

The challenge to the church and parachurch ministries in our city is how to partner in order to scale up those successful efforts to reach as many children as soon as possible. Successful, proven results clearly exist. But at current levels these effective efforts are simply not enough. James 1:27 states that religion that pleases God our Father is measured by how the church addresses widows and orphans. While not technically orphans, these children are living lives of deep distress and hopelessness, lives that should cause the hearts of followers of Jesus to be moved sacrificially to find ways to offer hope and healing in loving environments. Surely, it is not too much to think this is possible.

To scale the existing programs up and/or create new ones to serve approximately 70,000 children not being reached is a mammoth undertaking. However, a reasonable strategy is to address those children at the neighborhood church-level in partnership with existing parachurch expertise and other outside resources. To do nothing is to sentence those children to the ongoing cycle of poverty, hopelessness, and high probabilities of future entrenchment in the criminal justice system.

In at-risk children, discouragement begins in third or fourth grade as the child finds academic work significantly challenging and thus has trouble staying focused, keeping up, and learning to read and write. (The State of Connecticut actually estimates its need for prison beds by the literacy rate of its children in the fourth grade.) When these learning difficulties begin for at-risk children, there is typically no parent truly present to help identify the problem and step into the gap on behalf of the child. In middle and upper-middle-income homes, the child with these same difficulties is supported and encouraged through the difficult time and is often provided significant resources to address and remedy the problem. By the time most at-risk children reach middle school they are such poor readers and students overall that dropping out becomes a real alternative. When these troubles begin, many are placed in “resource” classes and become targets of ridicule by classmate. A further cruel irony is that the “cost” of treating children this way burdens the whole society, because a parent with a “resource” child is given additional financial support through federal assistance.

When these at-risk students drop out of school, they have often already been recruited by gangs in elementary school.

Jesus told his disciples, “Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these” (Matthew 19:14). Further, as He instructed his disciples to pray in what has come to be known as the Lord’s Prayer, “Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven” (Matthew 6:10), what does this mean for Jesus’ followers today? Surely we need to have a high priority to intervene and help stop the downward cycle for children sooner rather than later. Are we being the hands and feet of Jesus to these children?

When these at-risk students drop out of school, they have often already been recruited by gangs in elementary school. In gangs they find a structured environment of discipline and accountability. Gang life requires loyalty of its members and provides a child with a ready-made framework to be somebody, even if that “somebody” is a person they never truly hoped to be. Are the disciples and followers of Jesus offering a positive alternative to these children? Are we intervening early to help them to overcome the educational challenges in elementary and middle school?

In a study of the Shelby County Jail located at 201 Poplar, estimated the inmate population, which is predominantly African-American males, has an overall high school graduation rate of less than 10%. More than 90% of the inmates on any given day do not have a high school education and of those inmates more than 70% have some level of learning disability. The disturbing question we may try to avoid asking ourselves is exactly when that downward cycle first began, one leading to high-school dropouts moving toward lives of crime trapped in the criminal justice system rather than being met where they are, early on, and developed as productive members of the community?

Boys & Girls Clubs of America statistically tracks the participants in their clubs’ programs and have documented results that show more than 95% of their participants, if involved for five years, receive a high-school diploma. Similar results from other at-risk kids’ agencies show similar high school graduation rates prevail. When asked how many participants of the various programs become involved in the criminal justice system, the answer is commonly the very same: “Very few.” Therefore, it seems reasonable and responsible to assume that if the high-school graduation rate is increased the crime rate will show a significant decrease.

In order to divert at-risk kids from the streets and keep them in the classroom, the interdiction needs to begin no later than elementary school. High quality, early childhood education and home visitation programs are proven and powerful preventative measures that can promote resiliency to future risk factors and decrease the need for future intervention. The common factor in improving the possibility that a child in poverty can gain an education is a structural environment that helps the child believe he or she can be successful and then provides support and encouragement along the many steps to catch



up. Tutoring programs which give a child a one-on-one opportunity to work on basic skills with an interested and committed tutor have been proven essential in changing the trajectory of a child's learning experience. Many faith-based organizations are very good at reaching kids and encouraging them to become more proficient, disciplined, and desirous to learn. Parachurch organizations also do an excellent job at preparing students for college entrance examinations. Mentoring programs are also proven to assist youth in graduating high school and entering post-secondary programs that prepare them for career success. Arguably, if every child had a mentor, the problem would be addressed and solved.

Kids in poverty arrive at school well behind their peers in middle and upper-middle-income environments. In low-income urban schools fourth graders read at a level 70% below grade level, according to the U.S. Department of Education. Approximately half of the ninth graders in a typical high-poverty, urban school in America read at a sixth or seventh grade level.

The neighborhood church in partnership with the excellence and expertise already existing in faith-based organizations, if combined with caring people from resourced churches, could become vital partners in the solution of a neighborhood site-based location where kids could safely come to "catch up." Parents would be also be drawn to that environment as the neighborhood church seeks to serve those in their immediate vicinity.

Recommendations:

- A detailed analysis of the church, parachurch ministries, charter schools, agencies, and any others serving at-risk kids is needed to determine an estimate of the current population being served to then determine an estimate of those remaining to be served. A 10-year strategy could then be developed to scale up the ministries and agencies to at-risk kids through a partnership comprised of the neighborhood church, parachurch ministries, resourced churches, and other agencies.
- An army of tutors and mentors is necessary to serve through neighborhood churches, parachurch ministries, Adopt-A-School programs, charter schools, and other organizations with the ultimate goal of every child in Memphis having such a tutor.

- The Adopt-A-School program could be enhanced by developing a methodology to scale up the program that would include additional resource churches and large faith-based organizations (such as a hospital system).
- Out-of-school programs might be piloted to operate in concert with Adopt-A-School, which could include mentoring and tutoring for youth at the neighborhood church.
- Churches could promote the development of the One-By-One mentoring program for expecting mothers to help them understand the importance of positive prenatal behaviors on early brain development to enhance children's opportunity for full educational opportunity.
- The growth and training of urban school teachers' needs focused support through programs like Memphis Teacher Residency (MTR) and Teach For America (TFA) by educating college-age and young adults at resourced and neighborhood churches about the opportunity to serve.

- 1 <http://www.zerotothree.org/site/DocServer/NGASummit.pdf?docID=4381>
- 2 blogs.edweek.org/teachers/new_terrain/2008/12/we_are_closing_the_achievement.html
- 3 <http://edu.reportcard.state.tn.us/pls/apex/f?p=200:1:4441812749685142>
- 4 Lee, V. E. & Burkam, D. T. (2002). Inequality at the starting gate: Social background differences in achievement as children begin school. Washington, DC: Economic Policy Institute.
- 5 Layzer, J. (in press). Project Upgrade in Miami-Dade County, Florida. Cambridge, MA: Abt Associates.
- 6 http://www.aft.org/pubs-reports/american_educator/spring2003/catastrophe.html
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 http://www.nccp.org/publications/pub_695.html
- 9 <http://tennessee.gov/humanserv/adfam/card-family&group.pdf>
- 10 The National Association for the Education of Young Children has established rigorous standards for childcare centers and employees nationwide.
- 11 TUCI. Demographics, p 5.
- 12 TUCI. Demographics, p 6.
- 13 <http://www.childtrendsdatabank.org/indicators/13teenbirth.cfm>
- 14 <http://blackboysreport.org/node/58>
- 15 <http://edu.reportcard.state.tn.us/pls/apex/f?p=200:50:612004331305000>
- 16 Ibid.
- 17 Ibid.
- 18 TUCI, Education, p 15.
- 19 http://teachforamerica.org/corps/placement_regions/memphis/schools.htm
- 20 <http://edu.reportcard.state.tn.us/pls/apex/f?p=200:1:2174789093735755>
- 21 <http://edu.reportcard.state.tn.us/pls/apex/f?p=200:60:2174789093735755>
- 22 TUCI, Family Home Environment, p 1.
- 23 TUCI, Demographics, p 8.
- 24 www.childtrendsdatabank.org/indicators/13teenbirth.cfm
- 25 TUCI, Demographics, p 9.
- 26 TUCI, Family Home Environment, p 16.
- 27 TUCI, Health Domain, p 7.
- 28 Ibid.
- 29 TUCI, Health Domain, p 16.
- 30 <http://edu.reportcard.state.tn.us/pls/apex/f?p=200:50:612004331305000>
- 31 Ibid.