

Ending inequality through early childhood education



M. Nels Johnson

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BY M. NELS JOHNSON
CONTRIBUTING COLUMNIST

Several weeks ago Democrat Bill de Blasio won the Democratic nomination for Mayor of New York City while running a progressive campaign based on ending the city's growing inequality. The Center for Economic Opportunity recently released a report stating that by the end of 2011, more than one-fifth of New Yorkers lived below the poverty line, and another quarter lived just above it. Since 2000, income disparity in the city has widened dramatically, with the wealthiest one percent of city residents (those making over \$500,000 per year) earning 39 percent of the city's income, up from 12 percent in 1980. De Blasio ran as a New Deal Democrat, promising to tackle the stark and growing inequality in America's flagship city. His signature promise is to raise taxes on anyone in New York City making over \$500,000 per year to fund universal early childhood education throughout the city of New York. de Blasio won easily; in fact, it wasn't even close. His unabashedly progressive message got him the 40 percent needed to avoid a runoff in the Democratic primary. Polls show de Blasio beating his Republican opponent Joe Lhota handily in the general election.

In Portland, we spent the summer dealing with one form of inequality; namely, what to do about those among us who are experiencing homelessness. This summer saw the revival of the sit-law ordinance die in the Legislature, standoffs

between the Mayor and homeless advocates and questions about relocating Right 2 Dream Too.

Go anywhere downtown, and you see inequality among and all around us; sometimes it's huddled in tired, soggy masses, sometimes it has a sign asking for spare change, or sometimes its sprawled out under a business's awning trying to stay dry. In Portland, there is no greater example of inequality than that of those experiencing homelessness. Perhaps it's for us here in Portland to take a page out of de Blasio's playbook and try to address one of the long-term causes of inequality.

As de Blasio argues, public education is the great equalizer in our society. A free, quality and universal education system is the best way to ensure students are fully equipped to go and get jobs and live a stable life. A top-notch public education is also the best way to help children already experiencing poverty to escape its cyclical clutches. One of the main factors in determining whether a student received a quality education or not is whether the student received early, pre-kindergarten education or not. Research shows that 90 percent of brain growth occurs by age six. In Portland, one in five Portland kindergartners aren't ready when they reach kindergarten, largely because they don't have access to early childhood education. Children who fall behind in the first grade have only a 13 percent chance of ever catching up to their current grade level. According to a report put out by the

Children's Institute, children who start school behind all too often stay behind.

Success or failure in a child's early years largely determines the achievement later in K-12 school, and consequently, throughout life. As a city, we cannot afford to postpone making a proper investment in our children's future any longer. If we fail, the results will be dramatic, and the statistics bear this out. Seventy-seven percent of students living below the poverty line receiving childhood education graduate on time versus approximately 50 percent of their peers, who did not receive early childhood education. The rate of success is even more pronounced among girls (84 percent versus 35 percent). Universal early childhood education significantly influences higher graduation rates and successful general learning. There is no other single investment in education that yields these results.

As voters in New York City recently acknowledged by voting for de Blasio as Mayor, if we're serious about eliminating the long-term problems of inequality in our city, then we must start by investing in universal early childhood education.

A free, quality and universal education system is the best way to ensure students are fully equipped to go and get jobs and live a stable life.

Where can I? How can I?

BY JOHNNY WILLIAMS
CONTRIBUTING COLUMNIST

Here I am, starting over, I say to myself as I step off the Greyhound bus. I have no job. I have no money and no place to go. The place to start I decide would be to make some money. I grab a newspaper and find no jobs that I qualify for. It might be a job that I can easily do. But because I am not bilingual, I don't get the job. As my job



Johnny Williams

search continues, let's say I find someone that will hire me, then I tell them that I am homeless and they start thinking: If he is homeless, how well rested will he be when he comes to work? Will he have on clean clothes? How will he shower? He makes the decision that I'm not such a

good candidate for the job.

Then I decide that the first thing that I need to do is find a place to live. Problem solved! So I go to the nearest mission. Yes, they do have a program that will give me a fresh start. I will have a place to shower and rest so I can put in a good day's work. "Great!" I say to myself. I go and sign up for the help, but there is a problem. I don't drink and I don't use drugs, so I'm told that their programs are designed to help those who have drinking problems and you don't qualify. I go all over town going just to hear, "I'm sorry you don't qualify."

What can I do? Where can I go for help? Should I start drinking and doing drugs so

I can qualify for help? That can't be the answer. If I do that then I can't get the job. They don't want an addict or a drunk working for them.

I need money. I say to myself, what can I do? And as time goes on you find you will do just about anything that your conscience will allow. So you decide to try panhandling. I make up a sign and go out with it and find 15 other sign holders on every block. There are so many that the people just walk by! It is so overwhelming; they don't know how to help. I can't afford to help them. Is it their fault that their lives are like that? And without stopping and finding out your story and seeing that you are clean and sober, they just walk on by shaking their head, saying what a shame.

Homelessness in America has changed over the last few years, it is an ever-increasing a problem that has no easy answer. But something needs to be done. It's not just drinking or drugs that are the blame for homelessness, I know a homeless woman who has her master's degree in math, who had a good life, till the day of the accident that took the lives of her family. Is it her fault that she is homeless?

Another homeless man I know was a professor at the University of Texas in Austin.

During my time of being homeless, just trying to find a safe, dry place to rest, all the time I'm woken up by the police and told I can't sleep here. I just ask the simple question. Where can I? How can I?

Johnny Williams is a Street Roots vendor.

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