



JUNE
2004

Starting Behind, Staying Behind: Low-Income Area Kids and School

MANITOBA CENTRE FOR HEALTH POLICY

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based on the report:
*How Do Educational
Outcomes Vary With
Socioeconomic Status?*
Key Findings from the
*Manitoba Child
Health Atlas 2004*,
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Stay in school. It's a familiar refrain. Most of us have heard about how important it is to complete high school—more opportunities, better jobs, better life. But what may come as a surprise is that dropping out of school could shorten your life. In fact, a male from, say, Point Douglas—where incompleteness rates are the highest—can expect to live almost eight years less than a male from East Saint Paul—where incompleteness rates are lowest.

To put this in perspective, if we could wipe out cancer, it would add less than three years to our life expectancy. Of course, other factors besides quitting school also contribute to shorter life, factors such as low income, inadequate housing and bad nutrition. This relationship between socioeconomic status (SES) and health is known as the *socioeconomic gradient*. But research shows that education is one of the socioeconomic influences strongly related to health. People with more education live longer lives.

And it isn't just a problem for the poor. Students from lower-middle SES families do less well in school than their high SES peers, and the males have lives more than three years shorter. So what are we doing to get back those years of life lost for our lower- and middle-income citizens?

It's not new that children from poorer neighbourhoods are more likely to have difficulties in school. But what do we really know about the differences in educational achievement between low, middle and high SES students? And when do these kids start falling behind? high school? elementary school? grade one?

What are the implications? What can be done to change this trend?

Starting behind, staying behind

Of the entire population of Winnipeg, roughly 160,000 are aged 0 to 19. We divided these youths into 25 Winnipeg neighbourhoods, which we grouped by socioeconomic status: low, low-middle, middle, or high. Figure 1A shows performance on the Grade 12 standards tests in language arts. Students who live in high SES areas had a 92% pass rate; those from low SES neighbourhoods only 75%. But that's not the whole story.

These numbers only tell us about students who are still in school in grade 12 to write the tests. What happens when we focus on those who *should* be writing the test?

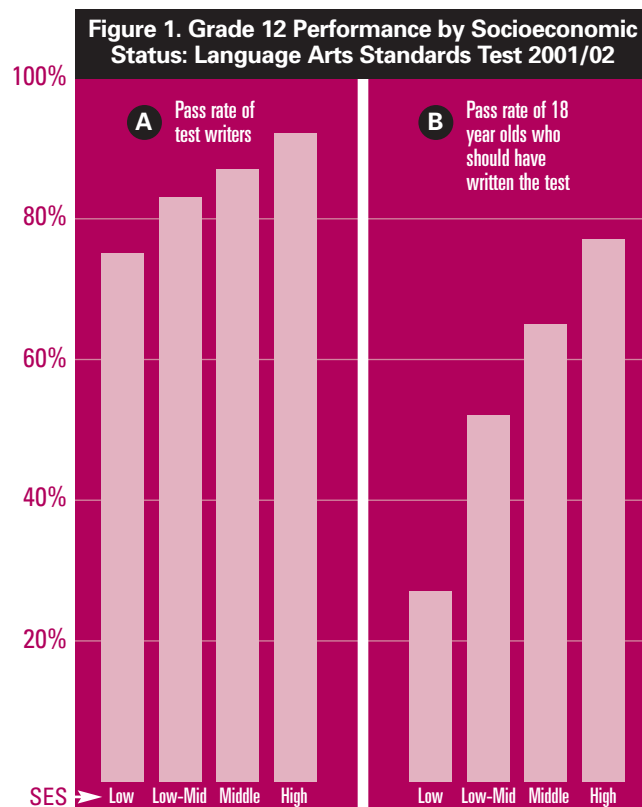
When we look at youths who were born in Manitoba in 1984, raised here, and living in Winnipeg in 2002 that should have been writing the test, only 27% of low SES youths passed (Figure 1B). Almost 36% were behind at least one year; while almost 20% had already quit school (had not been enrolled for at least 2 years). The bottom line for lower SES kids is they are far less likely to pass standardized tests and far more likely to fail at least one grade and to quit school.

The truth is, these children start falling behind well before high school. In provincial language arts tests in grade 3, low SES kids had a pass rate almost 12% lower than high SES kids. And again, that isn't the whole story. When we include all the children who *should* have been

*This research has been
funded by the Canadian
Population Health Initiative
(CPHI), a program of the
Canadian Institute for
Health Information (CIHI).
The views expressed herein
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the views of the Canadian
Institute for Health
Information.*



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writing the test at that age, only 50% of low SES kids passed, compared to 84% of high SES kids.

And it gets worse. Studies in Vancouver suggest that low SES kids begin school less prepared for school learning than their higher SES peers. So in effect, these students start out behind.

What can be done?

The lower the SES of a region, the higher the likelihood that its children won't graduate high school. They start school already behind their peers. Most of them never catch up.

So what can be done?

First of all, we can help all Manitoba children to start school on equal educational footing. More preschool initiatives would be a good start, followed by monitoring to figure out which are the most effective.

That's where something like the *EDI* (Early Development Instrument) might prove very

helpful. Developed by the Offord Centre for Child Studies, it's a set of questions completed by the teacher designed specifically to measure school readiness of children during kindergarten—in other words, just before entering grade one. With funding from Healthy Child Manitoba, over half the school divisions in the province began using the EDI in 2003—which is good. If the EDI could be used throughout the province, it'd be even better. This would provide as broad a base of information as possible on how well early childhood initiatives are preparing our children for school.

High quality child care could also help disadvantaged children get a better start at school. It's been shown to improve children's cognitive, language and social skills. According to our most recent information, distribution varies across Winnipeg neighbourhoods from 5 spaces to 263 per 1,000 children. Unfortunately, distribution doesn't correspond to SES. What's needed is more spaces per child in poorer neighbourhoods.

Early development programs for preschoolers that take place within primary schools should also be supported. Such programs not only enhance early learning, but also help connect children and their families to their local schools. These programs would be beneficial to all children, but especially those at risk of poor educational achievement.

Meanwhile, over the past few years several projects aimed at improving outcomes for children already in early grades have been initiated. It will be interesting and important to monitor these initiatives to see how effective they are at leveling the playing field.

In conclusion, while this study looks at the children of Winnipeg, we have seen similar patterns across Manitoba. And it is likely the same for children across Canada. Understanding the insidious nature and devastating impact of the education gradient is a necessary first step toward bringing about change. It's time to start developing more policies and programs aimed at helping Canada's children improve their school experiences and outcomes. It's time to make education the truly equal opportunity it was meant to be.

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