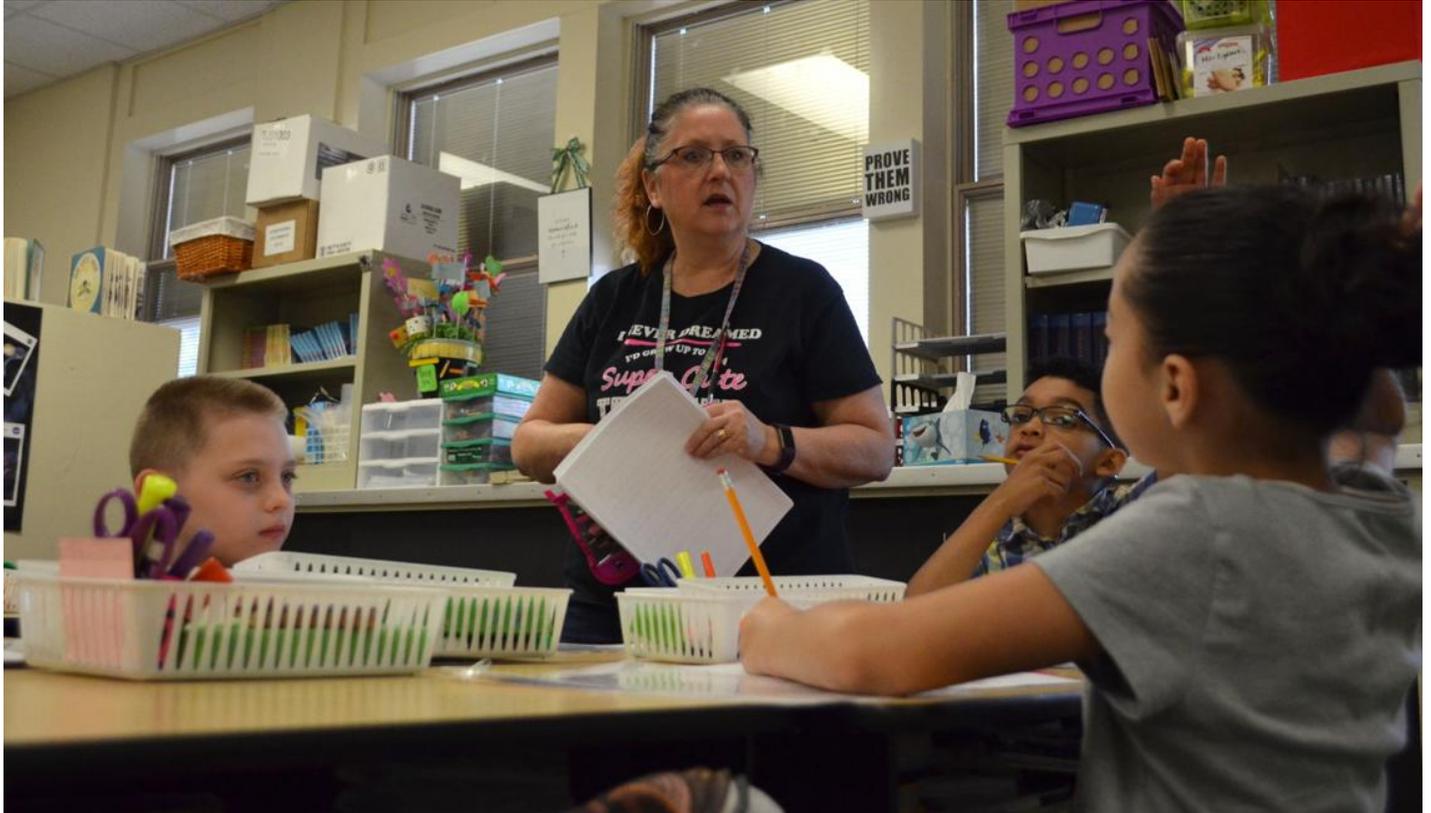


Schools try to tackle poverty

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VIRGINIA ANNABLE | NEWS-TOPIC West Lenoir Elementary School teacher Karen Bolick leads second- and third-grade students through a writing exercise.

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As first-grade students filed into the West Lenoir Elementary School gymnasium, physical education teacher Sharon Abee greeted them with high fives and called them by their names.

“I have a relationship with them. They can come to me, pull me aside if they need anything,” Abee said.

That relationship is one way Abee helps her students who come from low-income homes, and many do.

William Lenoir is one of Caldwell County's most impoverished schools — 100 percent of the students qualify for free or reduced-price lunch, meaning their household income is near or below the federal poverty level — but the problem is county-wide. Sixty percent of students in Caldwell County live in low-income homes.

Children who grow up in poverty generally start out behind their middle-income peers, said Dr. Caryl Burns, associate superintendent for educational program services. They are less likely to be in early childhood education programs, they don't have access to online learning tools, and their parents often work longer hours, so there is less educational interaction between parent and child. The stress that poverty puts on children, because of such things as a lack of food or worried parents, causes higher cortisone and adrenaline levels, which causes them to be less attentive and less likely to absorb information or to be able to focus when they are learning.

Burns spearheaded a task force of about a dozen school, government, non-profit and community members, including Abee, that formed in March 2017 and recently presented recommendations to the Caldwell County Board of Education for steps to address the ways that poverty affects students.

"I think we realize it's not going away," Burns said. "The problem is not getting better. We've got to do something. What are we going to do? We're going to do our best and see if it will work within the school system."

One of the biggest problems the school system faces is an achievement gap in reading and math proficiency between students from low-income homes and the average.

At Granite Falls Elementary School, the overall proficiency rating — a number calculated based on state test scores — was 70.4 out of 100, while among economically disadvantaged students it was 57.3. The size of the gap varies among Caldwell's schools but averages about 8 points in elementary schools.

It can also be seen between schools. At West Lenoir, where 100 percent of the students qualify for free or reduced-price lunches, the school's proficiency score is 48.7. That's 21.7 points less than at Granite Falls, where only half of the students qualify for the subsidized meals.

"That gap does not grow larger (as students progress in school), it's pretty well constant," Burns said. "But we have problems closing it. Why? Why? Why can we not?"

Since 2012, with the help of grant funding, the Caldwell County Schools have expanded their pre-K program, which starts students around 4 years old, and it now serves 62 percent of rising kindergartners, compared to a state average of 22 percent. The program is a huge step toward closing the achievement gap, Burns said, but there's more to be done.

Students' access to the tools they need poses one of the biggest obstacles. Doing homework can be nearly impossible if a student doesn't have a computer or Wi-Fi at home, or has to take on responsibilities like babysitting or cleaning, Burns said.

The task force recommended the schools work with county government to try to provide more internet access in the county or start an initiative to allow some students to take needed technology home with them.

In 2016, Google helped install Wi-Fi on Gamewell Middle School's school buses in a program called Rolling Study Halls as part of the effort to give students more internet access. That expanded to William Lenoir Middle School last year, and the school system is working toward getting Wi-Fi on more middle school buses, said Libby Brown, community services director for the Caldwell County Schools.

With some tools already in place, schools are making up ground during the year, but when students stay home for the summer, they lose knowledge — even more so in low-income homes.

To address that, the task force recommended more summer arts, music and physical education programs.

As a P.E. teacher, Abee agreed with that sentiment. Being active helps students get out their pent-up frustrations and energy, allowing them to focus on school work, she said.

"I think it really helps our children," Abee said. "It brings down their cortisone levels, and when you're stressed, your cortisone levels are up and it's not good. They're not thinking clearly, they can't focus on tasks."

West Lenoir Principal Travis Gillespie, who also sat on the task force, said the school puts an emphasis on the arts for the same reason.

While changes the task force recommended would help, Gillespie said working with impoverished children boils down to two main things: getting their basic needs met and building relationships with them.

Because West Lenoir has only 140 students, it's easier than at larger schools to build personal relationships, he said. It's Gillespie's first year as principal at West Lenoir but he has already gotten to know the students. When he walks through the school, he greets kids by their name. On a recent day as Gillespie walked through the school with a visitor, a student named Jay held the door open for him. Another student, Angelo, peeked around the corner, waved at Gillespie, giggled, then disappeared.

"He's a funny one," Gillespie commented.

Abee is one of the only teachers who sees every student every day. She gets to know the kids, so when they act out or aren't performing well, she can look past their behavior and find the true cause. Then she talks to them about it.

"If these kids know they can trust you and they can come to you and tell you what's really going on and they know you won't judge them for that, you'll just help them get what they need — then we can educate them," Abee said.

Going forward, the recommendations of the task force will go in to the schools' long-term plans, Burns said. They'll continue to meet to tackle the issue over the coming months and will consult with the new superintendent as he or she comes on board.

"Any time someone in the schools sees research they think would help they drop it off or tell me about it," Burns said. "We're using this in future plans, we're going to keep working. We're not finished."

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