



Poverty Simulation Workshop Opens up New Ideas and Solutions for Iowa Students

The poverty rate in Iowa currently sits at 11%, with approximately 35% of students qualifying for free or reduced lunch. Board members felt the true meaning of this statistic throughout the poverty simulation workshop, facilitated by Ava Cranmore with the Alabama Association of School Boards at the **Summit on Student Success** on April 27.

In 2.5 hours, split into four increments, the Poverty Simulation allowed attendees to experience a month of living in poverty, taking on the identity of a family facing challenges with a limited income and resources. Families were positioned in the center of the room, with various locations set up around them, including a grocery store, a public school, jail, social services and more. Each increment, the participants scrambled to keep their children in school, pay the bills and put food on the table while being confronted with various financial obstacles such as medical bills or a bounced check.

Following the simulation, board members participated in a 45-minute guided debrief with Ava Cranmore. Here, open, honest and at times emotional conversations took place discussing the workshop and the important lessons learned. Board members shared the efforts their districts are currently making to assist students and their families struggling financially, including provided food over breaks or holidays and after-school programs.

Key Takeaways:

- It is important to have hard conversations about poverty, even if it is uncomfortable. As noted above, 35% of students in Iowa qualify for free or reduced lunch. This percentage is only factoring in the students whose families have applied for this option. There are students in each district who struggle financially at home, and it is crucial that we address this fact and face it head on.
- Poverty is complex, with many contributing factors. When you are living with limited financial resources, something as simple as filling your gas tank is a milestone. It is essential that board



Ava Cranmore, Alabama Association of School Boards



Board members participate in the Poverty Simulation Workshop

members consider these factors when determining the best way to support students and families.

- There are many misconceptions about poverty and those living in it. Families across Iowa and the country work tirelessly to make ends meet and keep their families afloat. As board members noted, it can feel like one struggle after another with the added pressure of limited financial resources and a time crunch.

In addition to being an eye-opening experience, board members discussed new ways to support Iowa students in need, in the classroom and beyond.

What You Can Do as a Board Member:

- *Ask how your district is providing the needed resources to students who feel they have barriers to attending college in the future.* Parents who are struggling will not always have the time or energy to discuss college with their children. It is important to ask the question of how your district can expose or share college opportunities with all students. Throughout the debrief, a handful of districts shared their use of mentor programs, which allow incoming high school students to meet with older peers who are excelling academically and planning to attend college. Talk with your board about how a program like this might look in your district.
- *Ask thorough questions at the board table to understand what students in your district need to feel cared for and supported.* It is crucial that you have a basic understanding of the supports and solutions to meet student social-emotional learning. Students living in poverty will likely miss out on many of the opportunities that their peers have, be it a field trip or taking an AP exam. What are the barriers in place and how can the district help overcome those barriers? These barriers may include funding that you could advocate for at the board table, as one example.
- *Identify community partners to ensure all students have access to the online tools necessary to be successful.* It is important not to assume that each student has access to the internet at home. Technology was a major area discussed amongst attendees and how difficult it can be for parents and students without access to Wi-Fi or a smartphone. The COVID-19 pandemic and the rise of online learning revealed that students throughout the state are without stable internet. Which businesses in your community could help with these types of issues? Aside from the district, where is that access coming from?
- *Understand what programs or policies are available in your district to support students who need basics such as food, toiletries, supplies and more.* The reality is many students rely on school as their one guaranteed meal of the day. Aside from meals, many students go without clean clothes to wear or proper school supplies. Sending home sack lunches, snacks, etc. will make an enormous difference to students dealing with food insecurity. Taking in donations for basics such as shampoo, soap or laundry detergent will further ensure a **student's needs are being met in and out of the classroom.** Additionally, recognize that each community is different with varying needs. Draw support from the community, such as local

foodbanks. Ensure that students and their families are aware of where the foodbanks and accessible meals are in your area, and then ask yourself what gaps do we still need to fill? What can your district do to help alleviate barriers for your students?

The Poverty Simulation took place on April 27, 2023, the first day of the inaugural Summit on Student Success at the FFA Enrichment Center in Ankeny, IA. Thank you to Ava Cranmore and the Alabama Association of School Boards for leading an impactful, eye-opening session for our members. Thank you also to our amazing volunteers: 22 individuals from the Rotary Club, Sammons Financial, Wells Fargo, Jester Insurance and the United Way!