

# Poverty rates climbing in Georgia schools

The changes have been subtle, but the cumulative effect of rising poverty has been unmistakable to Sabrina Oakley, a parent who sent two children to public schools in Gwinnett County.

When her oldest, now 20, attended Norton Elementary School, Oakley said the atmosphere was relaxed and easy. But the rules became inflexible for her younger girl, now in middle school. Lunch was more regimented — children had to sit quietly with classmates — and tardy slips were handed out more liberally.

“When you see the poverty level rising at school, you know it’s going to be a whole different set of rules,” Oakley said. “It’s just going to be more strict” as school officials defend a line between calm and chaos.

Student poverty in Gwinnett, and across the state, has soared over the past decade, freighting classrooms with hungry, tired and sometimes ill-disciplined students.

In 2002, when Oakley moved to Gwinnett, 21 percent of the district’s students qualified for free or reduced-price school meals, a common indicator of poverty. By last year, 55 percent qualified. Not all students who receive free or reduced-price meals are in households below the official poverty line, but the number of meal subsidies is one gauge school systems have of poverty’s reach.

The suburbs are seeing more of what one local superintendent calls the “pathologies of poverty,” such as homeless students or those with blurred vision for want of eyeglasses. Students who fall behind can become disruptive, and the wild, unfocused energy can infect a crowded classroom and hinder student achievement.

While the overall graduation rate ticked up in Georgia last year, it slipped nearly a percentage point for students the Georgia Department of Education calls “economically disadvantaged.” Nearly four in 10 of them didn’t earn a diploma last year. That compares to a state graduation rate where about three in 10 don’t earn a diploma.

In 2007, disadvantaged students became the majority in Georgia’s public schools and now comprise 62 percent of the enrollment.

Stephen Dolinger, president of the Georgia Partnership for Excellence in Education, said a declining graduation rate for one of the fastest-growing demographic groups in the state is a “real concern,” given the implications for the economy and the students’ futures.

English teacher Alyssa Montooth said many are from single-parent households, with no one to push them to study. Some have jobs. They don’t eat well. They don’t get enough sleep. And they’re not doing homework like they used to.

Montooth teaches seniors at Druid Hills High School in DeKalb County, where the meal-subsidy rate climbed 11 percentage points in her nine years there, to 55 percent.

“These kids are so worried about so many other things that they’re getting harder and harder to reach,” she said. “It’s like school is an afterthought.” Six years ago, she wrote three dozen college recommendation letters. Last year, it was 17. This year, through Thanksgiving, she had written three.

Yet it was worse at Cedar Grove High, where she taught in the early 2000s, in economically depressed south DeKalb. Montooth remembers neighborhoods battered by foreclosures. Many of the students were transient.

“The place was absolutely off the hook all the time,” Montooth said. “Kids at Cedar Grove would be outwardly rude to me. Like kids in the hall, I’d say, ‘Hey, take off your hat.’ And they’d say, ‘Hey, \*\*\*\* you.’”

Nearly three-fourths of DeKalb students come from low-income homes, up from half in the late 1990s. Superintendent Michael Thurmond said the “pathologies of poverty” — homelessness, hunger, domestic violence, medical or mental health problems, disengaged parents — are difficult to address in suburban schools because social services are concentrated in the inner city. Thurmond is a former director of the Georgia Division of Family and Children Services.

Schools need a closer collaboration with state caseworkers, he said. “We expect teachers to be social workers, but they’re not. All of these problems come to the schoolhouse, but they originate outside the schoolhouse.”

DeKalb has lost some engaged parents, such as Barbara Bowman, who moved away last year. She enrolled her first child in DeKalb schools in 1995, when the district had a reputation for excellence. The next year, the meal-subsidy rate climbed above 50 percent. By the time her fourth child was at Lakeside High School, she felt the quality had slipped.

One teacher showed Disney videos all day, Bowman said, and another sold cosmetics. The toilets were in disrepair. Her complaints to administrators yielded defensiveness rather than solutions, Bowman said.

“It was just kind of a free-for-all,” she said.

The family moved to Cherokee County, where Bowman’s oldest is a senior. Bowman commutes to a job in Norcross, in Gwinnett, but she said the family didn’t consider moving there. They wanted to get farther away.

The rise in student poverty paralleled a general decline in prosperity for Georgians.

In fiscal year 2008, the state ranked 15th in the proportion of food stamp recipients. Within four years, it had climbed to sixth. Nearly one in five of Georgia’s 10 million residents have been receiving federal help buying food.

Georgia has had the highest unemployment rate in the country during the fall. It was 7.7 percent in October, before dipping to 7.2 percent in November.

Median household income plunged 16 percent between 2006 and last year. And even after several years of modest job growth, about 179,000 fewer people are working in Georgia now than before the recession — despite population growth during those years.

Just as the school poverty rate started its ascent in the early 2000s, Georgia began “austerity” cuts to education.

Claire Suggs, an analyst with the Georgia Budget and Policy Institute, has written annual reports with titles like “The Schoolhouse Squeeze” and “Cutting Class to Make Ends Meet.” She said per-pupil spending is 12 percent below where it was in 2002 in inflation-adjusted dollars. Meanwhile, policymakers have demanded better performance, raising the bar on test results and other standards, while cutting more than \$8 billion, she said.

But some question whether spending more is the way to address the growing poverty.

Ben Scafidi, an economics professor at Kennesaw State University, said cumulative spending from all sources — local, state and federal — soared over 25 years, with little obvious impact.

Georgia spent \$4,843 per student in the 1979-80 school year, according to the National Center for Education Statistics, which used inflation-adjusted dollars. The comparable amount four years ago, the most recent available figure, was \$10,022.

“There’ve been massive increases in spending but not increases in student achievement,” Scafidi said. “So my read of the data is there are a lot more things going on than spending. I think we need to focus on improving the productivity of our education dollars.”

Mark McCann knows there is still plenty of unmet need.

His kids attend Peachtree Elementary in Gwinnett County, where his company has been doing charity work.

McCann is a human resources manager for Alcon, a global eye care corporation that has helped to coordinate optometrists and other volunteers to screen and, when necessary, prescribe eyeglasses at the school. Peachtree had about 1,800 students at last count, with about 80 percent from low-income homes.

Children who can’t see the teacher’s writing at the front of the classroom get lost, fall behind and stop paying attention, said McCann, who led the volunteer effort. They can be disruptive, but worse things can happen, he added.

He described a girl who was diagnosed by his group with an easy-to-correct but severe condition: She had a weak eye and her brain was gradually severing communication with it. The ailment can be treated with a temporary patch over the strong eye, he said, but if left untreated it can result in blindness in the weak eye.

This girl, a fourth-grader, had never visited an eye doctor, McCann said.

“We happened to catch her too late.”

*Staff Writer Michael E. Kanell contributed to this article*