

# Life IN A Title I WORLD

– Donna Dunson  
Principal, Edward W. Bok Academy

*“Everyone needs  
an equal chance  
to be unequal.”*

– Milton Friedman

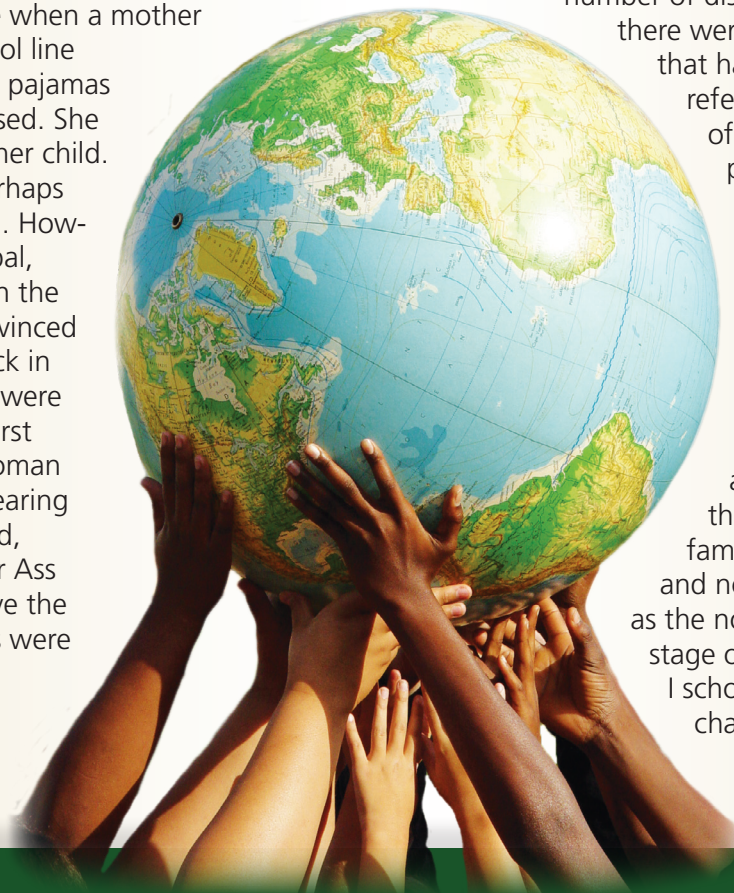
*In my first few months* of re-entry into the Title I World, I was in culture shock. I went from 15 years of carpools replete with limousines, Mercedes, Expeditions and Range Rovers (with the socioeconomic class-appropriate Lab or Golden riding shotgun) to a carpool line of vehicles that I thought would not even make it through pick-up time. Coming from the rarefied world of the elite, I had actually forgotten that everyone does not have air-conditioning in their cars – even in Central Florida.

My real awakening came when a mother came through the car pool line dressed in pink baby-doll pajamas with her left breast exposed. She was dutifully picking up her child. At first I thought that perhaps we should keep the child. However, our assistant principal, who had always served in the Title I World, quickly convinced me otherwise – I was back in public school and things were different. At one of my first parent conferences, a woman walked into my office wearing a T-shirt that boldly stated, “You Cross this Line Your Ass is Mine.” And just to drive the point home, these words were printed on a background of a Rebel flag with a

large pit bull’s head superimposed on the flag, (in case you didn’t receive the subtle written message). She proceeded to tell me what she thought while spewing profane language.

## *Educating Children of Poverty*

Polk Avenue Elementary is a high-poverty school (84 percent on free/reduced lunch) and has a high minority population. The good news is most of the 550 students are happy and extremely resilient. Out of this population, we looked at our students with the highest number of discipline referrals, and there were 62 “frequent flyers” that had the vast majority of referrals 2006-2007. Out of those 62 students, 52 percent of them had a parent recently or currently in prison. Generational incarceration is not an excuse for counter-productive behavior. However, schools must deal with that reality and attempt to help these students and families break that cycle and not see a stay in prison as the norm or just another stage of development. A Title I school must attempt to change family dynamics,



not just process a child through a system that gives the teacher the misguided notion that discipline has been dealt with. That is part of the equation but will rarely provide the necessary long-term behavioral changes.

Many high-poverty schools in this country are doing their best to hold things together under less-than-pristine circumstances. The fact that high-poverty schools with numerous subgroups are measured the same as schools with low minority participation and low free- and reduced-lunch levels is absurd. If the stakes were not so high, it would be laughable.

Trying to move kids academically and help them become strong enough to be catapulted out of the cycle of poverty is no easy task. Educators who actually believe that all kids, even the ones who come to school with dirty clothes and belligerent attitudes, deserve the best shot they can have for success. This effort is much more than the trite educational mantra, "All kids can learn." The vast majority of educators in Title I schools are trying their best to improve the lives of impoverished kids.

### *Educating Children of Poverty*

A bit of background to frame my perspective: I began my career in a comprehensive public high school; your typical oversized, understaffed high school. This school certainly had pockets of greatness, but the norm was not one of continuous improvement or excellence. In my opinion, more than half the teachers were not intellectually curious, nor were they able to fully engage students. J.P. Cone, the soft spoken and wise principal of Pensacola High School, took a bold step and implemented the International Baccalaureate Program. This one action changed the culture of the school, and this school is now listed as one of the top

schools in the US News ranking. It is all about high expectations.

Becoming more and more involved with the International Baccalaureate program, I had the good fortune to get to know schools and educators all over the world. That curiosity grew into a decision to leave public education. It was difficult in many ways, but I was tired of the inequities and mediocrity. The playing field was not equal – not even close.

Clearly, affluent geography or magnet school status garners you a better educational environment. The schools in wealthy areas get better funding, and they have parents with political clout. It is a given – parents with clout do not leave their children in classrooms with mediocre teachers. The IB programs around this country are, in part, responsible for the accountability – not too long ago only IB and AP teachers were really being held accountable. Now every teacher is. Every breath we take and every move we make there is accountability. And that, as Martha Stewart says, "Is a Good Thing."

My last public school position before I went private was as the coordinator of the IB program. I watched first-hand how we, in the IB Program, received better funding, received higher-quality instructors, received extraordinary professional development from IB, and received much more parental support than the rest of the school. We were able to build a high-quality program that still is flourishing today. This construct should be the norm, not just saved for the district magnets or determined by location, by location, by location. After watching the inequalities play out, I decided that I no longer wanted to be part of such a system. Although I thought that I might return one day, at that time, I was

*"Many high-poverty schools in this country are doing their best to hold things together with less-than-pristine circumstances to deal with and with all the problems that travel with children of poverty."*

frustrated by the inequalities and thoroughly discouraged by the mediocre teachers who were left in the non-IB classrooms to demoralize and not educate children. Subsequently, I jumped ship.

I decided that I wanted to know how top private and international schools educated their students. I read about the best: Deerfield Academy, Little Red Schoolhouse in NYC, United Nations, International School of Geneva, International School of Hong Kong, etc. Serving on a few international committees

broadened my perspective and led me to apply for Head of Secondary at Atlanta International School in Georgia. Much to my surprise I was appointed. I spent the next 10 years learning first-hand from many amazing educators from around the world. My first day on the job, an amazing Spanish teacher, Elena Bonau, walked into my office and boldly stated with great Cuban fanfare, "The faculty is not sure about you because you are American, a woman and from a public school."

### *Private Schools Lead Back to Title I*

At times, I felt like a public school spy, infiltrating the private school world. They taught me so much, and I am deeply grateful. After Atlanta, I did a short stint as Headmaster at the Ross School in East Hampton, New York, a unique school with a global curriculum and a faculty that is one of the best. Being in that environment was a great experience, but one that rekindled my desire to work with Title I students. I kept thinking: If only all kids were educated in this manner. If only all kids were treated with great respect. If only all kids were able to believe that their dreams could come true.

Are all private schools and international schools high quality? Certainly not, but the top ones have five major differences that enable them to move much faster and more efficiently than schools that function in large cumbersome systems: 1) they release teachers who do not meet the needs of students; 2) they make decisions quickly without having months pass before one finally makes it through the decision flow-chart; 3) parents do not accept less than the best; 4) high-quality private schools and international schools treat their instructors with much more respect

than is the norm in most public schools; 5) pupil-teacher ratio in the top private and international schools is 1:7.

Some of the extras that affluent private and international school children receive do not cost any more, but many public schools are just too overburdened and understaffed to go that extra mile or provide the extras. The size of

American schools is a major contributing factor to mediocrity. Again, there are educators in these large schools who are doing so many things right, but it gets more and more difficult to succeed the larger the school becomes.

At Polk Avenue, and I am sure at thousands of Title I schools across this country, the staff tries to build up the children. I am not talking about empty self-esteem lessons taken from the latest flyer sent to all educators; I am talking about substantive conversations that eventually lead to a change in the child's belief system. Large schools simply cannot deal with these emotional needs as well as smaller schools. The high drop out rate is the salient symbol of the mediocrity. These students check out mentally; they drop out. Many of them end



up in the U.S. growth industry: our out-sourced, privatized, prison system.

What if we reallocated monies spent on the prison system to elementary schools and watch what happens? Currently, the U.S. chooses to spend money on teaching incarcerated adults to read, rather than paying for more reading teachers in elementary schools. The Florida State Prison System in Florida and Polk Avenue Elementary have one key thing in common: we both use the *Soliloquy* computer-assisted reading program. Ponder that for a moment!

Here is another observation from my trek through private and international education systems. There is another commonality that both affluent and impoverished children share; they are both transient. At Atlanta International School, children are very mobile because their parents often move to another country because they work for a multi-national corporation, whereas the impoverished child moves because the rent is due or they are in foster care. Students can have emotional problems because of that mobility or they develop excellent coping skills.

If the child does have adjustment problems, the affluent parent can pay for support, if needed. Meanwhile, the public school child may have to wait many, many months because the psychologist has such a heavy case load. The good news is that there are many caring people in public schools, but response time for professional help – not even close. The cause of the move is not as important as the lasting effect it can have on children, particularly the children of the poor. I would think it is much easier to be moved from place to place in a Boeing 747 than a 1970 Ford that doesn't have air conditioning.

## Adequate Funding is Critical

In my Title I World the free- and reduced-lunch level is 84 percent. That one notation says it all for public school educators who are in the trenches. That one statement signals that these kids do have tremendous odds against them. Can these kids overcome these odds? You bet. However, the numbers could be far, far greater if this country would spend more money on the front end. Is that too much to ask of this country? Thank goodness for Title I, but it is not enough.

Apart from the humanitarian reasons to fund public education, there are compelling economic development reasons as well. In 2004, Columbia University conducted a study on the social cost of an inadequate education. "America loses \$192 billion – 1.6 percent of Gross Domestic Product – in income and tax revenue with each cohort of 18-year-olds who never complete high school." (Levin, 2005).

We are making strides, but we are not even close to knocking down the barriers that poverty erects for children. They come into kindergarten with a multi-million word gap and many never catch up. There is a big difference between impoverished high school students and elementary students. The former have learned how to act like they are not poor or act as if it doesn't matter, as opposed to the wide-eyed elementary children, who, without hesitation, will tell you they do not have any food in the house or that their father was taken to jail last night.

Do I blame the parents? Most of those I work with are doing the best they can to provide a better life for their children, and most are

"Clearly, affluent geography or magnet school status garners you a better educational environment. The schools in wealthy areas get better funding, and they have parents with political clout. It is a given – parents with clout do not leave their children in classrooms with mediocre teachers.

trying to find their way through an educational bureaucracy that is not always respectful, helpful or kind to their situation. Neglect of children knows no socioeconomic level. When an affluent parent is worn out or wants a break from the intensity of child rearing, they have the money to procure help. They also have money to provide the extras. My point is disenfranchised children deserve outstanding teachers, small class sizes, the best educational materials and technology, and they deserve to be educated in an environment that creates possibilities.

A tipping point in education has occurred. It was not until a few years ago that I realized it was time to return and see what could be done with this new knowledge and with the change in expectations that had begun to take place in public schools across this country. The charter movement was one reason to re-enter; charter gives educators more freedom to cut through the Byzantine system and do what is right for children. By its very existence, Lake Wales Charter Schools demonstrates what is possible when a city decides to reclaim the responsibility of education.

I was fortunate to find myself in this modest elementary school in the new charter system in this small central Florida town with a staff that could hold their own with the best private, public or international school educators around the world.

They are amazing, but their task is huge compared to what teachers have to deal with in schools where the free and reduced population is 50 percent or lower. I applaud the states and districts that are considering a \$15,000 stipend for educators who tackle the high-poverty schools. It is more difficult; I spent quite a few years in the other world, and I know, firsthand, the difference. Any teacher or administrator of high value works hard, no matter what socio-economic level they encounter, but high-poverty schools take more time, expertise and finesse. If this country cannot see its way to dramatically improve the educational system for disenfranchised kids in the United States,

we will continue to lose the competitive edge. Tom Friedman brilliantly speaks to this in *Flat World*. Bill and Melinda Gates get it, and Oprah gets it. When she received the criticism for attempting to create such a magnificent, creative and inspiring environment for the impoverished young women in South Africa, I cheered her on. She gets it.

America is one the most affluent countries in the world. It is a matter of choice, and this country is making the wrong one with allocation of resources. This is an economic development issue. More than 50 years after *Brown vs. Board of Education*, is this the best we can do? As the late U.S. Economist, Milton Friedman, stated, "Everyone needs an equal chance to be unequal."