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Poverty sucks.

Anyone who is poor knows that.

Anyone who works with the low-income and the unemployed understands it.

Education is lauded as the great equalizer, the vehicle out of poverty. It is not, because our schools reflect society as it is, not as we would like it to be.

Schools in low-income communities have larger classes (e.g., 45 second graders!), fewer and older books and supplies, too many decrepit buildings, and lower pay and benefits for teachers and staff, making it harder to retain and attract the best and the brightest. An experienced teacher with a master's degree in Detroit earns \$65,000 while in *some* suburban districts they earn \$ 78,000 or \$80,000.

What must be done? In *Our Kids, The American Dream in Crisis*, Robert Putnam outlines good ideas, many of which address the impact of poverty. And my union, the American Federation of Teachers Michigan, fights for these policies, works hands-on to advance literacy, chairs the board of Communities in Schools Michigan, and much more.

It is not enough. What really must happen for education truly to be the great equalizer is to *eradicate* poverty. Yes, education has a vital role, and everything that can be done must be done to enhance academics for *all* kids. But the greatest schools cannot compensate for a child who arrives with the effects of poverty, which may include hunger, homelessness and traumatic experiences. We must also immediately establish a \$15/hour minimum wage. We must stop all foreclosures caused by banks, the loss of employment or family tragedy. We must expand Obamacare (thank you, Mr. President) so that no one is without good health care coverage. We must overhaul our criminal "justice" system, and much, much more.

This takes an enormous amount of work because Flint and the Detroit Public Schools are no accidents. That year in year out, Wayne State University (WSU), the Detroit-based state university, receives the lowest increase in state funding is no accident. These and numerous other examples are the intended product of right-wing

politicians advancing the need for austerity regardless of the real human cost. Flint, Detroit Public Schools and WSU being on the bottom of state funding increases are a direct result of the bottom line of austerity, combined with a fair amount of racism.* Not to mention that African Americans are grossly disproportionately “governed” by the anti-democratic Emergency Manager system.

Flint and Detroit Public Schools are the direct result of the wealthy and powerful, the top one-tenth of one percent, making 40 percent of campaign contributions in 2012. One Michigan family, the DeVoses, contributed more to candidates in 2014 than the UAW International Union.

It is no accident that the super-rich who fund ballot questions and other strategies to destroy public education, civil rights and the labor movement are, for the most part, the same people. These three institutions have done the most to provide hope and opportunity for working families. Without these institutions the opposition to wealth and power is gone. Destroy these institutions and the wealthy and powerful expand their wealth and power.

As Putnam urges, everyone should be involved with our schools and our communities. It is essential that voices be heard. But it is not enough. We must also ensure that elected decision-makers are those who will make the decisions that truly provide opportunity. This means not just voting but also being involved politically. If everyone voted, candidates who support a great public education for all, good jobs, fair housing, a clean environment and more would win every statewide election in Michigan and many other states. Candidates with these views would always win the Presidency, and ballot questions that seek to destroy hope and opportunity would most often lose.

We can only then reclaim the American Dream.

**It is acknowledged that Latino/a is not a race as there are black, white and mixed Latino/as. However, as used in this text racism is meant to encompass discrimination against Latino/as.*