Safe and Healthy Communities

At the foundation of the civil rights road to deeper learning is a safe and healthy community, both within and beyond school grounds. Simply put, children cannot learn effectively when they are stressed, traumatized, sick, or hungry. Yet environmental inequalities are severe and widespread. People of color, particularly Black, Indigenous, and Latinx communities, are disproportionately exposed to toxic stress associated with high rates of poverty, food insecurity, housing insecurity, and proximity to toxic facilities (directly related to higher rates of cancer, asthma, and other physical illnesses). The legacy of redlining and the living conditions of people of color in low-income communities all affect their children's health and ability to learn.

Healthy Environment

In our current context, so-called "achievement gaps" begin early and widen over time. This is the result of significant *opportunity* gaps in multiple areas of children's lives. These gaps begin with unsafe living conditions. Richard Rothstein's *The Color of Law* documented the effects on learning of environmental factors such as lead poisoning, iron-deficiency anemia, asthma, substandard pediatric care, housing instability, and neighborhood dangers—all amplified by the aftereffects of redlining. One major study that documented environmental inequalities, including the siting of toxic facilities in low-income communities of color, estimated that the side effects of these hazards account for as much as half of the performance differential between students living in Los Angeles neighborhoods.

> Bethany Dumanois, who has taught in Flint for 25 years, works two jobs to keep teaching because she said she cannot abandon children whose discolored, rash-covered skin and chunks of exposed scalp haunt her. In the earlier days of the crisis, she spent class time addressing questions from her students about whether they would die from the water like their class lizard did.

The Flint, Michigan lead water poisoning scandal, caused by the decision of a state-appointed city manager to save money by changing the city's water supply, is just one of many examples of how environmental assaults have required legal recourse. Civil rights litigation was needed—first to stop the poisoning of the water in this predominantly Black community, then to require medical redress for the lead poisoning thousands of children experienced, and then to insist on the special

education supports more than 1 in 4 children needed. These lawsuits made possible the opening of a center offering neuropsychological screening for all children who had been exposed to lead as well as investments in special education services and preschool. But they could not correct the shortages of teachers caused by the combination of inadequate funding and low salaries in the under-resourced school system.

Safe Community

In addition to direct health threats, redlined communities often lack grocery stores, banks, pharmacies, and nearby employment opportunities. The stresses of high unemployment, underinvestment, abuse, and stigma can lead to crime and violence and compound to become what is referred to as toxic stress. Toxic stress occurs when stress exposure is frequent or prolonged, dysregulating the body's stress response systems and impacting every other body system. This leads to greater risks of infection and a variety of other health issues, ranging from pulmonary disease to cancer and more. The disruption can also create challenges in brain development, learning, and behavior. As just one example, researchers have found that neighborhood violence is associated with decreases in math and reading achievement, while an increase in perceived safety is associated with corresponding increases in student scores. Trauma and anxiety deflect focus, impeding concentration and the learning process.

Although trauma occurs in every community, poverty and racism, both together and separately, make the experience of chronic stress and adversity more likely. Furthermore, in schools where students encounter punitive discipline tactics rather than support for handling adversity, their stress is magnified. Research on human development shows that the effects of such trauma can be mitigated when students learn in a positive school climate that offers long-term, secure relationships that support academic, physical, cognitive, social, and emotional development — an approach known as "whole child" education.

Housing and Food Security

In addition to direct health threats, previously redlined communities often lack essential services and employment opportunities. The fallout from living in these marginalized communities can be psychological and physical trauma — a growing risk as childhood poverty, homelessness, and food insecurity in the United States have continued to rise to the highest rates of any industrialized country in the world, affecting approximately 1 in 5 children. In addition, 34 million children (46% of those under 18) endure adverse childhood experiences each year, as they are exposed to violence, crime, abuse, homelessness, hunger, or loss of family members.

These experiences can create toxic stress that affects children's attention, learning, and behavior.

During the No Child Left Behind Era, from 2002 until 2015, these extensive health risks and other harms to children were unacknowledged by a federal policy system whose only answer to evidence of struggling learners was a set of punitive accountability sanctions that blamed educators for low performance and responded to low test scores by firing teachers and closing public schools in high-need neighborhoods.

Social safety net benefits that should mitigate issues such as unstable housing, hunger, neighborhood violence, and additional challenges associated with precarity are frequently under attack. The fight to secure, protect, and advance these services is not new.

During the 1960s, Johnson era policies cut the child poverty rate in half. Together with major investments in education for low-income children through the 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act and large allocations of aid during the 1970s for school desegregation, teacher recruitment, curriculum improvement, summer programs, and more, the achievement gap between White and Black students was decreased by more than half by the 1980s.

However, nearly all these programs were eliminated or sharply reduced during the Reagan administration, and the federal education budget was cut in half. The administration cut housing subsidies, food stamps, Pell Grants, student loans, and unemployment compensation. Children were cut off from food benefits, including three million who lost school lunch, one million who lost food stamps, and 500,000 who were cut from school breakfast programs. Approximately 750,000 children lost Medicaid benefits, and more than 300,000 families lost access to public housing. Hunger and homelessness rose dramatically. Achievement for Black and Hispanic students declined, and the achievement gap grew as childhood poverty increased and educational investments shrank. The gap remains now, over 30 years later, 30% greater than it was in 1988.