

BUCKS COUNTY **Courier Times**

Growing up poor in wealthy Bucks County

By TAM ST. CLAIRE, March 14, 2017

Even though prosperity is on the rise in Bucks County, too many families live paycheck to paycheck while other households struggle with long-term unemployment. The bottom line is that nearly 9,600 Bucks County children are growing up poor in one of the wealthiest counties in the nation.

Good people can disagree about many things, but at least we can all agree that kids don't make themselves poor and are not in a position to single handedly raise family income. In fact, the economic recovery has been slower to reach children than any other age group in the county, including seniors. This is not a one year fluke.

Between 2010 and 2015, the poverty rate for children was an average of 2.2 percentage points higher than the poverty rate for seniors. In a perfect world neither our youngest nor our oldest citizens would have to contend with poverty and the associated risks to health, hunger and housing. Fewer seniors live in poverty because of effective public policy interventions like Social Security, Medicare and property tax relief. Our goal must be to advance similar solutions for kids.

Many parents may be breathing a sigh of relief thinking that they have done all the right things and that child poverty doesn't affect them. The reality is that every single Bucks County school district has more poor students enrolled today than in 2008. In fact, the percent of students qualifying for the school meals program more than doubled in the New Hope and Central Bucks school districts.

Compared to five years ago, every school district in the southeast region has more poor children enrolled and less money for classroom instruction. It's no surprise, then, that reading and math performance has declined. Imagine what we could do differently if we had the resources to meet the needs of these students? It goes without saying that we all want to take action so that children don't have to struggle with hunger while they are struggling to do their homework.

If we put smart policies in place to help reduce child poverty, then teachers will be able to spend less time on remediation and accelerate learning for all. Public Citizens for Children and Youth (PCCY), the leading child advocacy organization in Southeastern Pennsylvania and an organization partner of the Bucks County Women's Advocacy Coalition (BCWAC), just released a new report called *Left Out: The Status of Children in Bucks County* that sheds light on the facts and offers up some solutions.

One of the most direct ways to help families out of poverty is to raise the minimum wage. Some people may think that only teenagers work at the minimum wage anymore. Fact is, of the 48,000 Bucks County men and women who would benefit from an increase in the minimum wage, 88 percent are adults (age 20 or above). Too many workers are stuck at the bottom rung because they are juggling multiple part-time jobs or have to miss work to tend to a sick child.

The advocates at BCWAC and PCCY support a set of policies that would promote job longevity, including predictable scheduling, paid sick and family leave, and access to quality, affordable health care. School officials can make a difference, too, by offering free and reduced priced school breakfasts and adopting strategies to reduce the stigma that may prevent students from taking advantage of healthy school meals because they don't want to self-identify as poor.

With these steps, we can give working parents a better shot at providing for their kids so that none get left behind.

Tam St. Claire, Furlong, is president of the Bucks County Women's Advocacy Coalition.

http://www.buckscountycouriertimes.com/opinion/guest/growing-up-poor-in-wealthy-bucks-county/article_244f208b-ff91-512d-8205-43fe14cabe21.html