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Children from Low-Income Families Often Suffer Exclusion at [School](#)

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by Joan Madeleine Doughty

Imagine this: You live in Ann Arbor. Your first-grade student comes home from school and tells you the teacher handed out cupcakes today – to every child except yours and two others. Why? “Teacher said I wasn’t on the list of kids who were paid for.”

You call the teacher and are told you never sent in money for daily snacks. The reason you didn’t pay was because you couldn’t. With four mouths to feed, living on disability, you struggle to pay your rent, utilities and food bills. There is no money for extras. And now your child watches, while almost everyone in the class enjoys snacks every day.

Does this really happen in Ann Arbor? It does not. If it did, we would collectively rise in protest. We can’t imagine a teacher who would skip a student when distributing treats just because his or her parent is too poor to pay. In fact, when research showed hungry children had trouble focusing on academics, policy makers universally embraced the concept of free and reduced school breakfast and lunch [programs](#).

Now ask yourself this: Which would a child rather have – a cupcake or school pictures? A bag of chips or a yearbook? Every year in most of our children’s classrooms, teachers hand out school picture packets to some kids, but not others. They give certain children yearbooks, but skip their peers. Why? Because their parents didn’t pay. Sometimes by choice, but more often the reason is financial.

Through my work for Community Action Network, I have learned how difficult it is for low-income families to live in Ann Arbor. CAN offers programs and services at two local [public housing](#) communities. In the shadow of our world-class university, these families live in extreme poverty. They struggle to pay rent and energy bills. They run out of food at the month’s end. And time and time again, their children feel as if they don’t quite belong in our classrooms. Our low-income children experience systematic social exclusion in our schools. Let me share a few examples.

School pictures and yearbooks: Anyone who has been in a classroom when school pictures are distributed can tell you this is a social event. Kids compare. They moan about their hair. Best of all are the small wallet-sized pictures, designed for exchange with a message on the back, like “Friends 4-Ever!” Similarly, when yearbooks come out, everyone looks to find themselves and friends, the track team, a school party. Homeroom teachers set aside time for students to write in each other’s yearbooks. Imagine not receiving pictures or a yearbook. It doesn’t matter if you are the only child in

that classroom, or if there are many of you. You feel left out. It is awkward. You need to do something with yourself, pretend to not care, while all around you peers are writing messages, affirming friendships and creating memories.

Middle school fundraisers: I resent the use of our children to sell things – there is something manipulative about it. I take even more exception to the high pressure incentive system: Winners get a limousine ride to McDonald's for lunch or earn stuffed animals, MP3 players, Rollerblades. Many schools organize it as a contest between classrooms. Some teachers make it into a team building experience. "Our class can earn the pizza party, if everyone contributes!" A friend of mine works at a large firm, and many of his colleagues are happy to order magazine subscriptions at the reduced rates the fundraiser offers. His son earns many points and lots of prizes.

Imagine you are the teen from an extremely low-income family. Your parents may be barely literate. Your family doesn't have money for magazine subscriptions. Your neighbors don't buy them. You simply cannot participate. You can't be part of the "team." Every announcement, every drawing, every tally excludes you, again and again.

Field trips: It's not unusual for me to find a school child playing outside alone on a school day. Sometimes the child is home because a field trip is scheduled. The family can't afford the (optional) contribution, and doesn't want to face the embarrassment of asking for a scholarship. Nor is there money for the McDonald's lunch afterwards. These small amounts can be barriers to participation in field trips – for students who already experience the least exposure to educational events! Time and time again, the children CAN serves are left out of the social fabric of their classrooms and schools. Book orders? Our kids don't place them. Wear your \$25 school sweatshirt every Friday? Not possible. Pizza night, ice cream social, family game nights? Unless they are free, our kids can't attend. This school year, count how many times you pull out your checkbook. It is mind boggling.

Why should we care? First, we should care because we believe in social justice. In our liberal city, where only Democrats can win city council races, we should demand that all economic barriers to social belonging are removed from our public classrooms.

Second, we must recognize, even if only instinctively, that children learn better if they are socially integrated. Most of us have been in situations where we felt out of place. It is uncomfortable and stressful. It is exhausting. Imagine feeling that way every school day. I am convinced this constant stress detracts from our children's ability to focus and learn.

But there is third compelling reason to care: self interest. I believe the effects of social exclusion to be cumulative. In the lower grades, many of our sweet, sweet children naively believe they are the same as their classmates. They make friends easily, with a diverse group. They are eager to belong, eager to please. The constant bombardment of exclusionary experiences erodes their confidence.

By the time our kids are in middle school, the reality – that they do not quite belong and never will – is evident. Many children manage to cope, but in my experience, the most sensitive start displaying "problem" behaviors. They act indifferent or even hostile. They give up on blending into the mainstream and some eventually give up on school altogether. While our kids as individuals pay a heavy price for this, so do we, as a community. High school dropouts cost us much. We pay for their support, for their

housing. And we pay with higher crime and incarceration rates. A recent Alliance for Education publication confirmed what we already knew: "Education has a strong impact on crime prevention and the personal safety of Americans."

Is systematic social exclusion of low-income children solely responsible for their achievement gap or higher drop out rates? Of course not. Many of our children experience educational challenges and have no at-home academic support to turn to when they need it. It is clear that no individual, family or social factor alone is responsible for the achievement gap and there is no one easy solution. But the social exclusion factor adds yet another reason for our low-income Ann Arbor students to feel inadequate. How can it not?

Community Action Network has been working with the Ann Arbor Public Schools administration and schools our children attend to address the economic barriers to social equality. These are not adversarial discussions. We have become partners in trying to solve this complex problem. The district does not have funds to make a systemic change. Schools depend on their PTO's fundraising dollars to buy special equipment and fund the very field trips discussed. Our district cannot buy yearbooks or pictures for every student who can't afford them.

Some schools have made adjustments. Allen School has not asked for field trip contributions for several years. At King School, every time something requires a contribution, the PTO, teachers and principal work together to make certain every child is included. But these examples are exceptions, dependent on individuals taking initiative, and their solutions are pieced together.

We need a communitywide partnership to tackle this social problem. If all principals, teachers, parents and PTOs at every school in the city resolve to no longer tolerate systematic economic exclusion, it should be one of the easier problems to solve. If it can happen anywhere, it can happen here. And it should. We owe it to the children from low-income families, to our own children and to ourselves.

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