



# How does poverty affect students in East St. Louis? Here are 5 things to know

BY KELLY SMITS SEPTEMBER 16, 2024 5:00 AM



Tashonia Hentz listens to the Rev. Starsky Wilson, president and CEO of the Children’s Defense Fund, during a forum on child poverty in East St. Louis, Ill., on Sept. 10, 2024. SOPHIE PROE *St. Louis Public Radio*

East St. Louis residents, educators, elected officials and others gathered at the Wyvetter H. Younge Higher Education Campus Tuesday to [discuss an issue prevalent in the community](#) and in many others across Illinois: child poverty.

Once a transportation and industrial powerhouse, industry in East St. Louis declined throughout the 20th century, which, combined with “white flight,” led to a decreasing population, diminishing tax base and economic disinvestment.

Now, [31.6% of residents live below the poverty line](#) and the median household income is \$28, 519, according to 2022 U.S. Census data. Nearly half of the children in East St. Louis — 48.1% — are living in poverty, three times the state average.

The effects of poverty manifest in the lives of children in various ways, experts said at the event. “Poverty is about robbing young people of opportunity,” said Rev. Starsky Wilson, president and CEO of the Children’s Defense Fund. When we talk about child poverty only in terms of resources and money, we’re having too small of a conversation, he added.

“It’s really about how we’re able to unlock and enliven the realities of children’s lives,” Wilson said.



Rev. Starsky Wilson, president and CEO of the Children's Defense Fund, talks about the root causes of systemic poverty with Tasha Green Cruzat, president of Children's Advocates for Change, during a forum on child poverty in East St. Louis, Ill., on Sept. 10, 2024. Joshua Carter Belleville News- Democrat

Poverty especially affects children's educational outcomes, which was the topic of one of the panels at Tuesday's event organized by Children's Advocates for Change, a Chicago-based nonprofit.

Here are five key takeaways from the panel discussion:

### **EARLY CHILDHOOD IS A CRITICAL TIME FRAME TO PROVIDE RESOURCES**

In 2023, Birth to Five Illinois Region 50 published a report [assessing early childhood needs](#) throughout St. Clair County.

Birth to Five Illinois is a program aiming to address early childhood needs in communities across the state. Research shows that the first five years of a child's life are the most crucial for physical, intellectual and social-emotional development.

Among the top needs identified across the county and in East St. Louis were full-day or wrap-around services so families can return to work, transportation to access those services, and family outreach from the relevant agencies providing the services.

Much of the state funding for preschool goes to half-day programs, which doesn't work for many families, Regional Council Manager Stephanie Herling said.

Additionally, many areas lack accessible, reliable and safe public transportation, creating an additional hurdle for getting kids to preschool and other essential early childhood services.

And sometimes, people don't know about the programs available to them, learn about them too late, or struggle to balance the long, tedious processes with their immediate family needs.

East St. Louis School District 189 has taken the lead in addressing those needs locally by providing full-day preschool and transportation for all kids within district boundaries to preschool, according to Herling.

A more recent report by Birth to Five Illinois Region 50 [looked specifically at mental and behavioral health needs](#), which found a lack of available services, long waitlists to access services that are available and other issues.

“There are very, very little resources available for children under the age of 5,” Herling said. Birth to Five Illinois Region 50 is trying to work with communities and families in St. Clair County, including East St. Louis, to get kids the support they need early in life.

### **ADDITIONAL SCHOOL FUNDING HAS BEEN IMPORTANT, BUT MONEY ALONE ISN'T THE SOLUTION**

When he [first came to District 189](#) in 2011, Superintendent Arthur Culver said the biggest issue was funding.

“There were so many programs and positions that we didn’t have because of money,” he said.

Every year, Culver said he has advocated to the state legislature for additional resources for District 189 and other districts in communities where poverty is widespread.

Before the state revamped its education funding formula in 2017 to make it more equitable and direct dollars to the school districts most in need, Illinois school districts relied mostly on local property taxes for revenue. As a result, schools in communities with a diminishing tax base like East St. Louis were chronically and severely underfunded.

Once District 189 started getting more resources from the state to add staff and programs, Culver said he thought things would start to improve.

“It didn’t happen that way,” he said. “What I found out was that the mindset, the culture, wasn’t right, and it takes so much time to change culture. We had educators that were providing resources for students, teaching students, but did not really believe in their hearts and minds and souls that kids could get the job done.”

In addition to changing that mindset, the district also needed to make its curriculum and teaching methods more consistent within and across schools, weather the Covid-19 pandemic that set things back, and provide principals space to support teachers and help them improve their teaching practices and students’ learning outcomes for teachers instead of “putting out fires” on a daily basis, Culver said.

While the district is still behind the state average, it’s making progress. For the last two years, students meeting state reading standards increased by six percentage points, according to Culver. The improvement from the 2021-22 to 2022-23 school year is verified by the Illinois School Report Card. Scores for 2023-24 have not yet been released publicly by the state.

“We’re making progress, but it just takes time,” he said.

Another sign of progress came last fall, when all of the district's elementary schools received a "commendable" designation on the Illinois State Report Card.

Soon, Avant Elementary School will get an "exemplary" designation, Culver said. That indicates Avant is in the top 10% of Illinois schools in terms of overall performance.



Arthur Culver, superintendent of East St. Louis School District 189, talks about the challenges students living in poverty face during a forum on child poverty in East St. Louis, Ill., on Sept. 10, 2024. Joshua Carter Belleville News-Democrat

### **'RADICALLY SMALLER CLASS SIZES' ARE NEEDED**

Sheila Burton is the executive director of [Every Child Education Equity Project](#), an East St. Louis-based organization that advocates for individualized education for children growing up in the toxic stress and trauma of poverty.

Burton said she has worked with families and children experiencing poverty for decades, looking at what can be done to break the cycle of poverty and asking herself:

"If I had to put my finger on one thing that I think could make a huge difference, what would it be? And I kept coming back to education and education equity and the fact that the education that the children are getting in East St Louis is not enough," she said.

Burton's organization seeks to change the way children living in poverty are educated, and she said it is pushing for "radically smaller class sizes" to provide individualized education for kids who have had "adverse childhood experiences," a term that refers to [traumatic events in a child's life](#) that can have long-term health consequences.

"The science of trauma is now telling us that a child's brain actually changes," Burton said. "If we know this, and if children in poverty actually have a right to education, it has to be in a way that they can actually learn."



What Every Child Education Equity Project is doing, she said, is working with parents and students “to stand up and say ‘no more.’”

“We can’t have another generation of kids go through and be graduating with these reading levels, with these math levels,” Burton said. “Yes, there are schools that are making some improvements, but it’s not enough. It’s not enough, and our kids deserve better.”

### **OUT-OF-SCHOOL TIME IS JUST AS IMPORTANT AS IN-SCHOOL TIME**

Students living in poverty depend on their schools for necessities, said Tiffany Gholson, director of parent and student support services at District 189.

Gholson is a social worker by trade and also the founder of [Breaking Barriers International](#), a new organization working to help children in urban and impoverished areas who have experienced trauma or violence.

In East St. Louis schools, she said kids get free meals and snacks, uniforms, books, health care at the high school-based health clinic and transportation services regardless of where they live.

“But what I realized in my 25-plus years in this work is we only have the kids about 40 hours a week, and we have about 128 hours in the rest of the week when they’re at home and in their community,” Gholson said.

“I realized that out-of-school time is just as important as in-school time. They’re with their families, they’re in the community, and they need to be safe.”

Her organization provides professional counseling services for kids to help them heal, grow and learn new skills as well as expose them to new experiences and opportunities.

It also provides support to parents and families, since some parents may not have graduated from high school themselves, or if they did graduate, it was without the skills they needed to be successful.

“They stay in that cycle of poverty, which then impacts their kids,” Gholson said.

She referred to “[Maslow’s hierarchy of needs](#),” a five-tier pyramid model created by psychologist Abraham Maslow that categorizes human needs. At the foundation of the pyramid are “physiological needs” like water, food and shelter that are essential for basic survival.

A lot of families in poverty that Gholson and her colleagues work with are stuck on that level, she said. “We can’t get past that, because I think it’s more than income,” she added. “They don’t just need income. They just don’t need material wealth, but they need to learn how to access new capabilities and opportunities.”

### **CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM REMAINS A BIG ISSUE**

Among the biggest issues schools have been grappling with post-pandemic has been chronic absenteeism, which refers to the percentage of students who miss 10% or more of school days and is associated with higher dropout rates and poorer life outcomes.

According to a recent study by the Brookings Institute, [chronic absenteeism nearly doubled nationally](#) between the 2018-19 and 2021-22 school years from 15% to 28% with only marginal declines since then. In District 189 specifically, 65.5% of students were chronically absent during the 2022-23 school year. Following national trends, the issue is most acute at East St. Louis Senior High School, where 89.1% of students were chronically absent.

“It’s hard to teach kids that aren’t here,” Superintendent Culver said.

Some of the reasons students in the district are chronically absent are related to poverty, he said. For example, kids living in poverty are more likely to have mental and physical health issues that prevent them from going to school.

In some cases at the higher grade levels, students are working to help provide for their families and getting home late at night, Culver said. When they wake up early the next morning, they don’t want to go to school. In other cases, students have to stay home to babysit their younger siblings.

The district tries to incentivize attendance and provide support to parents to get their kids to school, but in some cases, the district will have to start referring parents to the judicial system because they are allowing their kids to be chronically absent.

And for teachers, Culver said he stresses the importance of providing engaging, interesting lessons so that even when students aren’t feeling their best, they want to come to class so they don’t miss out.

“You gotta teach lessons that are engaging, that actually correlate to what kids do in their everyday lives. They see how it’s going to help in the future,” Culver said.

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