

Guest commentary: How to break the cycle of poverty and poor education

- By Anne Mosle, Washington, D.C., Women in Leadership
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In his State of the Union address, President [Barack Obama](#) challenged America to "win the future" in a fiercely competitive world. But we can't win the future as long as we are losing the battle to lift struggling families out of poverty. For America to have a bright future — with an equitable and prosperous society — we must do more to help the households whose own futures grow dimmer by the day.

Consider some grim statistics that should be a source of national shame. Income inequality is now at its worst since the Census Bureau began tracking household income in 1967. By some estimates, inequality hasn't been so bad in America since the 1920s.

One segment of our population faces an especially dire picture: Single parents and their children. Currently, more than one third of women-headed families live in poverty — more than three times the national average. Families led by single mothers make up more than 62 percent of families with children living in poverty; nearly half (42 percent) of low-income children live in women-headed families. Poverty rates of women and children of color are higher than other populations. For single mothers with at least one child under the age of six, the poverty rate is 58 percent for African Americans and 55 percent for Hispanics/Latinas compared with 49 percent for Whites.

What sort of future can many of these kids and their struggling parents expect? How are they going to help America compete with global rivals like India and China?

We can't shrug off the plight of families like these and still be a thriving 21st century economy. America needs to tap the full potential of all the people, not just those already on the path to college and advanced degrees. And with the reverberations of a major recession still echoing in communities across the country, and a deficit looming over Washington, we must pragmatically do much more with much less.

Fortunately, we have a vital tool to work with: The resiliency of the folks — overwhelmingly women — who head these single-parent families. They are the cornerstone of a two-generation strategy for moving families beyond poverty. They are women who are driven to clear paths to success for the next generation: they want to win their future. Globally, the economic power of women has been illuminated in the work of Princeton sociologist Viviana Zelizer, who has noted that women in developing countries are more likely to earmark their money towards their child's well-being than a man in a similar position. There is also the work of Nobel winner Muhammad Yunus, who has studied the efficiency of loan repayment by women in the developing world, noting that when women control the family finances, they are more likely to benefit from their overall income.

Why not apply that dedicated focus on those women right next door or across town? It's time for a big re-think here in the U.S., which is where innovative, evidence-based solutions come in. The three Es: economics, education, and engagement.

There's nothing more valuable we can do to help these moms and dads struggling to raise kids on their own more than expanding their economic opportunities. By lifting up and expanding the

reach of proven solutions – like Earned Income Tax Credit, family leave, and quality child care – we dramatically increase parents’ potential for financial stability, as well as move closer to shrinking the gap between low-income families and their neighbors.

Single parents with low incomes are often hamstrung by limited education. In today’s stagnant economy, their options are deeply limited. As of 2009, 87 percent of all children with parents who have less than a high school degree – 7.6 million – live in low-income families. But that can change, and quickly, if single parents acquire access to quality post-secondary education: as of January 2011, those with less than a high school diploma face an unemployment rate of 14.2 percent; those with some college or associate degree, 8 percent. Strengthening the retention and graduation rates of our community colleges through wraparound supports – from mental health counseling to accessible, affordable transportation – is a vital step in changing the course of a single parent’s path to economic stability.

Take, for example, the innovative "Keys to Degrees" program at Boston’s Endicott College, where single parents get special dorms in which to live with their young children, free meal plans for kids, and career counseling, among other supports. Creative leadership – and financial support – has allowed Endicott to develop a thriving environment for single parents driven to succeed.

It’s also essential to broaden opportunity for their children as early as possible. Almost nothing predicts a child’s future success like the quality of education he or she receives before five. Here’s a snapshot: in Tulsa, Oklahoma, the Community Action Project (CAP) provides comprehensive early childhood education to low-income children, ensuring their emotional, cognitive, and social development while implementing career training as well as health care for their mothers. Think of it as an investment: a greater financial stake in a child’s early education – one that ensures literacy, safety, and social development – leads to an adult who repays our economy and society at an exponential rate. That’s how a country wins its future.

Of course, in the adage of sports, winning requires teamwork. Right now, powerful social networks of resilient single parents, especially women, are going untapped. Building connections to these parents between service organizations, between policymakers, between researchers, and employers will be an integral part of the movement to change the trajectory of single mothers and their children. And ours, too: we’ve all been hit by the economic crisis, so let’s reset and reimagine what is possible. As we play to win, we should build a game where the rules are designed for all kids and parents to have a fair chance to succeed.

Do we have the will to make this happen? How can we afford not to?

Mosle is the executive director of Ascend, a new initiative at the Aspen Institute, which will advance a dual-generation approach to lifting families out of poverty. She is an executive on loan from the WK Kellogg Foundation, where she was responsible for developing two new portfolios — Family Economic Security and Civic Engagement — including \$40 million annual grantmaking and a \$100 million mission-driven investing pilot program.

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