

BEYOND ACCOUNTABILITY

Meeting Children's Most Basic Needs

By Harvey Lee and Jennifer Padua

Sitting at the kitchen table doing his reading assignment, Chardee comes across the word, *emphasis*, and tries to sound it out haphazardly: /e/ /m/ /p/ /his/ /is/. When his first attempt sounds wrong, Chardee gives it another try, this time blending some of the sounds, /em/ /p/ /his/ /is/. The result still sounds wrong, so Chardee puts down the book in frustration and walks over to the refrigerator. There he finds beer, cigarettes, baking powder, and batteries, but nothing to eat—again. Fatigued from hunger, Chardee's stomach is now growling, his eyes are tired, and he has no energy. He moves over to the sink only to find a stack of dirty dishes. He looks high and low for a clean cup. He takes a drink of water and then goes to his room to sleep. This is just another night without a decent dinner.

These events are not uncommon. In many households, children are home alone, struggling with homework, and have nothing decent to eat. The scenario above has a direct correlation to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (see Figure). Maslow claimed that learning is deeply impacted by a person's level of physiology, safety, belongingness (affection), self-esteem, and self-actualization. Children whose most basic needs (e.g., food, sleep, shelter, safety) are not fully met cannot successfully devote themselves to learning until these needs are addressed.

Why bring up this theory now? Educational systems around the country are pursuing higher accountability and increased student achievement, and are measuring improvement through testing. Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) requirements have placed pressure on many schools. Increased funding has poured into low-achieving schools to help them implement a new curriculum, rebuild the schools' infrastructures, and sometimes even replace teachers and staff. Yet, with all of these changes, some schools' achievement rates have not changed. Increases in funding, new curriculum, and improvements in infrastructure will not always lead to greater student achievement, and many schools continue to fail.

Think again of Chardee. Imagine he is a student in your

classroom and arrives hungry each day. It is unlikely he will be able to concentrate on learning in your classroom, regardless of how much money was spent on new curriculum. How can your school help meet Chardee's physiological needs? Implementing programs such as school breakfasts and working with the community to provide clean clothes to children are good starts. Discussing the importance of brushing teeth and bathing with students will also help.

Students like Chardee never do their homework and their parents do not return telephone calls. A family resource center could help by providing parental activities in the community. Having after school programs for latch key students or a safe passage program may also help.

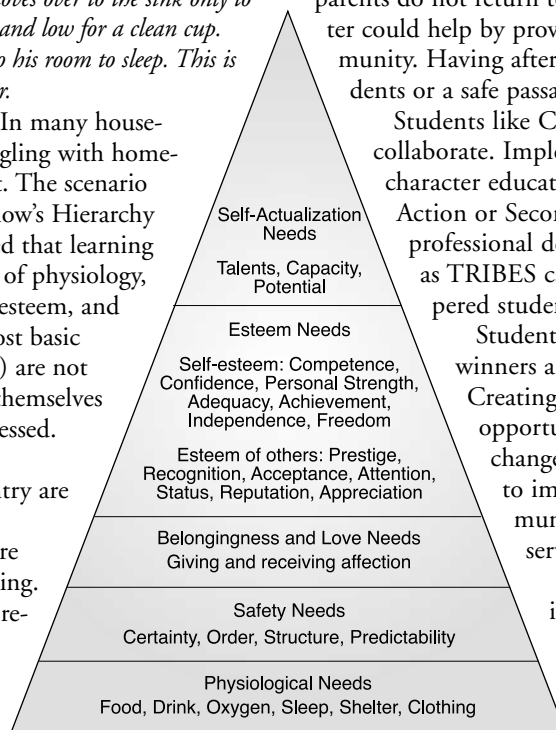
Students like Chardee are short-tempered and rarely collaborate. Implementing a relationship building or character education curriculum, such as Positive Action or Second Step, may help. Implementing a professional development program for all staff such as TRIBES can help teachers deal with short-tempered students.

Students like Chardee never see themselves as winners and have difficulty trying new things. Creating programs that give students the opportunity to make a difference can help change these issues. Encourage your school to implement programs connecting community service and academics through service learning.

As results and accountability are increasingly emphasized, many schools are reacting by emphasizing academics. However, when schools take into account students' needs—at all levels of the hierarchy—and try to ensure that those needs are met,

they may find that improved test scores will follow.

Harvey Lee, Specialist, Center for Learning and Teaching, and Jennifer Padua, Specialist, Center for Accountability, Research, and Evaluation, can be contacted at leeh@prel.org and paduaj@prel.org.



▷ Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

Schools struggling with change may wish to consider some of the following questions:

- What are the demographics of your students? How many students receive free or reduced services? What is the daily absenteeism rate? How many children have chronic attendance problems? What type of absenteeism interventions has your school implemented?
- What are the demographics of the instructional staff? What is their average number of years of teaching experience? What is the average number of years teachers stay at the school? How many of them have teaching credentials, graduate degrees, or specialized degrees?
- What are the demographics of the leadership staff? How many years has the principal been at the school? Does the principal have experience teaching at the level of the school that he or she now leads? (E.g., has an elementary school principal ever taught at an elementary school? Does a high school principal have high school teaching experience?)