Teach People. Fight Poverty.

**Recognizing the barriers to education people living in the crisis of poverty face can help us to reach all students.**

In the 1940s, President Truman commissioned a group to determine why a large number of people in America were not being educated. The group found five barriers preventing people from becoming educated (Levine and Nidiffer, 1996): geography, religion, gender, race, and poverty. Thomas Mortenson replicated this study (The Mortenson Report, 1995) to identify educational barriers and found that geography, religion and gender had been mostly eliminated as educational barriers. Mortenson found race was still a barrier, though its influence had somewhat diminished. Poverty however, was still a main barrier to education.

President Barack Obama (2009) commissioned a similar study to explore why so many Americans are not accessing postsecondary education. The report showed that poverty continues to be the core barrier to gaining an education in both K-12 schools and higher education. A twelve year study of eighth graders showed that nearly 80 percent of middle income and high income students with high math abilities achieved college degrees. Comparably, only 30 percent of students from poverty who scored well in math achieved college degrees. The same study revealed students from the top 20 percent of income levels who scored poorly in math achieved college degrees at the same rate (30 percent) as those from poverty who scored highly in math.

**Myth:** An education is always attainable if someone works hard enough.

**Reality:** In a recent study examining homework practices and middle-class parents, over 90 percent of the parents responded that they did homework with their children or for them (Hale, 2009). What does that mean for the student from poverty who is highly likely to have parents with limited literacy, less education and less time? Our focus has to shift to how we will ensure these young people are getting support and guidance in a place where their needs are met and they have support from adults who are not in the crisis of poverty and who understand the homework.

In 2008 a teacher selected for a Best Teacher award said she succeeded so well with some of her students because she focused on “the students who want to participate and to learn.” We must understand and believe that all students want to participate and they want to learn. Poverty experiencees have taught many that what they know now is all they will ever know. Poverty steals hope and possibility.

Living in the context of poverty creates real external and internal barriers to learning. Maslow’s (1943 hierarchy of needs shows that it is difficult to learn or develop potential when fundamental needs are unmet. Students struggling to meet basic needs encounter messages that education is not for them.