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## NEWS RELEASE

### *Socioeconomic Disparities in Educational Outcomes Far Greater Than Previously Believed, Says IRPP Study*

*Manitoba study shows that, by grade 12, over 50 percent of children in low socioeconomic neighbourhoods had left school or failed a grade.*

**Montreal** – While it has long been understood that children from low socioeconomic backgrounds do more poorly in school than their wealthier counterparts, a path-breaking study published today by the Institute for Research on Public Policy (IRPP.org) shows that the problem is much larger than previously believed.

Lead authors Marni Brownell, Noralou Roos and Randy Fransoo (all from the Manitoba Centre for Health Policy) examine the academic performance of students from Manitoba using data on cohorts of children born in a given year, regardless of whether they are in school or at the proper grade level. This “population-based” approach to analyzing educational outcomes (which could be applied in other provinces) provides a more complete picture of educational outcomes than that afforded by standard educational assessments, which only measure the performance of students who have made it far enough in school to be examined. While useful in their own right, such assessments understate the strong correlation between socioeconomic status (SES) and school performance.

For example, the reported pass rate in the 2001-02 academic year for the grade 12 language arts test in Manitoba was 75 percent among students from disadvantaged neighbourhoods, compared with over 90 percent for students from the higher end of the socioeconomic scale. But the authors demonstrate that 56 percent of the disadvantaged students who should have taken the test in fact did not – 36 percent had failed at least one grade and 20 percent were simply no longer in school. The true “on-time” pass rate of the test among disadvantaged students was in fact only 27 percent.

The authors note that the problem of poor school outcomes is apparent early on. By grade 3, children from low socioeconomic backgrounds are already much less likely to be performing well.

The authors also stress that the problem of poor educational attainment is not confined to low-SES students. Middle- and even upper-middle-SES milieus also suffer from lower pass rates on educational tests than do wealthier neighbourhoods, though to a lesser degree. Thus, even though low-SES students have the most educational problems in

proportional terms, the majority of students with substandard educational achievement do not live in disadvantaged areas. The authors point out that “programs that are directed only at low-income areas would not substantially reduce the total number of poor outcomes.”

In this vein, Brownell, Roos Fransoo et al. recommend strengthening several different initiatives using a “universal needs-targeted approach,” by which all families qualify but the amount of benefits varies according to need:

- ◆ **Child care programs:** Although they look at schooling outcomes, the authors contend that child care and early childhood development programs are “keys to levelling the playing field down the road.”
- ◆ **Parenting programs:** Parents are important, the authors assert: “It is critical that parents be offered adequate supports, including community programs designed to enhance parenting skills.”
- ◆ **Stay-in-school programs:** “Programs for older children and youths, designed to engage them and keep them interested in school while at the same time providing them with the skills necessary to complete high school, should also be supported and enhanced.”

“Is the Class Half Empty? A Population-Based Perspective on Socioeconomic Status and Educational Outcomes,” by Marni Brownell, Noralou Roos, Randy Fransoo et al., can be downloaded free of charge from [www.irpp.org](http://www.irpp.org).

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**Contact:**

Jackson Wightman ([jwightman@irpp.org](mailto:jwightman@irpp.org))  
Director of Communications (IRPP)  
Office: (514) 985-2461, ext. 324  
Cellular: (514) 235-8308