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Homeless Students at the School Door

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With the number of homeless students on the rise, schools encounter new educational challenges, including how to make transferring from school to school least destructive to a child's education.

Every night anywhere from 225,000 to 500,000 children go to sleep homeless in America.¹ Of the total number of homeless people in the nation, almost one-third are families,² the fastest growing segment of the homeless population.³

Estimates of the number of homeless students vary. According to one source, the figure is equal to the number of students in the Montgomery County, Maryland, Schools (the 15th largest system in the country).⁴ Another source estimates that the figure parallels the number of children living in Atlanta, Boston, Miami, or Newark.⁵

No matter the exact number, the fact that there are so many homeless children in America is alarming. What is being done to provide for these children and youth?

Support for Homeless Students

In 1987, Congress passed the first comprehensive law to provide emergency and long-term assistance for homeless persons, in particular, children and youth. Under the Stewart B. McKinney Act, the 50 states, Puerto Rico, and the District of Columbia receive funding to investigate the number and the needs of homeless children, to identify obstacles that prevent them from receiving an education, and to develop a plan to overcome these problems (Stronge and Helm 1990).

The \$7.2 million that Congress appropriated in 1991 to serve the needs of homeless children was increased to \$24.8 million in 1992 (American Political Network 1992). While the increase appears dramatic, those who are actively involved with the students claim that it is not nearly sufficient. The McKinney Act also provides emergency food assistance, adult literacy instruction, job training, health services, and other programs. Under the act, homeless children are ensured access to the same free, appropriate, public education that other children in the state receive.

In 1990, the Center for Law and Education commissioned Kathleen McCall to identify programs that served the needs of the homeless. Her study located 29 alternative programs that provided remedial education, appropriate time and conditions for study, and continuity of instruction. In addition, the programs attempted to remedy many school officials' lack of knowledge and understanding of the

problems homeless students face. With a focus on involving homeless and indigent parents in their children's education, the projects coordinate educational services with social service programs and other community efforts, while also implementing flexible enrollment policies that emphasize individualized instruction (McCall 1990). Although successful, these programs hang by a slender thread. Uncertain funding and the difficulties of serving a transient population are two of the major obstacles they face. Some of the educational problems confronting homeless children center on whether they will receive better opportunities at the school they formerly attended or at a school near their temporary shelter. Some benefits of remaining at their former school include greater stability, more continuity of instruction and friendships, and possibly more satisfaction with the school and the teacher. For many homeless students, however, this option is not a viable alternative, either because transportation is not readily available or it presents more problems than it is worth.

Each time a child transfers to a new school, time irrevocably lost. The effects of those losses, even if a quality education program is available, contribute to academic underachievement, holdover rates, and a break in continuity of learning. The transfer of school records takes time and prevents new school personnel from preparing an appropriate learning program for the student. Each time a student moves to a new shelter, he or she typically misses four to five days of school.

Rather than create schools specifically for homeless students, which isolates them from their peers who live in homes, a better solution is for public schools to develop programs that incorporate many of the positive qualities of the school projects mentioned earlier. Many public schools have done just that. For example, the collaborative efforts of agencies in Orange County, Florida, provide an excellent model (see "A Safety Net for Homeless Students," p. 82).

Physical and Psychological Effects of Homelessness

The sensitivity that teachers exhibit to their special needs students can make a big difference in how children feel when they enter the school. Homeless children may have experienced a number of problems including:

- physical abuse,
- health problems,
- eating and sleeping problems,
- lags in language skills,
- low self-esteem,
- learning disabilities, and
- attention deficit disorder.

Observations of behaviors of homeless children in 14 early childhood programs in New York City found the following developmental delays:

- short attention span,

- withdrawal,
- aggression,
- speech delays,
- sleep disorders,
- regressive behaviors,
- inappropriate social interaction with adults,
- immature peer interaction, and
- immature motor behavior (Coe et al. 1991).

The same can be said for homeless elementary students. In addition, the psychological impact of homelessness is manifested by a greater prevalence and intensity of anxiety, depression, and behavioral disturbances. Homeless children scored significantly higher than housed children on sleep problems, extreme shyness, speech difficulties, withdrawal, and aggression (Reinherz and Gracey 1982).

Frequently, the majority of homeless students read below grade level. Also, a very high percentage of them scored below grade level on mathematics ability. These poor showings in two critical areas usually result in homeless children being two or more years over age for their grade.

A Baker's Dozen of Ideas

What can administrators, teachers, and support staff do to provide the necessary educational opportunities for homeless children and youth? Here are some practical suggestions culled from the research.

1. *Find out if there are any shelters or hotels/motels housing homeless families in the school district.* Arrange a meeting to share information about district programs and policies and to learn about the shelter's program.
2. *Identify a volunteer advocate at each school for any homeless children who may come to that school.* This person can be trained to help overcome the needless delays most homeless people encounter when they try to register their children.
3. *Share copies of all school newsletters, school calendars, and bulletins with the shelters.* Having access to this information keeps shelter personnel informed about school activities.
4. *If possible, develop opportunities for teachers to meet with parents at the shelters.* This could be an effective way to share ideas about how the parents can be involved in their child's education and ways the school can be of help.
5. *Enlist the support of parent groups and civic organizations to collect school supplies and clothing.* Crayons, paper, pencils, and items of clothing are examples of supplies to have on hand at the school to share with needy students.
6. *Have a buddy system.* When a homeless child moves into the school, assign a buddy to show him or her around the school and make introductions to people.
7. *Provide homeless children with conveyable resources for completing homework, and incorporate play time into their school day.* Children in shelters may not have any physical space in which to do their homework. Try to provide a "transportable desk" such as a notebook or clipboard. Homeless children

need play time, too. This may need to be incorporated into the school's program, since space might not be available in a shelter.

8. *Provide homeless students with structure in the classroom.* A consistent daily schedule should be maintained.
9. *Incorporate life skills into the curriculum.* These skills include listening, following instructions, social skills, and self-esteem enhancers.
10. *When you know a homeless child is leaving the school, try to bring some degree of ending for the child.* Ways to provide completion to the school experience include allowing time to gather up personal items and to say good-bye to friends and teachers.
11. *Try to reduce the time it will take a student to begin working in a new school setting.* Ways to accomplish this include having students take transfer cards, records, and IEPs when they leave.
12. *Enlist volunteer students or adults as tutors.* These helpers should plan to tutor homeless students at the shelters.
13. *Finally, remember that homeless children and youth didn't create the unfortunate situation they are in, nor can they participate in the political process to alleviate it.* They need all the support, love, and consideration they can get.

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Endnotes

¹ According to James Stronge, researcher at the College of William and Mary, as reported by D. Kelly, (March 9, 1993), "A Haven for Homeless Students," *USA Today*, p. 10.

² See Mihaly (1991).

³ House of Representatives, Select Committee on Children, Youth, and Families, (1987), *Crisis in Homelessness: Effects on Children and Families*, (Washington, D. C.: U. S. Government Printing Office).

⁴ According to figures released by the U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, (1992), *Digest of Educational Statistics 1991*, (Washington, D. C.: U. S. Government Printing Office).

⁵ See Mihaly (1991).

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