

It Takes McCarver



to Raise a Child

The Tacoma Housing Authority's Education-Based Fight against Homelessness

by Diana Scholl

Juillianne, Levi, and Malchi Torrella were accustomed to moving around a lot. “There was one school we went to for only six months, so I never tried to make any friends because I knew we were going to be moving again,” says Malchi, age nine.

The Torrellas are not military brats; they are not children of farmworkers or of parents with any other jobs that require relocation. The Torrella children were transient because of poverty and homelessness. And they were typical of students at McCarver Elementary School. The school has a warm environment, a gregarious principal, passionate educators, and a well-behaved, racially diverse student body of 465. But McCarver, located in the economically depressed neighborhood of Hilltop, has the highest poverty rate of any elementary school in Tacoma, Washington. In 2010 its student-turnover rate was 107 percent. (This was actually an improvement over the 2005–06 school year, when the figure was 179 percent.)

Two years ago the Torrella children would very likely have contributed to the school's turnover. They were attending McCarver when their father, Alex, was released from prison. “I got out, my wife told me we were getting divorced, and I had the kids. I had a one-bedroom”—which was too small for him and the children—“and couldn't live there,” Alex remembers. “I was basically homeless. I didn't know what I was going to do. But then the lady in charge of the [rental] property told me about the project.”

She was referring to the McCarver Elementary School Initiative. Starting in 2011 the Tacoma Housing Authority (THA) gave five-year housing vouchers to 50 families whose children were students at McCarver Elementary School—families who were homeless or on the verge of becoming so. As with many voucher programs, the amount of rental assistance the family receives decreases over the course of five years, in order to promote self-sufficiency.

A student passes lockers at McCarver Elementary School, where a partnership between families and the Tacoma Housing Authority has shown promising results.

The parents also signed a pledge that they would commit to focusing on both their children’s education and their own. The program tracks parents’ participation in various activities—including helping with the children’s homework and being involved with the PTA—as well as their success at reaching certain benchmarks, such as earning diplomas and finding employment. The McCarver initiative provides these families with intensive support, including two full-time THA caseworkers who have an office in the school. The students in the program also receive additional help whenever needed, from backpacks to a summer program supported by private partners.

Many housing programs provide caseworkers and additional support. What makes THA’s pilot project different from other housing programs is that parents stay eligible for the voucher only as long as they keep their children enrolled in McCarver Elementary School. At a time when charter schools and private-school voucher programs are in vogue, for a housing authority to invest in a public school this way is highly unusual.

A more common approach to fixing a failing school would be to “give 50 families vouchers so they can escape so they can find themselves another school,” as THA’s executive director, Michael Mirra, explains. “Some of them might have done that, and that might have improved their families’ prospects. But those families would have been replaced by 50 families from the shelters, and nothing about that school would change. Our education project has two goals that are different. One is to improve the education outcomes of children we serve. And maybe we would have done that by giving 50 vouchers. But that would have done nothing for the second goal: to improve school outcomes. The McCarver project is focused as much on the school as it is on the children.”

The project is being carried out in conjunction with Tacoma Public Schools, which is also investing heavily in McCarver. The enthusiastic principal, Scott Rich,

and energetic McKinney-Vento liaison and counselor, Carol Ramm-Gramenz, oversee the program’s day-to-day operations. At the request of the THA, the school district is undertaking a three-year process of turning McCarver’s curriculum into an International Baccalaureate Program, as a way of upping academic standards.

Ramm-Gramenz says, “It takes McCarver to raise a child.”

Using Housing for Educational Change

While THA has had partnerships with the school district before, they became more extensive when Mirra was named THA’s executive director, in 2004.

“The feeling before was, ‘We’re not social workers, we’re landlords,’” recalls Nancy Vignec, THA’s director of community services, a former teacher and a longtime THA staffer.

But Mirra is an activist in technocrat’s clothes. He wanted to use the housing authority’s status as landlord to many of the city’s low-income residents to create broader educational opportunities for the families THA serves—thereby breaking the cycle of poverty.

“I think of THA as a social-justice organization with a technical mission,” Mirra says. “If we mean to alleviate the poverty of the people we serve, education is really the solution.”



David McMullan, who once struggled with drug addiction, and his son, D.J., are successful participants in the McCarver Elementary School Initiative.

“This isn’t a Band-Aid. It’s actually a cure.”

“We started this education experiment with a couple of surmises. Except for the school district and the public-assistance office, the THA serves more poor children than anyone in the city. We are already deep into these families’ lives. We are their landlord, we manage these exquisitely regulated housing-assistance programs, we provide community services. That positions us to have influence. The surmise is that we can influence educational outcomes. The educational project means to find out how, and then to exercise that influence,” Mirra says.

Some of these educational fixes are as simple as giving out free books to every child who visits THA’s brightly colored offices. But the most ambitious experiment is the McCarver Elementary School Initiative.

The project is funded by a number of sources, including the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, Pierce County, the Seattle-based nonprofit organization Building Changes, and the Sequoia Foundation, as well as THA. The largest funder is HUD. In 2010 THA became a “moving-to-work housing authority,” which is a status HUD gives to 40 housing authorities. Rather than bringing more federal money, this designation allows THA flexibility in spending what it already receives. This made the McCarver Elementary School Initiative possible.

According to Vignec, “The McCarver Project proposal was a really central part to our original application to HUD and caught HUD’s eye.”

How to Measure Success

Mirra recruited former Tacoma Public Schools superintendent Michael Power to execute the McCarver Elementary School Initiative and, along with an outside contractor, design evaluation metrics and goals.

At the first yearly assessment, in 2012, the results looked promising. Because of the strongly encouraged participation of parents taking part in the initiative, the school had an active PTA for the first time anyone could remember. Families benefited from increases in education levels, job training, employment, and household income, with 13 more parents working than before the program started. Students in the project saw a 22 percent improvement in test scores—three times more than those in similar schools and cohorts. And while turnover at McCarver still remained extremely high, at 96.6 percent in the 2011–12 school year, it was down from the previous year’s rate of 107.4 percent. Among project participants the turnover rate



The McKinney-Vento liaison and counselor Carol Ramm-Gramenz helps oversee the McCarver initiative’s day-to-day operations.

was only 4.5 percent. School personnel say that this stability has done wonders for McCarver.

“So often at the end of the school year, students don’t know if they’re coming back or not, and there’s really a collective sense of grief, for children as well as staff,” says Ramm-Gramenz. “Without the project, I’m sure a lot of those families would have been gone. But I really felt this last year for once there was a group of kids who absolutely knew they were coming back to McCarver. We were able to see them through the summer at the summer programs. It was just seamless as far as their progression to the next year. Having the sense of ‘I don’t know what’s going to happen next,’ of course they’re going to act out. This isn’t a Band-Aid. It’s actually a cure.”

Fourth- and fifth-grade math teacher Megan Nelson notes that having more stability in the student body has improved her classroom, with students more engaged and focused.

“It was really nice that when I did my report cards in the fall, there were the same kids in the winter. As a community it’s better when it’s stable,” she says. “And the parents are the most involved [they have] been. We had the first book fair in the first time anyone can remember.”

The students participating in the project are happier, too. Nelson’s student Juilianne Torrella, age ten, explains, “It was



An important part of the McCarver initiative is to involve students' parents in the education process.

an often thing to move every half a year. But now we're not moving. I like it because I still have all my old friends and don't have to make new friends."

Success Story

One success story is that of David and D.J. McMullan. David has had custody of his son, D.J., now eight, since the boy was very small. Their one-bedroom apartment is papered with pictures of D.J., and one wall is covered with his awards.

When D.J. was younger David struggled with an addiction to methamphetamine, which left him toothless, unemployed, and unable to care for his son. "It's not that I was a bad dad, I just got caught up in it," David says. D.J.'s mother is out of the picture, and D.J. was put in foster care for two years. Determined to get his son back, David enrolled in a drug- and alcohol-treatment program and visited his son in foster care every week without fail.

Once clean, he got his son back and enrolled him in McCarver Elementary School. Then the two joined the school's project. "The program has made my life structured. Anything I really need I can go to them for," he says. The support has included everything from help with resume writing, to enrollment in school to become a fleet mechanic, to a new set of dishes, to

help with paying \$2,000 in electric bills, to dentures.

David is optimistic that he will be employed and self-sufficient soon. "If I'm not self-sufficient at the end of the program, there's a deeper problem," he says.

Obstacles

For many parents in the program, like many poor parents overall, there *are* deeper problems, and finding employment for them has been one of the biggest challenges of the McCarver initiative so far.

"We have to be very resourceful," THA caseworker Sharon Fletcher Jackson notes. "Just in the economic climate we have, even for someone who has a high school or college education it can be difficult. But there are families with legal problems and employment barriers. It's more difficult for that population."

The caseworkers put a lot of effort into addressing these employment and legal problems. They also work to make life as easy as possible for the families. The school has invested extra resources in these families and is attempting to improve academic performance across the board. With five years free from the threat of eviction, families can better focus on these other concerns.

Trial and Error

In one fifth-grade classroom at McCarver, students tried to get a fan to move a paper boat. In the process of trial and error, the engaged and determined students were making changes to their experiment. The teacher, Ms. Haase, told her class, “Make sure you only change one thing at a time. If you change two things, you won’t know which made the difference.”

Considering that advice as it applied to a larger experiment—the McCarver Elementary School Initiative—Power observed, “We are changing so many things but don’t know what’s helping. There may be some point in the future where another school wants to replicate our success, but only has half the funding. It will be difficult to say, ‘Here’s what really worked, and here’s what was just a nice extra.’ But we don’t care as long as it’s working.”

And McCarver *is* being looked at as a model. Educational liaisons for housing authorities across the United States have visited the school, hopeful for success they can emulate. Power is cautious of moving too quickly but says that so far, the results have been promising.

The Torrellas

The Torrellas serve as an example of what the McCarver initiative can accomplish. The children have flourished in school, and their father has been active with the PTA. “Everyone at school knows Alex,” he says with a laugh. Alex has remarried; his bride’s son also attends McCarver and benefits from the program.

In addition, with the encouragement of his caseworker, Carlena Allen, Alex started his own company.

“The way I started off was, the caseworkers were moving offices, and I had a lot of time on my hands, so I helped them move furniture. Carlena said, ‘You should be a handyman.’ That planted the seed. You can only go so far looking for work. I’ve been busy nonstop,” he says.

By Alex’s account, he has become less dependent on the program. “You have to progress with everything you do, from raising the children, to being gainfully employed and all the steps that are required,” he says. “The one thing I learned is, if you communicate all the time, they will help you.” ■

The Tacoma Housing Authority’s innovations include giving free books to children who visit the office and providing parents with easy access to information.

