

# Changing Perceptions about Child Homelessness

## A Pittsburgh Advocacy Group's Curriculum Inspires Youngsters to Help

by Krystle Morrison

"We're going on a trip for a few days," the instructor, Kaitlyn Nykwist, tells the third-grade students to introduce a new topic of discussion in the Pittsburgh classroom. "Imagine you only have ten minutes to pack one backpack with everything you want to take."

With a drawing of a backpack in front of them, the students hurry to write and draw the things they want to bring along. Cell phones and video games are popular choices, as are basketballs, stuffed animals, and other objects that take up a lot of valuable backpack space. Some remember to pack a change of clothes.

On their imaginary trip, the students stop at a hotel, where they realize they've forgotten to bring pajamas, toothpaste, snacks, and other essentials.

"Do you wish you had added anything to your backpacks?" Nykwist prompts. "What did you forget?" Hands go up as the students notice how much is missing and realize they can't return home to retrieve any of it.

Then Nykwist adds, "If you had to stay away from home for a long time, what things would be hard to leave behind?" Though toys and games are on this list, the students also mention irreplaceable objects that hold memories, such as photos, journals, and gifts.

The trip is intended to be exciting, but the places they visit—including parks and hotels—as well as the urgency of the packing helps frame the rest of the "Conscious Caring" curriculum. Conscious Caring aims to give students a glimpse into the unpredictable lives of their peers who might be experiencing homelessness. The Pittsburgh-based Homeless Children's Education Fund (HCEF), which works to meet the educational needs of children and youth experiencing homelessness in Allegheny County, Pennsylvania, developed the curriculum to gently teach elementary-school-age children the truth about homelessness. HCEF Executive Director Bill Wolfe notes, "our mission is to ensure children experiencing homelessness receive the same educational opportunities as their stably-housed peers so educating their peers through this curriculum helps to foster empathy and prevent bullying, ultimately providing a better educational environment for them."

The curriculum grew out of meetings of HCEF's interfaith cabinet of congregations.

"We needed a tool to use to spread awareness of and teach our congregations about children experiencing homelessness," says Darcy Osby of St. Bernard's Parish in Pittsburgh.

Cabinet members agreed that third grade was the ideal time to take in and help spread the curriculum's message, as these students would be most likely to share their knowledge and materials with those around them. Although third-graders were the target students, the curriculum was designed to be adaptable for different elementary-age groups. Osby adds, "I have also used the curriculum with older children up to 8th grade to give them a sense of why we do the service projects that we do and who benefits from them."

Nykwist, who worked with HCEF for a year before being invited to help with the curriculum development, authored the Conscious Caring curriculum and piloted it at places of worship through the influence of cabinet members. Nykwist first became involved with HCEF as a volunteer reading tutor in the organization's after-school program, while earning her B.A. in English literature and certificate in children's literature at the University of Pittsburgh. She has since earned a master of arts and teaching degree, and she gained experience in curriculum design and implementation during an internship at the University of Pittsburgh's Falk Laboratory School. During nearly two years of adjusting and refining the Conscious Caring curriculum, Nykwist presented it at several Pittsburgh-area schools and worked to train others to teach it. A limited number of copies of the curriculum pilot's printed version were also distributed to participants at the 2012 National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth (NAEHYC) conference to obtain valuable feedback from educators and others who worked with homeless children and youth. The material generated interest among educators from around the country.

Partnerships in which HCEF trains university and high school students to teach the curriculum have resulted in the lessons being incorporated into elementary schools in Pittsburgh and other areas of Allegheny County. The

partnerships have worked well, particularly with university students, who desire the teaching experience and want to deepen their knowledge about the laws surrounding homelessness as it relates to education.

A main component of the Conscious Caring curriculum is *Voyage to Shelter Cove* by Ralph da Costa Nunez, president and CEO of the Institute for Children, Poverty, and Homelessness, and Jesse Andrews Ellison, with illustrations by Madeline Gerstein Simon. The book, intended for elementary school students, tells an engaging story of a group of sea creatures who lose their homes and seek out a shelter, where they find help and purpose. Nykwist realized that teaching the book not only incorporated reading, writing, and discussion but also helped the students to better identify with someone having an episode of homelessness. The use of sea creatures makes the story entertaining for children and eases them into a discussion about the challenges of housing instability.

As Nykwist notes, "A particularly memorable activity for many students [based on *Voyage to Shelter Cove*] is the 'I' poem."

A fifth grader at Manchester Academic Charter School displays his finished card to inspire children at a homeless housing agency.



After reading and discussing the book, students choose their favorite character and craft an “I” poem (writing, for example, “I feel \_\_\_\_\_,” “I wonder \_\_\_\_\_,” or “I understand \_\_\_\_\_”). “During this activity,” Nykwist adds, “students engage in an empathetic exploration of characters’ feelings and experiences.” One child concluded in his poem, “I dream of everybody having a home.”

Throughout the curriculum, students are prompted with critical-thinking questions (“What is a home?”, “Is it different from a house?”, “Who is homeless?”, “In what ways might people lose their homes?”). They are encouraged to reach the answers on their own, with little prompting from their instructors. Initially, the students often voice a narrow perception of homelessness, mentioning adult men asking for money and sleeping on streets. Though they generally grasp the difference between a house and home well, the idea of families experiencing homelessness due to unfortunate circumstances is a new concept, which they come to realize through the reading of *Voyage to*

*Shelter Cove*. The curriculum includes possible student answers to discussion questions and teacher responses to help guide instructors if the need arises. But the chief discussion question regarding homelessness is, “What can we do about it?”

The final assignment in the Conscious Caring curriculum is not to answer reading-comprehension questions but to complete a single sheet of paper that has at the top, “This week you will do something to help someone in need.” The curriculum’s concluding activities encourage students to think about their peers who might be going through challenging times and how the students can respond positively to those situations. The curriculum encourages students to take action in their communities in a way that meets a need. There is room for creativity here: one class designed and wrote encouraging cards to anonymous children living in local shelters. “I know you’re going through tough times,” one student wrote. “I have too. I understand your situation, and I know you can overcome it.” Others have collected supplies for HCEF’s back-to-school drive or prepared microwavable soup cups for the drop-in facility for unaccompanied youth in downtown Pittsburgh.

## ***Curriculum Passes the Teacher Test***

The service project on April 4, 2014, coordinated with Sewickley Academy students, focused on Conscious Caring curriculum, was impactful and increased awareness on issues relevant to all students. The Urban League of Greater Pittsburgh Charter School second and third grade students had the privilege of engaging in a number of powerful activities including unpacking a backpack, creating model homes, and reading literature on homelessness. Our scholars took away from the curriculum a sincere appreciation for each other by understanding the various living arrangements of others. Conscious Caring curriculum should be used by all schools to improve awareness of homeless children and genuine regard for the many different types of students.

**Tashawn Nichols, MS Ed, NCC**  
Professional School Counselor

Urban League of Greater Pittsburgh Charter School

The Conscious Caring curriculum is a thought-provoking, yet relatable curriculum that really allowed my students to talk openly and honestly about homelessness and what it looks like in the lives of others. The curriculum set up incredible dialogue between my students that lead to a deeper understanding of a topic that is not always easy for kids to talk about.

The whole experience was a growing opportunity for my students. The Duquesne University students really took time to get to know my students and invest in them individually. That connection allowed an open platform for honest and raw conversations. By the end of the experience, my students were opening up about their own experiences with homelessness, asking honest questions, and displaying a new level of sensitivity.

**Lauren Kruk, 5th grade**  
Teacher

Manchester Academic Charter School

Sometimes the concluding curriculum activities change based on the instructors’ input. HCEF’s Conscious Caring teachers are a diverse group of individuals—often high school or university students—who are also learning new things about issues surrounding homelessness and who bring their own insights and creative ideas to the process. “When working with the university students,” Nykwist explains, “we added an activity where the elementary students trace their own hand and list five things that they can do to ‘lend a hand’ in their community. This was an engaging way to encourage students to reflect on what they can do in their own community to help others.” One group of university students also made cutouts of characters from *Voyage to Shelter Cove* and used them as puppets to help keep students engaged while reading the book.

The high school and university students who help teach the curriculum have reported positive experiences. “Going in, I was a little nervous that the students would have a hard time connecting with the material and answering some of the



Susy Robison introduces a group of Shady Side Academy students to the issue of homelessness and the writing and art activities they will be doing.

questions. But when we got in there, it was a completely different story,” a student of Duquesne University commented. She and some of her classmates spent a morning in an unfamiliar elementary school, where they quickly bonded with their fifth-grade students. “[The students] wrote very nice ‘I am’ poems. It was interesting for me as a future teacher to get to go into a classroom of fifth-graders and observe how they interact with each other.” Instructors often emphasize the usefulness of the “I” poem in driving home the curriculum’s message: “The activity familiarized the students with the common emotions felt by those experiencing homelessness: fear, uncertainty, confusion, loneliness, and feeling left-behind.” In classrooms where the curriculum instructors made return visits weeks to months later, the students remembered their names and the activities and were ready to dive into the next lesson.

HCEF is working to spread the curriculum into more classrooms, within and beyond Allegheny County. Though most of the lessons are taught by HCEF-trained individuals, the curriculum is designed for independent use. HCEF intends to continue refining it based on feedback, especially from teachers who use the curriculum in their classrooms without HCEF training. In addition, the cabinet of congregations is planning a version of Conscious Caring for adults.

Schools, Girl Scout troops, and members of faith communities often contact HCEF to ask about services children can perform on a “day of caring.” HCEF encourages them to use the

curriculum as an awareness-raising outreach activity. In one instance 70 high school students participated in HCEF’s Conscious Caring training in a morning session, then presented the curriculum to 250 students in kindergarten through fifth grade that afternoon. On a Girl Scout service day, university students volunteered to teach the curriculum to 210 girls in groups of 70.

In one Pittsburgh classroom, decorated paper houses are on display by the end of the day, lining the walls like a miniature village. Each house reflects a child’s experience of home. The children now have an idea of what it might be like to lose their homes and how they can help those who have. The kids crowd around their instructors for a group hug, despite having met them just a few hours ago. What will they remember about this day? If it is only having a few misconceptions about homelessness dispelled and learning to have a little more compassion, the Conscious Caring curriculum will have been well worth the effort.

It has been well worth the effort to see students like second-grader Sariyah, who, after quietly completing the activities and listening attentively to the story, worked with another classmate who was struggling to recall details of *Voyage to Shelter Cove* and construct her “I” poem. The two students discussed the story together, and when it came time to share their “I” poems, Sariyah prefaced hers with this comment: “I chose Serena the Seahorse, because I want to be like her and help people when I grow up.” ■