

Building

Positive Tomorrows, a private, nonprofit school and after-school program serving homeless and at-risk children in Oklahoma City, believes that homeless children need "all the educational time they can get," according to president and principal Susan Agel. A student works with an instructor after school to supplement what she is learning during regular school hours.



Bridges to Learning

Programs Focused on Reducing Academic Gaps for Homeless Children

**by Lee Erica Elder
with Joan Oleck**

With schools and educators nationwide confronting an alarming drop in budgets and resources, after-school and out-of-school programs are, increasingly, a primary means for supporting children in unstable living conditions. “Homeless children need all the educational time that they can get,” says Susan Agel, president and principal of Positive Tomorrows, a private, nonprofit school and after-school program serving homeless and at-risk children in Oklahoma City.

“It’s a fallacy to expect that six hours of classroom instruction will work for these children. They need hands-on activities to help internalize the things they learn during the day and constant, supplemental enrichment activities,” Agel says.

Certainly, homelessness creates undeniable barriers to learning that include high mobility, decreased motivation, an inability to meet school enrollment requirements, a lack of transportation, and increased problems of health, hunger, and fatigue.

“Our students are missing layers of learning due to multiple moves, frequent absences and changing schools two or three times in a year,” says Cheryl Opper, founder and executive director of one promising solution in Boston.

That solution is School on Wheels of Massachusetts, or SOWMA, which offers individualized academic services for children in transient living situations. SOWMA is modeled on a School on Wheels in California that Opper had read about; a third such school operates in Indiana.

The notion of turning to an outside facility to address homeless children’s unique education issues makes sense, Opper argues. “It is estimated that each time a child changes schools it can take three to six months to recover academically,” she says. “The magic of what we do is one-on-one tutoring and support, treating each student as our only one—giving them what they need, when they need it, and providing stability around a child’s education during a time of chaos and turmoil.”

Why One-on-one Tutoring Is Crucial for Children in Transition

Today, three out of four high school students experiencing homelessness will not graduate, Oppen says, citing national statistics. Believing that this bleak scenario could be reversed—that homeless students have the resilience to flourish academically—Oppen two years ago started two programs: High School Plus and the South Shore Coalition for Unaccompanied Youth. The results were impressive: Twenty students enrolled in the programs were able to enter college or vocational school following high school. “We have a 94% success rate of students graduating from high school and obtaining higher education,” Oppen says proudly.

She cites a student named Darren as a case in point. In 2004, Darren, then in sixth grade, lived in a family shelter in Brockton, a suburb of Boston, and was one of SOWMA’s first recipients of tutoring services. Failing half of his classes, Darren suffered from low self-esteem, Oppen remembers. Then he became involved with SOWMA and its High School Plus program, where he is doing so well that he himself now tutors classmates in math. Currently a senior, Darren hopes to attend Bridgewater State College next year.

Lamar is another School on Wheels success story. A junior at Newbury College in Brookline, Mass., Lamar is now studying culinary arts and hotel management with dreams of becoming a chef and owning his own restaurant. Oppen fondly remembers moving Lamar into his first apartment off campus. “We made

three trips from his summer dorm room to his new apartment, and he was so proud to show me his new place,” she recalls happily. “I thought back to helping him move out of the single men’s shelter after his high school graduation.”

Pens and Notebooks and Other Barriers to Success

Children in transition face multiple academic obstacles, but one of the most basic and easiest to reverse is the lack of school supplies. “Students would rather not turn in a classroom project than tell a teacher they don’t have the school supplies to do it,” Oppen points out.

The problem is magnified in areas such as New York City, where previous government funding for programs such as Teacher’s Choice—providing teachers a small amount of discretionary money for classroom and student supplies—has been eliminated. Other locations, however, are devising ways to pay for school supplies: School on Wheels and The Homeless Children’s Education Fund (HCEF) of Pittsburgh both sponsor annual backpack drives, for example.

Receiving supplies from SOWMA helped 12-year-old Sierra McGeoghegan of Brockton, Mass., get her education back on track after attending three different schools and moving six times during the course of just one year. “One night my friend Annie and I were in our motel lobby talking about our school projects, which required some pretty expensive things that our moms could not afford,” Sierra remembers. Then, in what

seemed like a feat of serendipitous timing, a visiting School On Wheels tutor asked the girls if they needed any supplies. “It was like a weight was lifted from our shoulders,” Sierra says. “I got an A+ on that project—I went from nothing to having an A+, which really meant a lot to me.”

Further proof that Sierra is doing well today: She recently partnered with her friend Miranda to create a peer newspaper.

A School on Wheels of Massachusetts staffer encourages a student during one-on-one tutoring. Founder and executive director Cheryl Oppen notes that “our students are missing layers of learning due to multiple moves, frequent absences, and changing schools two or three times in a year.”



Along with gaps in school supplies, an academic challenge homeless students face is their frequent inability to keep up with technology. Katherine Marshall-Polite is a director of youth development for the New York City Department of Education and its Children's First Network program. She points out that, "Even where students have been provided with laptops and/or desktops to use at school, they often lack accessibility to the Internet once they are back in their residence." This puts them at a disadvantage to students in stable living situations, who typically have family computer access in their homes and, frequently, their own bedrooms.



An instructor at School on Wheels of Massachusetts makes after-school learning fun as she works with a student in the program, reinforcing skills that the student learns during regular school hours so that she keeps pace with her peers.

Youth impacted by homelessness often count language barriers as another roadblock to academic achievement. "Living in a border city, close to 80% of our identified homeless students are Hispanic, and of those, nearly 50% do not know English," says Rafael R. Elizondo, homeless liaison for Region 19 in El Paso, Tex.

Elizondo's program accordingly ensures that all children in homeless situations have the same opportunities as their non-homeless peers, by providing after-school learning that focuses on language skills. The program checks to make sure all partner shelter sites provide a room for student-residents to study and sets up on-site after-school tutoring by certified teachers from the El Paso School Independence District.

Such attention to homeless students pays off: "A homeless student that attended the 2011 Graduation Summit was recognized as having the highest grade-point average (95.5) in her class, and also among the other students from other districts," Elizondo points out.

Paying attention to the issues homeless students face has a psychological component as well as a resource one. Compassion and discretion are important tools in assisting youth in transition, to help them avoid the negative self-images that can further disrupt learning.

Self-image, of course, is an important part of development for preteens, teens, and in fact students of any age. "I had a ten-year-old come to my office after the first day of school," remembers Kathryn Cox, administrator at Sara McKnight Transitional Living Center in El Paso. "I asked him how his first day went, and he looked dejected. He said the teacher shared with the class that he was homeless. He was no longer looking forward to his school year."

To head off such egregious classroom errors, homeless liaison specialists in school districts can guide teachers and administrators in developing sensitivity around homeless students, Cox says. Gaps in service can be identified and the school community can work together to find solutions.

Opper, in Massachusetts, is wary of labeling children as homeless at all. "Our children have a home—it might be a hotel, a family shelter, a car, a campsite, or doubled up with friends and relatives," she says. "These are their temporary homes until they can have a permanent place to call their own."

Partnerships between Schools and After-school Programs

Often, combining school-based resources and agencies provides the most comprehensive academic support for children in transition. HCEF in Pittsburgh, for example, provides



A junior at Newbury College in Brookline, Mass., Lamar is now studying culinary arts and hotel management with dreams of becoming a chef and owning his own restaurant. He shows off his school pride in front of a banner for the college and credits his participation with School on Wheels of Massachusetts for his current success.

shelters and transitional housing programs with on-site after-school tutoring, literacy, enrichment, and mentoring.

Recently, HCEF piloted a collaborative program in suburban Clairton, Pa., designed to foster strong connections and align school curricula between the local school district and a homeless provider in the community, Sisters Place.

“We were able to bring the reading specialist from the children’s local school out to the Sisters Place after-school program once a week to work with children individually on literacy for the whole year,” says Laura Bailey, HCEF education program manager. The school guidance counselor and homeless liaison also visited monthly, meeting with parents to discuss important school information and address their concerns. A reading specialist, meanwhile, met with homeroom teachers to gain a sense of the targeted children’s needs, then produce learning plans that after-school center staff could use for planning learning activities.

Says Bailey: “Even though after-school is, and should, differ from day school, for children who are mobile or transitioning out of homelessness, it’s extremely important to build a connection between the two.”

Another partnership exists in the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools (CMS) in North Carolina and an outside provider called the After School Enrichment Program (ASEP), which provides after-school and extended-day learning, in addition to individual tutoring with teachers for up to six hours weekly.

Using a curriculum correlated with the NC Standard Course of Study,

ASEP site coordinators, school administrators, and teachers work together to ensure that their ASEP programs supplement the learning taking place during the school day, explains Kay Carriera, a district specialist who works with homeless students.

The results, Carriera says, speak for themselves. At West Mecklenburg High School, the graduation rate among homeless students was 79%, higher than the overall school’s graduation rate. “At the end of the 2010–2011 school year, two of our graduating MCV [homeless] students received college scholarships,” Carreira says.

In Minneapolis’ public schools, the focus is on increasing access and participation in the district’s extended-day opportunities for students who are homeless and highly mobile. “All of the district departments and services responsible for these activities were involved in problem solving and identifying strategies to test effectiveness,” says Elizabeth Hinz, district liaison for homeless and highly mobile students. Academic assessment results for [Minneapolis public school] students indicate that students who are HHM average significantly lower results in reading and math scores at all grade levels, Hinz says. “Our belief is that extended-day activities are the best opportunities for them to begin to catch up with their grade-level peers.”

Parents' Rights and Responsibilities

Of course, along with schools and out-of-school programs, the third part of the triumvirate for advancing homeless students academically is parents themselves. Parents experiencing homelessness frequently are plagued by the misconception that they are not actively involved in their children's education: A 2009 Duquesne University study of the educational needs of families living in housing for the homeless showed that fully 64% claimed that a lack of knowledge of available educational opportunities was the biggest barrier to their children's participation in community programming.

"In general neither parents nor agency staff members [in the Duquesne study] claimed to have strong relationships with school teachers or administrators," says HCEF's Bailey. "These were parents who cared about their children's education—79% indicated that they helped their children with homework, and 92% indicated they spoke with homeless agency staff at least once a week about their children's educational progress.

"One mother even got a job at her children's school so that she could be near them throughout the day."

Some school districts have made moves to draw parents into the mix. In Philadelphia, parent ombudsmen are recruited as point people whom parents can see as peers and be comfortable communicating with, says Joe Willard, vice president of policy of the city's People's Emergency Center.

In Massachusetts, proud mom Jean McGeoghegan credits her daughter Sierra's success to effective staff communication. "They listened to me as a parent and listened to her," McGeoghegan says. "No one ever gave us a hard time. I was really impressed with how strong their educational knowledge was and how they were able to transfer that to my daughter."

Educators, Bailey says, echoing McGeoghegan, need to see parents not as a hurdle to helping homeless students, but rather a partner in that effort. "That's a challenge and a goal for this school year," Bailey says. "To network with the after-school communities around us and find better ways to get that information out to families. We need to do more to help families make informed choices about after-school programming." ■

A School on Wheels of Massachusetts after-school student benefits from access to technology during a personalized lesson with a teacher.

