Meeting the Educational Needs of Homeless Children

What does it mean to be a homeless child in the United States today? What can educators do to address the needs of homeless children, promote their academic success, and make the classroom a haven in a heartless world?

The "economic boom" of the 1980s paradoxically generated an unprecedented rise in the number of homeless families with children in the United States that continues to this day. Major disruptions to the home environment inevitably take their toll on normal family life, including the education of children. Even when the change is a planned move from one permanent home to another and children are prepared for the disruption, the transition is stressful. For homeless children, the loss of their home is more sudden, more unexpected, and more traumatic—the family is suddenly thrust outside of its own community, friends, support system, and schools. The experience is devastating for children and their families (Rafferty and Shinn 1991).

Educators can play a critical role in cushioning the blow for homeless children. They need to understand how homelessness affects a child's ability to succeed in school, what the legal rights of homeless children and their families are regarding education, and what schools can do to mitigate the potentially harmful effects of homelessness on children.

Homelessness and Academic Failure
Homeless children score lower than their housed peers on achievement tests and are less likely to be promoted at the end of the school year. Their failure to succeed will, no doubt, have long-term repercussions, as indicated by the research on academic failure, school mobility, and grade retention. No study has looked at dropout rates for homeless children. Related research on housed children indicates the risk (Rafferty 1995).

Several factors severely compromise the ability of homeless children to succeed in school, as I discovered in interviews with 277 homeless families in New York City in 1988. Barriers to the success of these children include health problems, hunger, transportation obstacles, and difficulty obtaining school clothes and
supplies—all of which are linked to low attendance rates (Rafferty and Rollins 1989). Other factors are associated with the nature of the emergency shelter system, the mobility that follows the loss of the home, and barriers that inhibit access to schools and to various school services.

Sadly, there is no right to shelter in the United States. Even when families successfully obtain emergency shelter, other obstacles prevail. Placements are often made without regard to community ties or educational continuity. For example, the 1989 study by Rafferty and Rollins showed that 71 percent of homeless families with school-age children were sheltered in areas far removed from their original homes. Many had been frequently bounced between facilities. In many cases, each transfer to a different shelter requires a transfer to a new school, and each transfer means the loss of valuable school days. In addition, the noisy environment and constant flow of traffic typical of many shelters make it difficult for children to do their homework or get enough sleep.

When both home and school disappear simultaneously, children are especially unanchored. They lose their friends and must make new ones; they have to get used to a new school, new teachers, and new schoolwork that is often discontinuous with what they were doing previously. Homeless children also confront stigmatization, insensitivity, and rejection by classmates and teachers, as a 12-year-old homeless child states:

People in school call me a hotel kid.... They have no right to punish me for something I have no control over. I'm just a little boy, living in a hotel, petrified, wanting to know what's going to happen to me. I am not a hotel kid. I am a child who lives in a hotel (Roberts 1990).

Besides the emotional and educational impact on children, frequent student mobility makes it more difficult for schools to provide meaningful services, particularly if records have been lost in the shuffle.

Homeless children historically have faced many barriers accessing education, although legislation has improved the situation somewhat. Residency requirements have been the most significant barrier because homeless students are, by definition, without a residence. When parents have attempted to enroll children in the school district where they are temporarily staying, admission often has been denied because they are not residents of the district. In some cases, restrictive shelter policies toward adolescent males force parents to send their adolescent children to stay with relatives or friends. Some schools deny or delay the enrollment of children who do not reside with a parent or legal guardian in the school district. Most schools continue to deny homeless preschoolers (including those with disabilities) their legal rights to schooling. Many are forced to transfer into local schools because the districts simply disregard the federal mandates pertaining to transportation. Other delays occur because of a lack of documentation, including birth certificates, academic records, and immunization records. For some children, the challenge becomes too great. As one homeless teenager explains:

Between all the school changing, my credits were messed up and they said I might have to stay back another year. I didn't know what was going on. I dropped out and started working full-time (Berck 1992, p. 82).

Like housed children, some homeless children have educational needs that require special services, such as special education, bilingual programs, remedial education, and gifted programs. When homeless children transfer into new schools, they often experience difficulties accessing the services they received previously. This occurs for a variety of reasons, including lost records and the new school's failure to comply with the law.

Educational Rights of Homeless Children
The 1987 Stewart B. McKinney Homeless Assistance Act and subsequent amendments in 1990 and 1994 provide considerable protection for the educational needs of homeless children and youth in the United States. The legislation also provided formula grants for

Moving from one school to another is stressful for children, and when both home and school disappear simultaneously, they are especially unanchored.
provided to other children and youth."
States must review and revise all policies, practices, laws, and regulations that may prevent the enrollment, attendance, and school success of homeless students. This includes providing a choice of school placement, with the right to continue in the “school of origin” through the end of the current school year or for the following year if the child becomes homeless between academic years. (“School of origin” is defined as the school the child had been attending when permanently housed, or the school in which the child was last enrolled, regardless of where the family is temporarily staying.) Local school districts must comply with a parent’s or guardian’s request for school selection and provide the required transportation.

States must ensure that homeless students receive access to the same educational programs and services in the classroom as their permanently housed peers, as well as the same access to preschool programs, early intervention, tutoring, counseling, before- and after-school programs, vocational programs, and state and local food programs.

Although the Education for Homeless Children and Youth Program has helped to reduce barriers to education—particularly those related to residency, guardianship, immunization requirements, and the transfer of school records—serious implementation problems persist. Less progress has been made, for example, with regard to the provision of transportation to schools or origin, accessing comparable services to special education and before- and after-school programs, and involving parents in school placement decisions as required by law (Anderson et al. 1995; National Law Center 1995).

Persistent problems also hinder enforcement of the requirement to ensure that all homeless children obtain equal access to education. For example, many states routinely disregard certain elements in the McKinney Act’s definition of “homeless” and deny the mandated protections to children who are temporarily living with relatives or in domestic violence shelters. Anderson and colleagues (1995) report:

Although most states have reviewed and revised laws that create barriers to school enrollment for homeless children and youth, this does not guarantee that homeless children and youth have access to school. . . . Translating state policy into local policy is a never-ending process fraught with difficulty (pp. 12-13).

What Educators Can Do
According to state education agencies, the most frequently reported educational needs of homeless children are as follows:

- remediation/tutoring;
- school materials and clothes;
- support services such as counselors;
- after-school/extended day/summer programs to provide basic needs for food and shelter and recreation;
- transportation;
- educational program continuity and stability; and
- sensitivity and awareness training for school personnel and students.

Both directly and indirectly, principals and teachers can take steps to meet these needs and mitigate the potentially harmful effects of homelessness on their students (NASCEHY 1997, Walter-Thomas et al. 1996, Wiley and Ballard 1993). Here are some specific suggestions.

1. Facilitate continuity of schooling. School may be the only source of stability in the life of a homeless child. One effective preventive strategy is to help homeless children remain enrolled in their current schools. Local educational agencies should ensure that school personnel are aware of the legal rights of homeless children, and schools should actively collaborate with local shelters to provide continuity.

---

**Project SAFE**

School District 10 in the Bronx, New York, ensures that children from homeless families receive the educational services to which they are entitled by law. Bilingual family assistants interview each new family within 24 hours of their shelter placement. Key to the success of Project SAFE is having staff at the shelters.

To avoid the stigma often associated with programs for homeless families, the program doesn’t even include the word “homeless.” Project SAFE stands for “Schools and Families for Education”—and its mission is to welcome all students into the school community. Project SAFE informs parents of the educational rights of their children; arranges for school registration and the transfer of records; and ensures that children receive special education, preschool, or bilingual education placements, where needed. If parents choose to allow their children to remain at their current schools, the family assistants provide subway or bus tokens for students’ transportation.

Project SAFE does not stop there. Family assistants continue to monitor children’s progress at school, maintain contact with the parents, and provide referrals to community agencies. Project staff also provide cultural programs for students after school.
2. **Minimize enrollment delays.** Schools must address access barriers and implement school policies that minimize enrollment delays, particularly those related to residency, guardianship, and immunization requirements, as well as the timely transfer of school records. Educators must expedite the process both for students who are transferring into their schools and for those who are leaving.

3. **Ensure timely access to appropriate educational services and in-school support services.** Schools must ensure that homeless children are placed in appropriate classroom settings and that they receive the services they are entitled to. If a child needs special educational services, schools should not postpone referrals or testing because of uncertainty about how long the child will be enrolled. In addition, schools and districts should ensure that homeless children receive support services that are comparable to those provided to other children (such as free and reduced-price lunch programs, before- and after-school programs, and summer programs).

4. **Provide family support services.** Homeless children and their families have a variety of urgent needs requiring services that schools are in an ideal position to make available. For example, McKinney grants provide fiscal support for counseling for homeless children and youth and for parent education and training programs. In addition, schools can enlist community volunteers to tutor students.

5. **Empower teachers as advocates.** Teachers can be a powerful force in the lives of homeless children, helping them both emotionally and academically. Teachers can make sure that children are placed in the appropriate grade and are receiving necessary educational and support services. They can identify a child's special needs and ensure that the child receives proper testing to diagnose those needs. They can also refer the child to the school psychologist or guidance counselor or to outside counseling. They can help children make new friends and learn how to deal with questions from classmates about being homeless. Teachers can ensure that homeless children are never isolated or stigmatized.

6. **Provide staff development.** Staff development workshops can increase the sensitivity of those who teach homeless children, enabling teachers to understand the nature of homelessness, to create positive experiences for homeless children, and to provide strategies for discussing this topic in the classroom.

7. **Encourage family involvement.** Educators should provide a warm and nonjudgmental reception for homeless parents and address their questions and concerns. Workshops conducted at shelters can be especially valuable, covering such topics as the educational rights of homeless children, special education, child development, and how to communicate with teachers.

8. **Appoint a homeless liaison in each school district.** Where they exist, homeless liaisons play a key role in linking local education agencies to community resources, including shelters, food and clothing banks, community mental health services, after-school programs, and child care providers. Through these linkages, homeless children and their families are connected to services that they need.

**The Larger Issue**

More than anything else, homeless children need homes. As long as there is an insufficient supply of affordable permanent housing in the United States, and as long as the gap between rich and poor widens, homeless children will suffer the consequences. Advocates have been tremendously successful in securing emergency legislation designed to minimize educational disruption when families lose their homes. But until our policymakers recognize that it is cruel and abusive to expose our
nations most vulnerable children to the hardships of homelessness, schools can help by providing an environment that supports these children's physical, emotional, and social development. Educators can and must play a vital role.

References
National Association of State Coordinators for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth. (January 1997). Making the Grade: Challenges and Successes in Providing Educational Opportunities for Homeless Children and Youth. Atlanta, Ga.: State Department of Education.

Author's note: Preparation of this article was funded by the Children's Institute, Dyson College of Arts and Sciences, Pace University.

Yvonne Rafferty is Assistant Professor of Psychology and Policy Analyst for the Children's Institute at Pace University, Dyson College of Arts and Sciences, Department of Psychology/Children's Institute, 41 Park Row, New York, NY 10038-1502 (e-mail: rafferty@pace.edu)