

# *POLICY, BEHAVIOR, AND RESEARCH*

## *Changing Schooling for Homeless Children and Youth*

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**Access to free public education** is the legal and moral right of all children in the United States today. It is the responsibility of all states, cities, townships, parishes, and counties to provide it. The task of making public education accessible to all children is monumental for all communities, but especially for large urban school districts facing the problems of poverty, homelessness, and dropout. Urban educators are often so concerned with the organization of schools (residency requirements, transportation, school records, and immunizations) that the problems of homelessness (finances, mobility, shelter, and food) receive much less concern. District policies and procedures are developed to fit the needs of all students, but, as society changes, few district regulations change to meet the growing needs of the urban student, except when federal legislation forces change as, for example, in the case of disabled children. Even then most change is reluctant and slow.

Urban education policies must be kept current to address the growing problems that urban students face each day (gangs, poverty, food, shelter, health care, and transportation). Many of the policies that schools mandated as far back as the 1960s have not been amended to reflect the problems of the 1990s. Many of the policies that were designed to protect students 30 years ago now are often barriers to the urban student population of the 1990s. Our purpose is to discuss the kinds of policies in urban school districts that may hamper attempts to educate homeless children and youth, to suggest changes in attitude and behavior regarding these policies that may assist well-meaning urban school administrators in helping children of homeless families, and to call for the collection of data on this subject in order that school boards may be convinced that policy changes need to be made.

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## THE POLICIES

Legislation, state and federal social agency regulation, and social service availability provide formidable barriers to accessing educational programs and support services that are out of the administrative control of the local school district. In the case of homeless children and youth, the problem of surmounting these barriers becomes particularly evident. Because of both the lack of low-income housing and other issues such as unemployment, underemployment, domestic violence, divorce, child abuse, teen pregnancy, catastrophic illness, and substance abuse, an alarming number of urban American students find themselves living in shelters, cars, abandoned buildings, parks, and in many other temporary settings that are unsafe, unprotected, and unsatisfactory for regular habitation. With loss of their houses, many students will lose much more than just a regular nighttime residence: Loved pets, furniture, toys, and schoolmates are also lost in their moves from shelter to shelter. Their sense of self-confidence, self-esteem, and identity gradually decreases. Education policies are not written to compensate for the growing population of homeless, emancipated, and *couch homeless* children and youth trying to survive in urban cities.

The couch homeless represent another segment of the homeless population that is often overlooked by urban schools. Although students may be able to give a permanent address, they are rarely there. Couch homeless families move continuously from one residence to another, but because they do give a "permanent address" where school mail and messages can be left, the school district is able to deny, knowingly or not, that there are homeless children needing services. Policies are not seen as needing to be changed. But it is not unusual for one student to live with his or her mother one night, with the father the next, then throughout the week with other different family members or friends. Rarely are these residences in the same school district or boundaries, and thus these children miss much schooling. But public urban educators can make a substantial difference in the educational growth of homeless children by recognizing in their policies a broad definition of homelessness. And, indeed, many major cities across the nation have already added supplemental programs to their existing services to meet the growing needs of homeless and emancipated children and youth with broadly defined policies intended to include the various kinds of homelessness.

Many urban districts defend their policies and procedures by explaining that they do not discriminate against homeless students. One midwestern superintendent, after being approached by community leaders and shelter directors about the probability of offering supplemental services to homeless

children, explained that "all homeless children are welcomed to attend our schools, we don't turn anyone away. All students should be in school, and homeless children certainly may attend our schools." But, in fact, homeless students were being turned away from his schools. In that same state, because of strict regulations requiring immunizations, proof of district residency, birth certificates, and additional vaccinations, one state department of education survey noted that 800 students were unable to attend school in 1989. Undoubtedly there were many more who were not recognized as being among the homeless.

## **IMMUNIZATION AND VACCINATION CONCERNS**

### **Policy Problems**

Requiring children to have current immunization as a condition of school enrollment continues to receive a great deal of judicial, legislative, and policy-making attention. Although legislatures have given local agencies the power to establish policies for the specific protection of their students, the mandate of requiring completed immunization before enrollment can take place is still unsettled. Litigation is common when challenges are based on charges of invasion of personal rights, especially religious beliefs. But the real question is whether or not any child can be denied enrollment because of a lack of vaccinations.

Not all states are consistent in regard to required immunizations. Some states require additional measles vaccinations before enrollment in their schools. Some states have permitted enrollment, but not approval to attend classes, until immunization can be brought into compliance with state laws. Often homeless students have all the necessary immunizations but do not have original copies of an immunization card with them, preventing schools from enrolling them. For students who have been attending school regularly, school records generally include immunization and vaccination health cards. Unfortunately, gaining access to student records is not always an easy task. In some cases, students must be enrolled before consent for release of student information can be sent, but enrollment cannot take place until appropriate verification of immunization is made. The homeless family is then caught in a classic catch-22. Many homeless families become so frustrated that the children just do not go to school.

## Policy Alternatives

Policies can be adjusted so that homeless children, emancipated youth, and runaways who wish to stay in school and do not have records with them, or who were never given the opportunity for vaccinations, can be welcomed at school. Under the law, can urban schools ever refuse these kinds of students admission? The wording of some statutes and implementing policies does make such denial possible. For example, Oklahoma's statute states:

No minor child shall be admitted to any public, private, or parochial school operating in this state unless such child can present to the appropriate school authorities certification from a licensed physician, or authorized representative of the State Department of Public Health, that such child has received or is in the process of receiving, immunizations. (*School Laws of Oklahoma*, 1990, article XII, sec. 700)

The key word is *admitted*. There is no reason to keep students from being enrolled and then referring them to sites where immunizations are given or, even better, to transport the homeless child to the vaccination site or have the vaccination process available at school. The full-service school movement, growing slowly across the country, shows us clearly that this level of assistance is possible. In Oklahoma City, in conjunction with the city and county health departments, vaccinations are available in different parts of the county throughout the week in addition to being available at the city or county health department. Students do not have to be admitted without appropriate certification, but lack of records or immunization should not be a barrier that prevents homeless children and youth from enrolling. Oklahoma law mandates compulsory education for students aged 5 to 16. Yet, because of the specific regulations set forth in the immunizations and vaccination laws, an obvious contradiction in enrollment policy exists.

Lawmakers and educators need to work together to ensure that all students have free access to enrollment. By serving the specific needs of homeless children, districts will make enrollment easier for all students.

## TRANSPORTATION CONCERNS

### Policy Problems

Transportation is yet another impediment to access to educational services for many urban students. For homeless children and youth, lack of transpor-

tation is a major barrier to access to public schools. Districts that do provide some transportation services often select inappropriate bus stops, far from the shelters. Most shelters are not located in the safest parts of town. For small children or children alone, walking to the stop itself invites danger, and walking to school is seldom an option. Most districts provide transportation services before and after school only, making extracurricular activities inaccessible to shelter and other homeless students.

In some urban areas, city buses do not run after 6 p.m., closing another option for students who wish to participate or watch extracurricular sporting events or academic programs. In one urban school district where only half-day kindergarten is required, homeless families do not send their 5-year-olds to school because midday transportation is unavailable from the district and the shelter is too far away for students to walk. One of these homeless parents, in a letter to an administrator, pleaded for help "because I understand how important school is to my child. . . . [A] good start is so important." In this case, the parent's plea made a difference. Half-day care was provided by the school so that the kindergartner could stay at school until after school transportation was available. Policies can be changed and programming arranged to help these children and their families. Unfortunately, in the disorganization of a homeless life, most parents are not able to send such a letter. Even more unfortunate, most administrators would not respond in such a caring manner.

### **Policy Alternatives**

In Oklahoma, the law does give districts the opportunity to provide transportation for prekindergarten or early childhood programs operated by local education agencies, as well as children enrolled in Head Start programs offered by the school district. Unfortunately, because of claims of lack of funding, many districts limit this service to before- and after-school transportation of students. The importance of early education is well known, both for its educational and economic benefits. One dollar spent on early childhood education saves \$7 later on social services (Edelman, 1992). Yet most districts do not choose to exercise the policy options already available to them under state law to provide the necessary transportation to get little children safely to and from school.

Some states require local education agencies to provide the transportation of schoolchildren wherever that is reasonable and desirable. Because so many emergency shelters are located in undesirable, often badly lighted and unsafe neighborhoods, this type of policy could force desirable transportation poli-

cies in school districts and enable shelter residents to choose schooling for their children. Both states and school districts must be reminded that homeless students are entitled to “expedited processing of transportation requests,” as stipulated in the Stewart B. McKinney Homeless Assistance Act of 1987, and that transportation barriers must be eliminated.

## **PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT CONCERNS**

### **Policy Problems**

A major key to providing a “supportive climate” for homeless children is the solicitation of help from the parents (Gonzalez, 1992). Gonzalez suggests that parent orientation to school policies and procedures is crucially important in building trust between homeless parents and school staff. Many homeless parents fear that, because of the conditions of homelessness itself, they are not—and cannot be—good parents. Fear of having children removed by human services workers is a common feeling that school intake staff, administrators, and teachers must be sympathetic toward. Students themselves can be instrumental in building trust between school and families.

Districts need to reexamine staffing policies at the school sites. Years of tight budgets have caused the elimination of many, if not all, counselors and social workers in school districts. These are the professionals with the background to help needy families such as the homeless. The full-service school movement is the main vehicle for restaffing our schools with the social service professionals necessary to help families so that children can be helped in school. All districts can reexamine their policies of cooperation with the social service agencies even if the districts are unable or unwilling to move to the full-service mode. Educational social workers are not uncommon throughout the states, although not all states and few districts have taken advantage of this specific talent to help students and parents. Counselors and social workers are often the best staff members to be designated to conduct enrollment procedures at shelters or predesignated sites away from schools, given that many of those social services professionals begin intake and case management activities at the time of enrollment at those agencies. And we cannot forget other unfortunate problems regarding the inclusion of homeless parents in school activities. Many parents fear school, perhaps because of their own or their children’s previous mistreatment in schools. Equally sad, most teachers and administrators do not want to work with these parents. There is a class-based shunning of homeless people that, both ethically and

morally, must be overcome by school personnel for the sake of all our children.

### Policy Alternatives

At one transitional homeless program with which we are familiar, the parent component is an essential part of the curriculum. Parents serve as volunteer office and teacher aides. Parenting classes, general education degree classes, and job preparation classes are available to those parents who wish to take advantage of the services. In return, parents volunteer time at the school to help teachers and office staff. The results of this special participation is rewarding to students, staff, and parents.

Students have reported to counselors that they like seeing their parents helping in class. One student noted his pride in seeing his mother helping to grade papers. At that same school, parents were asked to participate in holiday preparations at Christmas time. With food donated by the community, parents rode to school with students and cooked the Christmas dinner. The administrator described the scene as a "home town family kitchen. Everyone was laughing, talking, comparing their respective children's attributes . . . bragging, if you will." One mother said it was all she could do in giving something of herself to the school and her children for Christmas. The administrator hugged her and reassured her that "her gift was enough."

Advocates for Children of New York, Inc., gives four recommendations to reduce barriers to homeless parents' involvement in their children's education:

1. Parents must be encouraged to become involved. School staffs should welcome parents into the schools and be in constant contact with them when problems arise or when praise is in order. Parent and school collaboration is important to enhance student attendance and performance.
2. Parent involvement programs should be designed according to the needs of families. Workshops and orientations should be promoted and available to parents on topics of particular interest to them. Transportation and bilingual issues are important considerations in the success of these programs.
3. Information about the educational rights of homeless children should be available and posted throughout shelters, emergency assistance centers, and schools in the form of brochures and posters. Homeless families generally are not aware of the rights and services available to them.
4. School districts should make available to homeless parents a series of meetings to discuss the educational rights of their children, the educational system, special education, and how to advocate for educational services (Rafferty, 1991).

This level of cooperation and service to parents may require a major reorientation of the philosophy and goals of a district and school as well as changes in specific policies. The full-service movement is once again the example that this level of change can be accomplished, but other districts can proceed with incremental policy changes to accomplish the needed outreach to parents.

## **DOMESTIC VIOLENCE CONCERNS**

### **Policy Problems**

In many districts, no provisions are made to provide education to children living in domestic violence shelters. A few states and school districts make it possible for children to stay enrolled in their schools of origin. But, when parents who have been subjected to domestic violence remove children from schools and seek shelter with friends or in protective, confidential shelters, the school of origin is no longer a safe option. The violent parent or other relative will look for the family at school or through school attendance and transfer records.

It is unfortunate that, in some cities, children in domestic violence shelters are not considered homeless by the school system. In New York City, children in domestic violence shelters operated by human services domestic violence units are not considered homeless by the school system, regardless of whether or not they have a home to which they may or may not return. These victims of domestic violence are unable to receive the services available to children of homeless families in other temporary shelters (Rafferty, 1991).

### **Policy Alternatives**

In New York City, three strategies were tried to address the problems of homeless families in domestic violence shelters. Policy decisions were made indicating (a) that services provided to other homeless families must be provided to families in domestic violence programs because domestic violence shelters are protected by the Stewart B. McKinney Act of 1987; (b) that the Central Board of the New York City Protective Services should identify domestic violence shelters and provide accurate lists of shelters, contact personnel, and telephone numbers; and (c) that special attention must be paid to the school records of homeless children in domestic violence shelters. Specific policies and regulations must address such questions as who can



pick up children from school and notification to the homeless family by school personnel of attempts by a violent parent to locate the family through school records.

## HOME-SCHOOLING CONCERNS

### Policy Problems

For some parents, reluctant to enroll children in large urban schools, home schooling offers a convenient camouflage for withdrawing children from the hassles of transferring from school to school as family residency changes. Few states regulate home schools or monitor student progress in home-schooling classrooms. Rural homeless who find themselves moving into urban settings for social service are often intimidated by large urban schools. One family chose home schooling over the regular school setting because the size of the elementary school in which their children would enroll was as big "as the whole school district" from where they came. The stories of urban school violence, drugs, and gangs were enough to deter the family from even visiting district schools. For homeless families, home schooling offers the opportunity to keep the family physically together, without intervention of school counselors, teachers, and administrators. The lack of enforcement of the feeble laws in place in some states and districts to monitor home schooling allows these homeless children to be deprived an education. Even in the best of circumstances, home schooling is a difficult and time-consuming option for parents to consider. To assume that homeless parents are able to home school their children adequately during their period of homelessness is simply not to want to deal with the problem that these children are denied their right to an education.

In one case of home schooling in 1990, parents were using the guise of home schooling to systematically torture their three children out of the view of school personnel. Educators rank highest in making abuse and neglect referrals to departments of human services across the nation, and referrals drop any time school is recessed for any amount of time: summer, spring, and fall breaks. Although most home schoolers may be in both educationally sound and caring settings, it is the case that home schooling may mask an atrocity that would be reported or even prevented if a district teacher saw the child every day. Once again, the problems of homeless children draw attention to policies that need changing for the good of all children.

## **Policy Alternatives**

Monitoring policies for home schooling are the responsibility of the state. States have abdicated this responsibility, but school districts are not without blame for their reluctance to impose the regulation allowed within current state laws. Because many who choose home schooling for their children profess to do so for religious reasons, both state and local governments have been reluctant to monitor the educational quality of these arrangements for fear of violating provisions of the Constitution's First Amendment religious clauses. With the need both to protect and to educate all children, states need to reexamine the statutes, policies, and regulations in this area. Legitimate religious concerns must, of course, be respected. But our children deserve carefully crafted policies that will ensure their physical safety and provide them with their best chance for a better life, an adequate education.

## **CHANGES IN ATTITUDES AND BEHAVIORS**

Over the past 4 years, urban school districts have used McKinney Act resources to improve access to appropriate educational services for thousands of homeless children and youth (National Association of State Coordinators for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth, 1990). Attempts have been made to change attitudes as well as behaviors. Alaska, Arkansas, Kentucky, Maryland, Massachusetts, Nevada, North Carolina, North Dakota, Oregon, South Dakota, Utah, Vermont, and the District of Columbia have provided training for school personnel to help them become aware of—and sensitive to—the needs of homeless children and youth. Other states, such as Colorado, Texas, Montana, and Pennsylvania, have encouraged local outreach efforts to identify and enroll children of homeless families and youth. Several states, Alaska, Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Maine, Mississippi, and Ohio, among others, have used McKinney funds or other resources in pilot projects that provide counseling, transportation, tutoring, evaluation, and other direct services to homeless students. Many states have made extensive efforts to improve the coordination between school districts and other community agencies in response to the needs of homeless children and youth.

It is our belief that homeless children have some of the most visible needs within the urban school setting and that, if the particular needs of homeless children are met, all children will benefit from the expanded awareness of

school and social service administrators. In many cases, state statutes need to be amended. In some cases, updating policies will suffice to serve the special needs of homeless children and youth.

At the very least, the mandates set forth by the Stewart B. McKinney Act of 1987 must be enforced if equity is to be achieved in public schools. Policies should be established that include parental involvement. Support services must include the needs of homeless children. More counseling, therapy, and referrals should be made to help homeless children reach their potential. Each state has a person designated as coordinator of services to homeless children and youth, whose functions are outlined in the McKinney Act. The primary function of the coordinator is to collect data and develop state plans to facilitate educational services to homeless children. In Oklahoma, the State Department of Education's homeless coordinator has assisted four local education agencies in finding funds to supplement educational services to homeless children and youth. Of the four programs, no two are alike, but each is successful in reducing barriers to access to education for many children who have fallen victim to homelessness.

In Oklahoma City, a transitional center for reintegration of homeless children has been serving the needs of urban homeless for the past 3 years. The Positive Tomorrows Transitional Center identifies homeless children; assists in securing appropriate records; verifies immunizations and vaccinations; offers case management for referrals for food, clothing, housing, and mental and physical health care; and conducts follow-up assistance for the families. The project is a joint effort by the Oklahoma City Public Schools and the Oklahoma City Community (a coalition of community groups). The most innovative aspect of the project is the actual ownership of the program by both entities: The director is a state-certified administrator who is not only hired by the district on a part-time basis but also hired part-time by the community to create a full-time position that literally shares the interests of both the community and the public school in meeting the educational *and* social service needs of a very specific population.

These efforts and the many others now being recorded in the growing literature on homelessness are heartening to those concerned about the homeless. But still needed are full-scale efforts to sensitize the vast number of teachers and administrators who treat homeless children and their families with an insensitivity that ranges from unkindness to mental cruelty, given their helpless and often hopeless state. These are the children who need us most, who need school the most. That they are ever treated less than well is an ethical scandal in our profession (First, 1993).

## IMPLEMENTING CHANGE IN THE EDUCATION OF HOMELESS STUDENTS

Because homelessness is a relatively new issue to be brought before urban school administrators and school boards, awareness and education regarding homelessness still needs to be accomplished. Many middle-class policymakers continue to deny the extent of the phenomenon. Redesigning policy or crafting statutes to help children and youth access free public education calls for more research both to document the extent of the problem and to design adequate responses. A great deal of literature is becoming available detailing the plight of the American homeless, but only a small portion is available in professional educational publications. The daring administrator will find model programs, issues, and facts in other areas of professional expertise, such as social work, psychology, and urban planning, and in reports by special interest committees, such as advocacy groups for the homeless. Good information is available (Stronge, 1992) for the administrator or board member who sincerely wishes to make a positive contribution to solving these problems.

The next step for district administrators will be gathering more complete homeless population data for their own districts, evaluating the services available, and convincing their school boards to forge links with social services agencies to cooperate in serving the needs of homeless children and, thus, all our children. A further step to take is that of administrators joining together as advocates for children, rather than protectors of institutions, and collectively forcing change at the state level in the laws that adversely effect, or inadequately serve and protect, children. Data must be assembled at all three levels of educational governance. The development at the federal level of a national data base on homeless children would be a good first step. With leadership and resources from the U.S. Department of Education, the state homeless coordinators already in place could provide much of the information, although agreements across states on the inclusiveness of definitions will need to be accomplished.

At the state level, the contradictions in state statutes that cause bureaucratic nightmares for homeless families need to be amended. Other language needs to be changed to force districts, if they cannot be convinced by milder methods, to find alternative routes to satisfying requirements such as those for vaccinations. Examples of alternative statutes and policies could be housed at a federal clearinghouse.

At the state and local levels, a cataloging, for the purpose of elimination, of "phantom policies" would be helpful, along with examples of staff

development programs and methods to address the phantom problem. In too many districts, abuses of children's rights are tolerated because "some law" or "some policy" is cited as the reason. We have too many real barriers to the adequate education of homeless children. Let us get rid of the phantoms.

## CONCLUSION

Half a decade after the promising enactment of the Stewart B. McKinney Homeless Assistance Act of 1987, homeless students are still facing barriers to enrollment and are finding the accessibility of educational services discouraging. In short, students are still being denied access to educational services because of the circumstances of homelessness, despite the mandates of the McKinney Act. It is easy for children and youth to get lost or to become displaced in large urban areas. For many students, it is easier to drop out of rather than to drop in to local schools. Where student populations exceed 25,000, emancipated youth can live on the streets and work odd jobs without attracting the attention of the legendary truant officer. In large cities, school officials are too busy with problems on site to look for truants, and district attorneys are far too busy with growing urban violence to "bust a truant."

All public school districts across the nation are affected by the problems discussed in this article, but none are so greatly affected as the districts in the large cities. Even with few resources and weak legislative mandates, local and state departments of education must encourage change in parochial policies and procedures. Far too much is lost when a homeless child is denied access to schooling because of difficulty meeting bureaucratic requirements. Far too much is lost each time a student drops out of school. Urban school districts have no time to waste.

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