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Counseling 101 Column

Helping Homeless Students

Principals have unique opportunities and a legal responsibility to assist homeless students and protect their rights in school.

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Estimates show that nearly 1.4 million children are homeless every year. (Urban Institute, 2000). As with many other unique populations, homeless students have special needs that schools have inimitable opportunities-as well as legal responsibilities-to address. Secondary school administrators set the standard for how homeless students are treated and are responsible for ensuring and advocating for their rights in school.

Legal Background

Addressing the needs of homeless youth is required by law through the Stewart B. McKinney Homeless Assistance Act, currently known as the McKinney-Vento Act. This federal law entitles homeless children to a free and appropriate education and states that schools must eliminate barriers to enrollment, attendance, and success in school for homeless students. Further, the act obligates schools to appoint a liaison to work with homeless students and their families and serve as a resource for educators. In December 2001, the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) reauthorized the McKinney-Vento Act. This reauthorization requires school districts to keep homeless students in their "schools of origin" and, to the extent possible, provide transportation to and from school. Homeless students are also immediately eligible for free meals and access to educational services that are comparable to any student in the district.

Defining and Identifying Homeless Youth

According to federal law, homeless children include those who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence. McKinney-Vento recognizes a wide

range of living situations as homelessness, such as frequent mobility or living in shared housing (often a crowded residence with several other families), motels, cars, parks, makeshift housing, or shelters.

Unless students are directly referred to the school as homeless students, staff members will often need to make judgment calls to identify homeless students and offer assistance. Although some students will volunteer their personal information, many homeless students will make oblique references to where they are staying. Students may also indirectly indicate that they are homeless through changes in their habits and appearance, such as increased sleepiness; wearing the same clothes frequently or other personal care issues; a decreasing quality of school work; and most often, and absences from school.

While it is important to respect students' right to privacy, it is also essential for homeless students to know their legal rights under McKinney-Vento. Homeless students should be offered every opportunity to continue to attend their schools of origin and have access to all other appropriate services to help them achieve in school.

Family Characteristics

Homeless students are of every race and cultural background. Ninety percent of homeless families are single-parent families that are typically headed by the mother. The characteristics of homeless students are similar to other students living in poverty, the difference being that they do not have consistent housing.

Research shows that homeless and low-income housed mothers have higher lifetime and current rates of major depression and substance abuse (Bassuk, Buckner, Perloff, & Bassuk, 1998). Many homeless and poor housed mothers have experienced severe physical abuse by a childhood caretaker, childhood molestation, and severe violence by a male partner. In fact, fleeing an abusive partner is the single most common reason for family homelessness in Minnesota (Wilder Research Center, 2003).

Homeless students are often on their own by the time they reach secondary school age. Administrators frequently refer to these older homeless students as unaccompanied youth or, more informally, as "couch surfers" or "couch hoppers." Unaccompanied youth may have more struggles than homeless students living with their families, and many drop out of high school (Family Housing Fund, 1999). These students are unable to live in family shelters and adult shelters are often not safe for them. In addition, men and boys over the age of 16, even if they have a family, are not permitted to reside in most family shelters.

Student Characteristics

Basic needs. Homeless students sometimes do not get enough to eat and therefore come to school hungry. Homeless students may not get enough sleep at night or are afraid to sleep. Many homeless students do not receive adequate medical or dental care and are more likely to have health problems. Homeless students have higher rates of upper respiratory and ear infections, skin diseases, and common cold symptoms than their peers (Yamaguchi, Strawser, & Higgins, 1997).

Social and emotional issues. In general, homeless youth are frequently shy and withdrawn, tend to feel isolated and disconnected from school, and often feel stigmatized and alienated from their classmates (Yamaguchi et al., 1997). Homeless students are likely to have lower self-esteem and higher levels of anxiety than their peers (Bassuk & Rubin, 1987). Kidd and Kral (2002) found that 76% of street youth reported having attempted suicide, and feelings of rejection, low self-worth, and isolation were prevalent. The suicide rate for homeless males between the ages of 18 and 24 is 10.3 times higher than the national average (Kidd & Kral, 2002).

School performance. About 12% of homeless children are not enrolled in school and up to 45% do not attend school regularly (Duffield, 2001). This is a cause for concern because poor attendance is a significant predictor of dropping out of school (Christenson, Sinclair, Lehr, & Hurley, 2000). Overall, the academic achievement of homeless students is poor. Research indicates that 43% of homeless students repeat a grade, 25% are placed in special education, and 50% are failing academically (Bassuk & Rubin, 1987). Other data reveal that only one-third of homeless students read at grade level compared to more than half of their same-aged peers (Rescorla, Parker, & Stolley, 1991).

School Interventions

The relationships that homeless students have with school staff members may be the only associations they have with people who are living in a productive and positive manner and who can serve as guides for how to live constructive lives. School provides stability for homeless students and gives them a sense of self-worth. Graduating from high school has been identified as a protective factor for this population, which highlights the need for intervention to ensure that homeless students receive adequate educational opportunities. A knowledgeable principal can help ensure that all staff members know the rights of homeless students and that they receive required services. The following are some ideas to provide support in school for homeless youth.

Provide workshops for teachers and staff members to inform and address the unique needs of homeless students. Educate staff members about the special needs of homeless students and ways to work with their parents or guardians to make certain that they know their educational rights. General information about developmental issues and resources should be discussed and definitions of homelessness should be clear to everyone. It is helpful to display information in prominent locations. Administrators should also stress that homeless students' privacy and emotional health should be protected.

Establish school services that meet the basic needs of homeless students. In addition to the traditional lunch, many schools provide breakfast for students. Teachers should be encouraged to have a snack supply in their classroom in case students arrive late to school. Consider providing showers, personal care items, clean clothes, or laundry facilities to students who need them.

Develop a clear attendance policy. Homeless students should not be penalized simply for being late because they may have to accommodate complicated bus schedules with several transfers to get to school. Keep close track of student attendance and follow-up immediately when students are absent.

Bridge the gap between schools if a child moves. Although the McKinney-Vento Act requires homeless students to remain in their schools of origin if the parent chooses, some students will change schools often. Learn which school a homeless student is moving to and contact the appropriate staff members at the new school to facilitate the transfer of records and background information and help the student to make a smooth transition and continue to receive the best education possible. Maintaining contact with the transferring homeless student will also indicate a special relationship and add stability to his or her life.

Ensure that a full range of services is available. Homeless students should have access to tutoring, special education, and English language learner resources as needed. In addition, homeless students should be informed that they can participate in field trips and schoolwide activities even if they cannot pay for them or do not have transportation. The district's homeless student liaison should provide each school with a list of community resources-such as shelters, housing information programs, and food banks-that meet the basic needs of homeless students.

Keep in contact with parents or guardians. Parents, guardians, or significant adults can provide valuable information regarding what homeless students' lives are like outside of school, and it is important to encourage their participation. Consistent contact helps homeless students and their parents or guardians feel more connected to school, which is associated with increased attendance and higher academic achievement.

Keep in contact with the district liaison. McKinney-Vento requires each school district to have a liaison to work with homeless students and families. This liaison works with school staff members to provide basic resources as well as resources for after-school activities. The liaison is especially important to unaccompanied youth and can help them fill out paperwork and make important educational and life decisions.

Although the district liaison will take the lead to support homeless students at the districtwide level, school social workers, psychologists, or counselors can take responsibility for these students as well. Homeless students also need support from the school's attendance clerk, nurse, transportation coordinator, food service staff members, after-school program coordinator, and individual teachers. *PL*

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Additional Resources

Web Sites:

- Center for Adolescent Health and the Law: www.cahl.org
- National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth: www.naehcy.org
- National Center for Homeless Education: www.serve.org/nche
- National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty: www.nlchp.org

Hotlines:

- Covenant House Neline, 800-999-9999, www.covenanthouse.org
- National Network for Youth, 202-783-7949, www.NN4Youth.org
- National Runaway Switchboard, 800-621-4000, www.nrscrisisline.org

Frequent Indicators of Homelessness

Students or their parents may make statements that indicate whether they are likely to meet the McKinney-Vento definition of homelessness:

- "Our address is new; I can't remember it."
- "I'm not sure what the address is of this place we're staying."
- "I don't know where we live."
- "I'm not sure where we're staying right now."
- "We've been moving around a lot lately."
- "I'm just going through a bad time right now."
- "We're staying with relatives/ friends until we get settled."
- "I'm with a friend for a short while."
- "We just aren't settled quite yet."

Case Study: A Shelter Student

Devon is a 15-year-old boy who has just moved from out of state to Minneapolis with his mother, two younger brothers, and an older sister. The living arrangements that Devon's mother had expected have fallen through and she has reluctantly moved her family to a shelter. The family stayed in a shelter in their home city, a family violence shelter, and the mother had hoped to avoid another shelter experience. However, she is very relieved that Devon is able to stay with them because not all emergency shelters allow boys to stay with their families-typically the maximum age is 16 for boys to stay in a family shelter.

Observations

The Minneapolis school district has a staff person who works with the shelter to enroll homeless students in school. Devon and his siblings do not have their previous school records or health information with them. This has not slowed enrollment for his siblings, but Devon's school placement is taking longer because he has special needs and he has waited several days. From what Devon and his mother describe, it sounds as though he was in a federal setting III program (i.e., in a separate classroom for more than 60% of the school day) in his previous school.

What to Do

Providing the best educational program for Devon means adhering to both the McKinney-Vento Act and special education legislation and regulations, which emphasize the importance of immediate school enrollment and attendance. The first step is to get Devon's records from his previous school through the special education placement coordinator or another staff member in order to provide special education options for Devon. An individualized education program (IEP) meeting needs to be held and an appropriate program and school placement should be made for Devon. If there are no records forthcoming from the previous school, Devon must attend the "home" school based upon the shelter's address as a regular education student. In the meantime, staff members will gather data and prepare an interim IEP to give Devon support while he is evaluated for special education. They should also secure transportation arrangements and school supplies for Devon.

Considerations

- What is the protocol for securing school records for students who are new to the district? Do all staff members know that students identified as homeless have the right to immediate enrollment in school and are expected to attend school?
- What is the protocol for securing special education records for homeless students when the student does not have copies of the records? What can be done when the previous school is not forthcoming with the information-for example, when the appropriate staff member is difficult to reach or insists on taking time to send the records?
- What is the protocol when the student's current IEP is not considered adequate or appropriate for the new school?
- Are staff members aware of both McKinney-Vento and special education

requirements for students? There is a higher rate of receiving special education services among homeless students than in the general population.

- How vulnerable is Devon in this new environment and how can he be helped to safely manage some of the basics of getting through the day—such as riding a new school bus with a new driver, passengers, and route?
- What can be done to help Devon adjust to the changes he faces in school, with new people and a new environment, knowing that special needs students are often especially sensitive to changes?
- How can Devon be placed in the best school setting to meet his needs?
- What can be done to work with Devon without having the opportunity to look at his current IEP?

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