





***Critical Questions in Education***  
ISSN 2327-3607

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An on-line, double-blind, peer reviewed journal hosted by  
The Academy for Educational Studies

*Critical Questions in Education*: <http://education.missouristate.edu/AcadEd/75532.htm>

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The mission of the Academy for Educational Studies is to foster a community of inquirers and provide a public space for debate and dialogue about important questions in education. The Academy encourages those interested in education, teaching, and learning to engage in thoughtful reflection, discussion, and critique of educational theory and practice. Involving people from across the state, region and country, the Academy promotes this vital dialogue by arranging education conferences and symposia and by creating publishing opportunities connected with Academy events. The Academy supports research efforts of graduate and undergraduate students and assists in the design and delivery of teacher education courses at both the graduate and undergraduate levels.

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\*\* Our thanks to the cadre of scholars who serve as reviewers without whose services the journal could not exist.



## *Critical Questions in Education: Volume 5, Issue 3*

The Academy for Educational Studies

November 3, 2014

Colleagues and Friends of the Academy:

Before getting to the “why” and the “what” of this second annual special issue of *CQIE*, we want to provide an update on the numerous goings on in the Academy—it has certainly been a busy few months on that count. As you may or may not know, the Academy has gone through some serious growing pains of late, and much like an adolescent growing toward adulthood, these growing pains have pushed us “out of the nest” so to speak. It is with some bitter sweetness that we inform you that *The Academy for Educational Studies* is now an independent, national, non-profit organization.

The bitter part (maybe a bit of an overstatement) comes with our departure from the nest. Missouri State University has supported us in very crucial ways as we have moved to and through our adolescent stage of development. Of particular importance has been the support provided by our Dean, David Hough, who was in large part responsible for the Academy’s birth a decade ago and continues to lend his support as we move toward independence. We will certainly never forget our Missouri State University roots.

The sweetness comes with the Academy’s expanded potential. That potential can already be seen in our decision to host *two* annual national conferences. We very recently held our regular October meeting at the beautiful Brown Hotel in Louisville Kentucky and are very much looking forward to our next one in San Diego this coming February. For the San Diego get together we are excited to have Gary Orfield, Professor of Education at UCLA and co-Director of the Civil Rights Project and Francisco Ramirez, Professor of Comparative Education at Stanford University joining us for two Academy Talk sessions. We look forward to seeing everyone in sunny San Diego. Information about the San Diego conference can be found at our web site: [academyforeducationalstudies.org](http://academyforeducationalstudies.org). The Academy is also looking to expand its publishing presence—more on that as we work out the details—suffice it to say that we are very excited about future publishing possibilities.

And, so, why a special issue on homeless youth and schools? Quite simply, the responsibilities that educators, administrators, and school districts have in regard to the education of our most vulnerable youth has for too long gone ignored. For those of us who prepare teachers, we too may feel culpable after reading this special issue given the lack of attention our homeless youth have received in teacher education coursework. The fact of the matter is that we, all of us, have important responsibilities—including legal responsibilities—to ensure that our homeless youth receive the education to which they are entitled. The articles in this collection speak to those responsibilities and the students who deserve our attention, care, and active response. Enjoy...thoughtfully.

PAX,

Eric C. Sheffield, Founding Editor

Jessica A. Heybach, Associate Editor

*Critical Questions in Education*  
Special Theme Issue:

*At the Crossroads of Policy and Poverty:  
A Critical Look at Homelessness, Youth, and Education*

Jessica A. Heybach & Ann Aviles de Bradley, Guest Editors

ISSN 2327-3607  
Volume 5, Issue 3  
Fall, 2014

Contents

<i>Introduction: Recognizing Blind Spots in Teacher Education and Cultivating Counter-Narratives for Justice</i> .....	137
Jessica A. Heybach & Ann Aviles de Bradley	
<i>Removing Barriers: The Struggle to Ensure Educational Rights for Students Experiencing Homelessness</i> .....	143
Patricia Nix-Hodes & Laurene M. Heybach	
<i>Literacy, Education, and Inequality: Assimilation and Resistance Narratives from Families Residing at a Homeless Shelter</i> .....	172
Mary M. Jacobs	
<i>The Voices behind the Numbers: Understanding the Experiences of Homeless Students</i> .....	189
Erica Mohan & Carolyn M. Shields	
<i>The Multi-dimensional Lives of Children who are Homeless</i> .....	203
Steve Grineski	
<i>A Question of Priorities: A Critical Investigation of the McKinney-Vento Act</i> .....	218
Keith Alan Cunningham	
<i>Sleep Out on the Quad: An Opportunity for Experiential Education and Servant Based Leadership</i> .....	233
Kristen A. Johnson, Jessica Grazulis, & Joshua K. White	
Video Essay: <i>The Academy Talks with Laurene M. Heybach</i> <a href="http://youtu.be/ZQHo1jciS7U">http://youtu.be/ZQHo1jciS7U</a>	



## ***Introduction: Recognizing Blind Spots in Teacher Education and Cultivating Counter-Narratives for Justice***

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*Jessica A. Heybach, Aurora University  
Ann Aviles de Bradley, Northeastern Illinois University*

### ***Abstract***

*This Special Issue Introduction outlines the underlying reasons for taking up the matter of educating homeless youth. The article addresses the lack of official policy and attention within teacher education programs to prepare future and practicing teachers for work with a growing homeless population—work that is legally mandated by the federal McKinney-Vento Homeless Education Act.*

***Keywords:*** *McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, NCATE, CAEP, homeless youth, homeless education, teacher education*

The impetus for this special theme issue of *Critical Questions in Education* was the collaborative work of the Illinois McKinney-Vento Network and an urgent desire to call attention to an often ignored population—homeless youth. The Illinois McKinney-Vento Network consists of community activists, public school homeless liaisons, civil rights attorneys and academics dedicated to understanding, supporting and advocating for the legal framework and services outlined in the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act. The various constituencies represented within this organization recognize that the social problems embodied in homeless youth and families require the dedicated work of *many* from multiple vantage points. This work cannot be done in isolation—social problems of this magnitude require activists, educators, lawyers, scholars, and community members to work together for the betterment of policy and practices.

In the wake of the recent “financial meltdown” or, “the great recession,” there has been a significant rise in the number of families and youth experiencing homelessness and poverty. With the shifting housing circumstances manifested as a result of sub-prime mortgage failures, communities across America began to feel the impact of white-collar greed en masse.<sup>1</sup> Suddenly, traditionally defined at-risk urban and rural populations became even more entrenched in public policy as it relates to issues of poverty—housing, food, health care, jobs, general welfare; further, working class and middle class suburban populations not usually impacted by poverty and unstable housing became a part of this growing demographic. Schools often serve as a consistent point of contact for students experiencing instability, thus, educators in particular represent a front line in terms of advocating for said students and increasing their access to needed services. Such services are legally protected under McKinney-Vento, and ensure families and youth are

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1. Although not taken up in this theme issue, we acknowledge the *global* component to the current financial crisis that is important to fully understanding such a complex problem as homelessness in society.

cared for during such difficult times. We hope the articles in this special theme issue create and/or reinvigorate a much needed discussion of the ways in which schools and society can better address the academic and social needs of homeless youth.

### Recognizing Blind Spots in Teacher Education

Unfortunately, education in the United States has become myopically focused on standardization, academic achievement, and “objective” measurable data that can confirm that the proper learning has occurred. As a result, significant attention is spent dissecting instruction and curriculum through very narrow means, rather than working to understand deeply the needs of the learner beyond “college and career readiness.” To examine the attention given to ensuring that the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act is fully understood in teacher education programs, we turn to the standards that guide our practice.

The largest national voluntary accrediting agency of teacher education, Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP)—previously called the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE)—has never included the language of McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act in their standards, nor have they included the issue of homelessness as a concern in the description of student diversity. Rather, the legal obligation and responsibilities of educators has been mildly addressed in these organizations’ documents via the following language: “Before the provider recommends any completing candidate for licensure or certification, it documents that the candidate understands the expectations of the profession, including codes of ethics, professional standards of practice, and relevant laws and policies.”<sup>2</sup> This statement allows for the potential to include McKinney-Vento, but falls short in mandating that all obtaining a teaching licensure will be knowledgeable on the rights and services available to homeless youth and families.

Additionally, CAEP’s standards acknowledge that their “guiding document” (written by the National Research Council’s Committee on the Study of Teacher Preparation Programs in the United States) is one entitled *Preparing Teachers: Building Evidence for Sound Policy*.<sup>3</sup> Within this document the following passage again positions the issue of homeless students as tangential and on the periphery of poverty:

Some important implications of this commitment [to educate all students] are evident when one contemplates the numbers of children who are living in poverty, including some who are homeless, and the ways in which their circumstances may affect their education. High-poverty students are the most likely to be taught by teachers who are not well qualified, in part because high-poverty schools tend to see high teacher turnover...*Although some teacher preparation programs may focus attention on the needs of poor and homeless children, there are no systematically collected data on the subject.*<sup>4</sup> (emphasis ours)

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2. Council for Accreditation of Educator Preparation, “Accreditation Standards,” accessed October 20, 2014, <http://caepnet.org/>.

3. Committee on the Study of Teacher Preparation Programs, National Research Council, *Preparing Teachers: Building Evidence for Sound Policy* (Washington D.C: National Academies Press, 2010).

4. *Preparing Teachers*, 34.

“No systematically collected data on the subject”—seems to be grossly inaccurate and misleading given the important legal battles that have been waged on behalf of homeless youth, and the countless school codes and policies now in place to ensure that homeless youth obtain access to school. Furthermore, the National Center for Homeless Education has had in place “data standards and indicators” for McKinney-Vento programs since 2000, and revised this document in 2006.<sup>5</sup>

Moreover, within *Preparing Teachers: Building Evidence for Sound Policy*, the legal history and protections that have occurred for the special education population are highlighted to ensure that educators are knowledgeable of and advocates for the rights of students with special needs: “For these students, 1975 was a landmark year: passage of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act, which mandated that children who were deaf, blind, emotionally disturbed, or mentally retarded could no longer be excluded from neighborhood schools.”<sup>6</sup> Thus, the question arises, why do the legal rights of homeless families and youth not benefit from the same narrative that is afforded to the special education population within educational policy rhetoric and mandates?

At the state level, the Illinois Professional Teaching Standards (IPTS), reissued in 2013, make no mention of the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, or homeless youth and families. However, the IPTS document references the following state and federal laws and school codes directly within the knowledge indicators regarding pre-service teacher education:

Understands the impact of cognitive, emotional, physical, and sensory disabilities on learning and communication pursuant to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (also referred to as “IDEA”) (20 USC 1400 et seq.), its implementing regulations (34 CFR 300; 2006), Article 14 of the School Code [105 ILCS 5/Art.14] and 23 Ill. Adm. Code 226 (Special Education);...when planning instruction, addresses goals and objectives contained in plans developed under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (29 USC 794), individualized education programs (IEP) (see 23 Ill. Adm. Code 226 (Special Education)) or individual family service plans (IFSP) (see 23 Ill. Adm. Code 226 and 34 CFR 300.24; 2006);...accurately interprets and clearly communicates aggregate student performance data to students, parents or guardians, colleagues, and the community in a manner that complies with the requirements of the Illinois School Student Records Act [105 ILCS 10], 23 Ill. Adm. Code 375 (Student Records), the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) (20 USC 1232g) and its implementing regulations (34 CFR 99; December 9, 2008);...understands emergency response procedures as required under the School Safety Drill Act [105 ILCS 128/1], including school safety and crisis intervention protocol, initial response actions (e.g., whether to stay in or evacuate a building), and first response to medical emergencies (e.g., first aid and life-saving techniques);...is aware of and complies with the mandatory reporter provisions of Section 4 of the Abused and Neglected Child Reporting Act [325 ILCS 5/4].<sup>7</sup>

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5. National Center for Homeless Education, *Data Standards and Indicators*, accessed October 20, 2014, [http://center.serve.org/nche/ibt/sc\\_data.php](http://center.serve.org/nche/ibt/sc_data.php).

6. *Preparing Teachers*, 36.

7. Illinois State Board of Education, *Illinois Professional Teaching Standards*, 2013, accessed October 20, 2014, [www.isbe.net/peac/pdf/IL\\_prof\\_teaching\\_stds.pdf](http://www.isbe.net/peac/pdf/IL_prof_teaching_stds.pdf).

We recognize the importance of these laws and policies, but wonder why the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act which stipulates in plain language, since 1987, the legal rights and affordances of homeless youth and families does not appear in such a compulsory document? Curiously, Illinois in many ways is the birth place of such legal precedence regarding homeless rights and advocacy.<sup>8</sup> If Illinois' professional teaching standards are void of this content, we urge readers in other states to determine if this content is also missing from their respective state's professional teaching standards.

### Cultivating Counter-Narratives for Justice

As concerned citizens and teacher educators, we acknowledge that there exists a sizeable gap between what has been written into law and what most understand regarding the law. This reality is unfortunately true for the professional preparation of teachers in regards to homeless populations. Consequently, this special theme issues seeks to close this knowledge gap and renegotiate the narrative that has been overly simplified, essentialized, and absent from the larger discourse regarding poverty and access to educational opportunities.

The articles in this special theme issue are interested in reframing the persistent dilemma of homelessness among families and youth in the United States. Each article presents a counter-narrative to the often articulated argument that homelessness is suffered by those who are personally at fault (unmotivated, lazy, etc.) for their circumstances. The aim of this special theme issue is to critically interrogate the persistent dilemma of homeless youth in schools, and renegotiate the narratives that have been claimed about homeless families such that we reconsider what can be done on the part of concerned parties. In particular, the authors are interested in how the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, a significant piece of civil rights legislation, has impacted the educational prospects of this rapidly growing population of marginalized youth.

We ask our readers to consider the following statistics:

- Estimates of the total number of homeless youth in the United States vary widely, with different studies reporting the population of homeless youth ages 12 to 24 between 1.6 million and 2.8 million. Of these youth, the *National Alliance to End Homelessness* estimates that more than 100,000 youth are homeless for an extended period of time, with the rest homeless for shorter periods. For youth ages 12 to 17, national studies estimate that there are between 1.6 million and 1.7 million who experience homelessness each year.<sup>9</sup>
- Chicago Public Schools identified a record 22,144 homeless students in the 2013-14 school year. This is an 18.6% increase from the entire prior school year. Of this, 98.2% were children of color and 20% have been diagnosed with disabilities or developmental delays. Homeless students included 2,508 unaccompanied youth, teens who were homeless and living without a parent or guardian.<sup>10</sup>

These realities should capture the attention of educational scholars, practitioners, policy makers,

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8. See Patricia Nix-Hodes and Laurene M. Heybach, "Removing Barriers: The Struggle to Ensure Educational Rights for Students Experiencing Homelessness," *Critical Questions in Education* 5, no. 3 (Fall 2014): 142-170.

9. Nico Sifra Quintana, Josh Rosenthal, and Jeff Krehely Center, *On the Streets: The Federal Response to Gay and Transgender Homeless Youth* (Washington, DC: Center for American Progress, 2010).

10. Chicago Coalition of the Homeless, *FAQ & Studies*, accessed October 22, 2014, <http://www.chicagohomeless.org/faq-studies/>.



and advocates, but something about the issue of unstable housing and abject poverty still allows for a subtle ignorance by many in the field of education. As a result, stereotypes run rampant and ill-informed assumptions about these families and youth dominate educator's consciousness in the United States.<sup>11</sup> Thus, this special theme issue encourages a much needed critical dialogue regarding housing and educational opportunities, as well as a discussion of the often omitted counter-narratives of homelessness that will aid academic discussions of equity and social justice.

Each article renegotiates the historical, sociological, pedagogical, and legal realities of homeless youth and families. Moreover, the backdrop of neoliberal educational reform, corporate logic, and growing dystopian educational landscape overlay the central concerns articulated in these articles.<sup>12</sup> For example, recently some cities have adopted policies that make homelessness a crime while at the same time acknowledging that affordable housing has all but evaporated.<sup>13</sup> The authors in this issue seek to understand such structural difficulties and logic that impede potential solutions to the continual problem of homelessness. Through broadly defined qualitative methodologies, critical policy inquiries, and legal studies, each author renegotiates the worn-out discussion surrounding homelessness and, more importantly, discusses what educators and advocates can do to ease the plight of this rapidly growing population within schools and social service agencies. We hope this special theme issues inspires a generation of educators to reframe their vocational calling first and foremost through the lens of advocacy rather than solely as "teachers of content."

Further, this special issue seeks to increase awareness among teacher educators, teacher education programs, colleges of education, and the bodies that govern them, and thereby encourage them to imbed the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act into their standards and requirements. Such measures would not only be good for students experiencing homelessness, but ultimately serve to strengthen the teaching profession in its ability to serve, support, and advocate for educational access for a significant and growing population of students. The contributors to this special issue understand the collective and sustained efforts necessary to seriously address the myriad of factors contributing to conditions of poverty and homelessness. We see education, advocacy, and justice as needed elements in addressing the school and societal inequities that serve as deterrents for homeless youth and families in reaching their fullest potential. We invite readers to join these efforts—talk about McKinney-Vento with your students, colleagues, friends, and family—increase awareness, ask critical questions regarding the implementation of McKinney-Vento in your respective institution, and take action!

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12. Pauline Lipman, *The New Political Economy of Urban Education: Neoliberalism, Race, and the Right to the City* (New York: Routledge, 2011).

13. Xander Landen, "More Cities Across the U.S. Consider Homelessness a Crime," *PBS News Hour: The Run-down Blog*, 2014, accessed October 24, 2014, <http://www.pbs.org/newshour/run-down/homelessness-now-crime-cities-throughout-u-s/>.

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**Jessica A. Heybach** is an Associate Professor of Education at Aurora University. She is interested in how controversial issues and images of human tragedy impacts the civic identity of both students and teachers as it relates to issues of democracy, justice, and human rights. She has published journal articles in *Education and Culture*, *Critical Questions in the Education*, and *Philosophical Studies in Education*. Also, she recently co-edited the book *Dystopia and Education: Insights into Theory, Praxis, and Policy in an Age of Utopia-Gone-Wrong* with Eric C. Sheffield. At Aurora University, she teaches graduate courses in curriculum studies, educational research and qualitative methodology.

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## Removing Barriers: The Struggle to Ensure Educational Rights for Students Experiencing Homelessness

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*Patricia Nix-Hodes & Laurene M. Heybach, Chicago Coalition for the Homeless*

### **Abstract**

*While the intent of the federal and state homeless education laws is clear, securing the educational rights of students without housing has been a long legal and political struggle in Chicago and Illinois. Education for students experiencing homelessness is a continuation of the civil rights struggle for equality in education and educational access. As the Supreme Court noted 60 years ago in *Brown v. Board of Education*, “In these days it is doubtful that any child may be expected to succeed in life if he [or she] is denied the opportunity of an education.” The struggle for educational access for students experiencing homelessness in Chicago began in the late 1980s. Advocates in Chicago and nationally worked for passage of the 1987 federal Stewart B. McKinney Act (“the McKinney Act” or “the Act”), the first comprehensive federal response to homelessness. Although that Act provided for the first time a basic framework of educational rights for students without housing, it was not sufficiently strong or specific to make a significant impact on the education of children. Later amendments and, most importantly, the 2001 reauthorization strengthened the law so that today it is a strong law with civil rights and anti-discrimination principles that offers strong and specific protections to homeless students in school. Illinois has its own state law, the Illinois Education for Homeless Children Act (or “Charlie’s Law) and a state policy that provides important educational rights. 2014 marks the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Charlie’s Law. Despite strong law and policy, legal advocacy was crucial to ensuring that students in Chicago benefited from the rights contained in the law. *Salazar v. Edwards* is a class action case filed on behalf of homeless parents and students in Chicago in 1992. Since that time it has been a tool to improve educational opportunities for Chicago’s students. A long legal struggle has resulted in significantly improved compliance with the law but many challenges remain.*

**Keywords:** *McKinney-Vento, Homeless, Renaissance 2010, Chicago Public Schools, Arne Duncan, Salazar v. Edwards*

*Chicago Public Schools' June 13, 2014 end-of-year data racial breakdown of identified homeless students: 18,702 African American, 2,717 Hispanic, 359 White, 176 multiracial.*  
 --Chicago Coalition for the Homeless<sup>1</sup>

*"Until America reckons with the moral debt it has accrued—and the practical damage it has done—to generations of black Americans, it will fail to live up to its own ideals."*  
 --Ta-Nehisi Coates<sup>2</sup>

## Introduction

Education has been touted historically as one of the greatest of American ideals. It is simultaneously embraced by the political left and right and the focus of legislation, litigation and philanthropy. And it is the rationale offered in a nation with public schools for why everyone can succeed. Indeed, in *Brown v. Board of Education*, 347 U.S. 483 (1954), now celebrating its 60<sup>th</sup> year, the Supreme Court enshrined education as a national ideal and necessity:

Today, education is perhaps the most important function of state and local governments. Compulsory school attendance laws and the great expenditures for education both demonstrate our recognition of the importance of education to our democratic society. It is required in the performance of our most basic public responsibilities, even service in the armed forces. It is the very foundation of good citizenship. Today it is a principal instrument in awakening the child to cultural values, in preparing him for later professional training, and in helping him to adjust normally to his environment. In these days, it is doubtful that any child may be expected to succeed in life if he is denied the opportunity of an education. Such opportunity, where the state has undertaken to provide it, is a right which must be made available to all on equal terms."<sup>3</sup>

In a remarkably forthright piece published in *The Atlantic* magazine this June, journalist Ta-Nehisi Coates sets forth piece by piece the collective injuries suffered by African Americans from the time of slavery until now (Coates, 2014). A central focus of these collective injuries is the systematic stripping of decent housing opportunities from African Americans as exemplified historically and currently in Chicago. Entrenched segregation is thus exposed by Coates as both a logical outcome of policy decisions and, in an historical context, an intended result.

Advocating for the educational rights of students experiencing homelessness, the *Law Project* of the *Chicago Coalition for the Homeless* is daily confronted with the moral debt and practical damage of which Coates speaks. Homelessness is devastating for our children and families. See, e.g., *Toward Understanding Homelessness, the 2007 National Symposium on Homelessness Research* (noting intense poverty and difficulties encountered by homeless persons) and therein especially, Rog & Buckner, *Homeless Families and Children* (identifying lack of social

1. Chicago Coalition for the Homeless, accessed October 27, 2014, <http://www.chicagohomeless.org/>.

2. Ta-Nehisi Coates, "The Case For Reparations," *The Atlantic Monthly*, June 2014, <http://www.theatlantic.com/features/archive/2014/05/the-case-for-reparations/361631/>.

3. *Brown v. Board*, 347 U.S. Reports, 391.

networks or economic support, young parenting, child-parent separation, mental health challenges, low employment skill levels, the presence of conflict, trauma and violence); Fantuzzo et al (2012), *The Unique and Combined Effects of Homelessness and School Mobility on the Educational Outcomes of Young Children* (demonstrating especially harmful educational and behavioral effects of combining residential and school mobility in young children in shelters); *Institute for Children Poverty & Homelessness Policy Brief* (September 2013), *An Unstable Foundation, Factors that Impact Educational Attainment among Homeless Children* (noting 1.6 million children experience homelessness in the U.S., and that significant aggression, social withdrawal, depression and anxiety among children experiencing homelessness impacts their academic, social and economic attainment).

Homelessness affecting our school population consistently rises year to year. Of the record-breaking 22,144 homeless Chicago students counted last school year, 21,595 are students of color with African Americans overwhelmingly comprising the majority at 18,702 (June 13, 2014 data report of Chicago Public Schools program, Students in Temporary Living Situations). Our formidable challenge is to struggle, create and insist on a modicum of fairness and equity for these youth. Far from a comprehensive solution and far short of the reckoning Coates urges, the laws addressing the educational rights of homeless students nonetheless offer us a critically important opportunity.

In this article we will set forth (1) the multiple legal bases of the educational rights of homeless students and (2) the long term legal and advocacy struggle undertaken by the Chicago Coalition for the Homeless to create and implement those rights primarily in Chicago and Illinois. The paper consists of three segments which the reader is invited to utilize separately or in combination: I. Laying the Legal Groundwork: Creating Educational Rights for Homeless Students in the federal McKinney-Vento Act; II. The Struggle to Enforce the McKinney-Vento Act in Chicago: *Salazar v. Edwards*; and III. Focus on Illinois: Law, Leadership and Partnership.

Throughout this article, different versions of the principal federal law governing the rights of homeless students, once known as the McKinney Act, are discussed. The law was renamed in 2000 as the McKinney-Vento Act, the term currently in use.

### **Laying the Legal Groundwork: Creating Educational Rights for Homeless Students in the Federal McKinney-Vento Act**

The struggle for educational access for students experiencing homelessness began in the late 1980s. Advocates in Chicago and nationally worked for passage of the 1987 federal Stewart B. McKinney Act (“the original McKinney Act” or “the 1987 Act”), the first comprehensive federal response to homelessness. Title VII-B of the Act enunciated specific educational rights of children in homeless situations and addressed some of the school access issues faced by the growing number of families with children who lacked permanent housing. The original McKinney Act incorporated some civil rights principles but stronger civil rights principles came with subsequent amendments and reauthorizations. While the McKinney Act was strengthened each time it was amended or reauthorized. P.L.101-645 (1990), P.L. 103-382 (1994), and P.L. 107-110 (2001), the 1987 Act provided a basic framework to begin to assist students without permanent housing. Barbara Duffield, Director of Policy and Programs for the National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth (NAEHCY) notes, “The original McKinney Act was essentially a small grant program that provided a limited level of support to certain commu-



nities. While the Act contained big aspirational goals, these goals couldn't be fulfilled without greater strength and specificity in the protections for students and greater funding.”<sup>4</sup>

### **The Basic Framework: The Original (1987) McKinney Act**

For the first time, the Act established that it was the policy of Congress that each homeless child or youth “have access to a free, appropriate public education” comparable to that of other children.<sup>5</sup> The 1987 Act also required that any State with a residency requirement for school attendance must review and revise such rule to ensure the education of homeless children and youth.<sup>6</sup> The Act established responsibilities at the state and local levels. It required each state to establish a Coordinator of Education of Homeless Children and Youth and to adopt a state plan.<sup>7</sup> The Coordinator's role included gathering data on the number and location of homeless children and youth, the nature and extent of problems in school access and placement, and the difficulties in identifying the unique needs of students experiencing homelessness.<sup>8</sup> The state plan required provisions to make determinations about educational placement, procedures for the resolution of disputes and assurances that “local educational agencies” (local school districts) would comply with the requirements of the Act.<sup>9</sup>

Two principles the original McKinney Act contained and which fundamentally shape the law today are: 1) full access to school despite no permanent residency and, 2) school stability – giving students the option to remain in the same school even if living arrangements continued to shift. The Act required local educational agencies to either continue the education of a student experiencing homelessness in the “school district of origin for the remainder of the school year” or enroll the student “in the school district where the child or youth is actually living, whichever is in the best interest of the child or youth.”<sup>10</sup> The rights regarding choice of schools applied regardless of whether the child or youth was living with his or her parents or was temporarily placed elsewhere.<sup>11</sup>

The right to equal treatment and nondiscrimination is an important theme of the law that began with the original McKinney Act. The Act required that “each homeless child shall be provided services comparable to services offered to other students in the school selected” such as: programs for compensatory education, special education, limited English proficiency, vocational education, gifted and talented opportunities, and school meals.<sup>12</sup>

Two areas of the initial Act—funding and awareness—that would be critical in ensuring that homeless students actually benefit from the rights contained in the Act were actually then quite weak. The Act provided funding to the states for grants but only authorized total annual appropriations of \$5,000,000.<sup>13</sup> If these funds were divided equally among the fifty states, each state would receive \$100,000, an amount plainly insufficient to address the needs of an increasing number of homeless students throughout the nation. An additional \$2,500,000 was author-

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4. Barbara Duffield, telephone interview with authors, July 15, 2014.

5. *McKinney-Vento Act*, 1987, Pub. L. 100-77, 100th Congress, 1987, 42 U.S.C. 11431(1).

6. *Ibid.*, 42 U.S.C. 11431(2).

7. *Ibid.*, 42 U.S.C. 11432(d)-(e).

8. *Ibid.*, 42 U.S.C. 11432(d)(1).

9. *Ibid.*, 42 U.S.C. 11432(e).

10. *Ibid.*, 42 U.S.C. 11432(e)(3).

11. *Ibid.*, 42 U.S.C. 11432(e)(4).

12. *Ibid.*, 42 U.S.C. 11432(e)(5).

13. *Ibid.*, 42 U.S.C. 11432(g).

ized for one year for exemplary programs and dissemination of information. The language of this provision—referring to “exemplary programs” and “demonstration grants”—suggests the limited scope of this funding.<sup>14</sup> During the first year of the program, less than \$5,000,000 was actually appropriated and Illinois received only \$200,000. The provisions with respect to increasing awareness of rights under the Act were similarly limited. Rather than requiring a broad dissemination of information about educational rights throughout the community, the Act merely sought “dissemination activities designed to inform State and local educational agencies of exemplary programs.”<sup>15</sup> For all its limitations, the 1987 Act built an important foundation and coming changes would portend more educational assistance for homeless children and youth.

### **Review and Revision of Barriers: 1990 Amendments to McKinney**

The McKinney Act was amended and strengthened in 1990.<sup>16</sup> These amendments reflected the data collected by the states showing that homeless students routinely faced barriers in accessing a free appropriate public education. The 1990 amendments made clear that all barriers to homeless students’ enrollment, attendance or success in school must be addressed—whether the barrier is caused by laws, regulations, practices or policies.<sup>17</sup> The amendments required State Coordinators to consider the full range of possible barriers and take steps to review and revise them. An important role established for the first time by the amendments was that of the local educational liaison for students experiencing homelessness. The liaison—then and now—has the critical responsibility of ensuring that students enroll in and succeed in school and receive all services for which they are eligible.<sup>18</sup> In addition, the amendments imposed the responsibility on the states to ensure that local educational agencies review and revise policies that act as barriers. The amendments also gave some—albeit limited—weight to the parent’s choice of school where the original Act did not. In determining school placement, the amendments provide that “consideration shall be given to a request made by a parent.”<sup>19</sup> Significantly, the amendments recognized the need for transportation to ensure stability in school. The amendments greatly expanded the funding under the Act and the ways that funds could be used, including for the provision of direct educational services such as before and after school programs, tutoring, referrals for medical and mental health services and more. Subsequent reauthorizations would further strengthen the educational rights of students experiencing homelessness.

### **The Struggle to Enforce The McKinney-Vento Act in Chicago: *Salazar v. Edwards***

*“Salazar was a milestone in the history of the McKinney-Vento Act—it showed that there were consequences for non-compliance with the law, and set a precedent that has lasting effects, to this day.”*

--Barbara Duffield, NAEHCY<sup>20</sup>

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14. Ibid., 42 U.S.C. 11433.

15. Ibid., 42 U.S.C. 11433(e).

16. *Stewart B. McKinney Homeless Assistance Amendments Act*, 1990, Pub. L. 101-645, 101st Congress. See NCHE Homeless Liaison Toolkit: Appendix 1.A History of the McKinney-Vento Act.

17. Ibid., 42 U.S.C. 11431.

18. Ibid., 42 U.S.C. 11432(e)(8).

19. Ibid., 42 U.S.C. 11432(e)(3)(B).

20. Duffield, “Interview.”

## Early Advocacy and Learning the Extent of the Problem

Unfortunately, the protections for students contained in the McKinney Act did not help students on the streets of Chicago. The Chicago Public Schools routinely violated the rights of students and ignored the law. In 1990, the Homeless Advocacy Project of what is now LAF (federally supported legal services for the poor), studied the treatment of homeless students in Chicago and found widespread non-compliance with the federal law. The findings were published by Bernadine Dohrn in 1991 in a report titled *A Long Way from Home: Chicago's Homeless Children and the Schools*.<sup>21</sup> As part of the study, 142 families with 588 children were interviewed at 20 different homeless shelters in Chicago.<sup>22</sup>

These families generally were not aware of their right to continue their child's attendance at the previously attended school.<sup>23</sup> Further, school administrators demonstrated indifference to the rights provided in the McKinney Act. Twenty-seven of the school-age children were not enrolled in any school and one-third of the families reported that a child missed two or more weeks of school due to the family's moves.<sup>24</sup> Some children missed months of school.<sup>25</sup>

Despite the promise of school stability offered in the McKinney Act, 75% of the school-age children in the study attended three or more schools during the 1990-91 school year alone.<sup>26</sup> At that time, one of the largest emergency shelters for families in Chicago required children to attend its one-room school onsite for the duration of their stay at the shelter.<sup>27</sup> This requirement not only caused more school mobility for children in the shelter since they must leave their school to enroll and then leave the "shelter school" when the allotted time for stay at the shelter expired, but it was also stigmatizing and separated homeless students from others in the neighborhood. The families interviewed faced serious barriers from enrollment delays, lack of transportation, lack of school choice, lack of access to early childhood education, missed school days, guardianship requirements, delays in transfer of records and increased school mobility and segregation due to the shelter school.

The report also demonstrated inaction at the state level. Illinois used initial McKinney Act funding to hire Bradley University to study the extent of the problem, estimate the number of homeless students in the state and identify barriers and make recommendations to overcome them.<sup>28</sup> The Bradley study estimated that in 1989 there were approximately 12,000 homeless children and youth in Illinois, with about 7,000 of those children in Chicago. Recommendations included revision of state laws, technical and financial assistance to schools, training for school staff, and additional funding for schools with large numbers of homeless students. Significantly, the report made recommendations that would greatly improve the lives of students struggling with the lack of housing: giving children and parents the choice of attending the previous school or the current school, requiring schools to provide transportation to students (with reimbursement by the State) and requiring that homeless students be immediately enrolled. Many of these recommendations were incorporated by advocates much later in the Illinois Education for Homeless

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21. Bernadine Dohrn, *A Long Way from Home: Chicago's Homeless Children and the Schools* (Washington, DC: Poverty and Race Research Action Council, 1991).

22. *Ibid.*, 28-29.

23. *Ibid.*, 30-31.

24. *Ibid.*

25. *Ibid.*, 33-36.

26. *Ibid.*, 30.

27. *Ibid.*, 18-19; 39-41.

28. *Ibid.*, 50-51.

Children Act (1994) and then, due to their effectiveness, incorporated at the national level into the 2001 reauthorization of the federal McKinney Act.

But the strong recommendations of the Bradley study were simply not implemented. As of 1991, no law in Illinois had been revised pursuant to McKinney. The State Coordinator at the time, John Edwards stated that he was “not too keen” on all of the Bradley recommendations, including the recommendation on transportation.

### Seeking Relief from the Courts: Initial Filing of Complaint

The non-compliance documented in *A Long Way from Home* eventually led to litigation. In 1992, the *Salazar v. Edwards* case was filed in the Circuit Court of Cook County.<sup>29</sup> Fifteen plaintiffs—Chicago Public Schools parents and students who were homeless—filed a class action complaint against the Chicago Public Schools (“CPS”) and the Illinois State Board of Education (“ISBE”). Prior to filing the case, the plaintiffs sent letters raising concerns about non-compliance to CPS, ISBE and the Chicago Department of Human Services (“CDHS”—the city agency then responsible for administering the shelter system).<sup>30</sup> After a series of unproductive meetings, the complaint raising claims under the McKinney Act, provisions of the Illinois School Code and the Illinois and federal constitutions was filed in June 1992. The plaintiffs sought broad relief against ISBE and CPS including a court order requiring a plan to address the systemic violation of state and federal law.<sup>31</sup> The Complaint described the plaintiffs’ experiences in accessing the most basic McKinney rights, including school enrollment, transportation, right to remain at the same school and more. It asserted that CPS and ISBE systemically failed to: locate and enroll students experiencing homelessness; provide transportation; remove barriers to enrollment, attendance and success; provide meaningful notice of the right to remain in the same school and other rights; and provide parents and children a process to appeal adverse decisions.<sup>32</sup>

The plaintiffs immediately sought a temporary order on behalf of a few of the plaintiff children requiring CPS to immediately enroll, allow choice of school, transportation and admission to a summer program to compensate two children who had missed their entire year of kindergarten after being placed on a waiting list. Faced with the threat of a court order, CPS agreed to provide the limited emergency relief requested.<sup>33</sup>

In the year following the filing of the complaint, the plaintiffs sought again to negotiate a resolution with the defendants that ultimately proved unsuccessful. After negotiations failed, the ISBE filed a motion to dismiss the case in the Spring of 1993, which CPS adopted. The ISBE argued that the provisions of the McKinney Act were not enforceable by homeless students and parents based on a federal district court decision in Washington D.C., *Lampkin v. District of Columbia*.<sup>34</sup> On May 24, 1993, relying in part on the *Lampkin* decision, the court in *Salazar* dismissed all plaintiffs’ claims, finding that the McKinney Act was designed to benefit the state

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29. *Salazar v. Edwards*, Illinois State Board of Education, 92 CH 5703 (IL 1992).

30. Laurene M. Heybach and Stacey E. Platt, *Enforcing the Educational Rights of Homeless Children and Youth: Focus on Chicago*, Section IV (Chicago: National Clearinghouse for Legal Services, 1998).

31. *Ibid.*, Sec. IV.

32. *Ibid.*, Para. 2.

33. *Ibid.*, Sec. IV(E).

34. *Lampkin v. District of Columbia*, Emergency Shelter Family Program, 92-0910, D.C. Cir., 1992, *rev’d*, 27 F.3d 605, D.C. Cir., 1994.

alone, not the homeless families seeking to enforce it, and also that the Illinois School Code claims were not enforceable.<sup>35</sup>

### Appealing the Dismissal of the Case

With conviction that the lower court decision dismissing the case was wrongly decided under the law and facing continued barriers in educational access, plaintiffs filed an appeal with the Illinois Appellate Court. Important developments took place during the appellate process and these developments greatly strengthened the likelihood that plaintiffs would succeed on appeal. In 1994, at the behest of advocates including the authors here, Illinois enacted its own homeless education law with strong, specific language and a right of both administrative and court enforcement.<sup>36</sup> Also in 1994, the decision in the federal *Lampkin* case relied upon by ISBE and CPS finding that the McKinney Act was not enforceable was overturned by the federal Court of Appeals in Washington, D.C. with strong language supporting the claims of the homeless parents.<sup>37</sup> Finally, in 1995 after work by national advocates including the National Coalition for the Homeless as well as the Chicago Coalition for the Homeless, the McKinney Act was amended for a second time.<sup>38</sup> The revised McKinney Act provided stronger, more specific rights and made preschool access a priority.

In light of these developments, the plaintiff families in Chicago filed a motion to inform the appellate court of the changes in the law and the *Lampkin* decision. Immediately before the Illinois Appellate Court was to hear oral arguments in the case, the *Salazar* defendants conceded that the McKinney Act as amended was enforceable. On August 1, 1995, the Illinois Appellate Court remanded the case to the Circuit Court of Cook County for trial.<sup>39</sup>

### Seeking Judicial Relief: Amended Complaint and Second Temporary Order

More than three and one-half years after filing the initial complaint and still awaiting relief and compliance by the Chicago Public Schools, the plaintiffs filed their amended complaint before a new judge, the Honorable Michael J. Getty. In the intervening years, there had been little improvement of the treatment of students experiencing homelessness. The amended complaint detailed story after story of children refused enrollment, removed from schools, denied the right to attend the school of origin, and denied transportation.<sup>40</sup> The amended complaint brought new plaintiffs and new claims based on the amended McKinney Act and the Illinois Education for Homeless Children Act.

In May 1996, plaintiffs sought immediate relief for a 10-year old boy who sought to enroll in a neighborhood school near his shelter. He was denied enrollment by the school and told that he must attend the segregated “shelter school.” The judge granted an order requiring the neighborhood school immediately enroll the child. Subsequently, the judge denied yet another motion to dismiss brought by defendant CPS and then conducted a structured mediation process

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35. Heybach and Platt, *Enforcing Educational Rights*, Sec. IV(G).

36. Laurene M. Heybach, “Advocacy and Obstacles in the Education of Homeless Children and Youth in Illinois: Advocacy and Obstacles,” *Public Interest Law Reporter* (Summer 2009): 284-85; See Section III(A) for a description of the state law and advocacy regarding its passage.

37. *Lampkin*, 27 F.3d 605.

38. Heybach and Platt, *Enforcing Educational Rights*, Sec. V.

39. *Ibid*, Sec. V.

40. *Salazar v. Edwards*, First Amended Complaint (November 13, 1995).



that—at long last—resulted in a Settlement Agreement with hope to finally address the needs of the students.

### Reaching a Comprehensive Settlement: Removal of Barriers

Finally, more than four years after the *Salazar* case was filed, a comprehensive settlement was entered into in November 1996 and approved by the court in January 1997.<sup>41</sup> The settlement was designed to remove the multiple barriers to the enrollment, attendance and success of homeless students that were identified during the long course of the litigation. The settlement established general equal access and non-discrimination policies and required CPS and ISBE to formally adopt and implement specific policies negotiated with the plaintiffs on the education of homeless children and youth.<sup>42</sup>

The settlement contained important rights for homeless students to ensure: immediate enrollment, school choice, transportation, dispute resolution, annual training of CPS staff, coordination with government and social service agencies, notice to students and parents, attendance and truancy data and information production and enforcement.<sup>43</sup> One of the most significant aspects of the settlement was the requirement for CPS to designate at each of the 600 Chicago Public Schools an employee to serve as the school's liaison to assist in identifying, enrolling and serving students without permanent housing.<sup>44</sup> The settlement also achieved clear rules to ensure that transportation was provided to every child who chooses to attend his or her school of origin. In many cases, public transportation fare would be provided for the students and for the parents of younger children to accompany them. In cases where a parent was unable to transport a younger child, school bus transportation would be provided through the "hardship transportation" program.<sup>45</sup>

The settlement also contained important definitions of key terms including "guardian," "school of origin," and "homeless."<sup>46</sup> Because the definition of homeless was somewhat general under the McKinney Act and thus subject to differing interpretation, the settlement adopted the expansive definition contained in the U.S. Department of Education Guidance.<sup>47</sup> This Guidance contained a broad definition of a "homeless" children and youth: those living in shelters, sharing housing with other families or individuals ("doubled-up"); living in cars, abandoned buildings, on the streets or other inadequate situations; or living in trailer parks or camping grounds due to lack of adequate living accommodations.<sup>48</sup> However, despite achieving this comprehensive settlement, difficulties remained for students and families.

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41. *Salazar v. Edwards*, "Settlement Agreement and Stipulation to Dismiss;" see Heybach and Platt, *Enforcing Educational Rights* for a more detailed discussion of the provisions of the Settlement Agreement.

42. *Salazar v. Edwards*, 9, CPS Policy attached as Exhibit C; ISBE Policy attached as Exhibit D.

43. *Ibid.*, paras. 9-33.

44. *Ibid.*, para 21.

45. *Ibid.*, paras. 11-14.

46. *Ibid.*, para. 3.

47. *Ibid.*

48. United States Department of Education, *Preliminary Guidance for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth Program* (Washington D.C.: United States Department of Education, June 1995); this document was attached as Exhibit A to *Salazar* settlement. Many of these living situations would be incorporated into the definition of "homeless" the 2001 reauthorization of the *McKinney Act*.

## Back to Court: Enforcing the Settlement Agreement

Although the provisions of the 1997 settlement offered hope and promise that students in homeless situations would finally be well-served by CPS, problems remained. Much of the information required to be produced by CPS regarding its implementation demonstrated a lack of compliance and a lack of commitment to the letter and the spirit of the settlement. Families continued to face significant barriers, particularly regarding the right to remain in the school of origin, timely transportation and access to preschool. In addition to hearing of problems directly from homeless service providers, the plaintiffs' attorneys, now at the Law Project of the Chicago Coalition for the Homeless ("CCH"), received numerous complaints from shelter providers and other professionals serving homeless families about the poor and degrading treatment of students. Faced with institutional indifference and a hostile attitude of the CPS Director of the Homeless Education Program—plaintiffs again returned to court. In 1999, plaintiffs filed a Motion to Enforce the Settlement agreement against CPS.<sup>49</sup>

A trial was held in the summer of 1999 in which homeless parents and service providers crowded the courtroom and testified about the widespread non-compliance in CPS. A number of documents evidencing non-compliance were also submitted into evidence. Several principals and administrators testified on behalf of CPS, including the Director of the Homeless Education Program. Following the hearing, the judge issued one of the broadest injunctive relief orders ever issued by the Circuit Court of Cook County.<sup>50</sup>

The judge found that the testimony of service providers clearly suggested that the Director of the Homeless Education Program "held homeless people in disdain and felt that they did not deserve the special privileges mandated by the law."<sup>51</sup> The opinion noted that:

- over one hundred schools failed to send any representative to mandatory training and that nothing was done about it;
- documentation about the program and services provided to families was "woefully incomplete;"
- the "demeanor, manner and testimony" of a senior CPS official support the allegation that homeless children were a low priority for CPS;
- CPS was confused about the estimated number of homeless students;
- CPS had a de facto policy of transferring homeless students to the school closest to their shelter event though that policy violated state and federal law and the settlement;
- CPS routinely distributed inaccurate information about the rights of homeless students to homeless families, the public, professionals and even to their own employees;
- The Director of the Homeless Education Program "simply tried to wear parents down until they were ready to switch schools;"
- Information provided by CPS pursuant to the Settlement Agreement was "patently deficient;"
- CPS failed to provide adequate transportation, in part, based on the fear of the Director "that someone will try to 'work the system' to get away with" extra bus or train fares

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49. *Salazar v. Edwards*, "Motion to Enforce the Settlement Agreement Against the Local Defendants, the Chicago Board of Education, and to Further Extend the Production of Information Provisions of the Agreement." By this time, ISBE had taken a number of positive steps to implement the law and settlement and joined in the effort to secure CPS compliance. Heybach, *Advocacy and Obstacles*, 286-87.

50. *Salazar v. Edwards*, "Memorandum of Opinion," August 3, 1999.

51. *Ibid.*, 2-3.

- CPS refused suggestions from the ISBE and the Chicago Coalition for the Homeless to improve service to families.<sup>52</sup>

The Judge noted that, with one exception, every CPS witness “was damaging to [CPS] case and often proved up one or more issues for the plaintiffs.”<sup>53</sup> The extensive Memorandum Opinion and Order was designed to address the widespread non-compliance of CPS and to ensure that the students experiencing homelessness received the services to which they were entitled. The 12-part Order addressed awareness, compliance of CPS personnel, training, liaisons, notice, transportation, reporting, collaboration and communication with the ISBE and the plaintiffs and revision of materials distributed to the public. Indicating the seriousness of non-compliance, the Order imposed a sanction of \$1,000 per day if CPS did not comply with reporting requirements. An independent monitor was appointed to ensure full compliance with CPS paying the costs of the monitor and ongoing reporting to the court was required.<sup>54</sup>

### **Continued Struggle: Appeal of Order by CPS**

At the time the decision was issued, Laurene Heybach, lead counsel on the case since its inception said, “Our hope is that this ruling will end the legal battles and allow us to focus on the real issue, making sure that homeless children get the education they need to succeed.”<sup>55</sup> However, CPS had other ideas. Paul Vallas, who was then the Chief Executive Officer of CPS declared, “We are not out there denying help to homeless kids,” and indicated CPS planned to appeal the court’s order. Remarkably, Vallas objected to the order enforcing the very settlement to which CPS had itself agreed because in his view it would allow homeless advocates to determine school policy. He explained “We don’t want a school system run by special interests.”<sup>56</sup>

CPS did indeed appeal the Order to the Illinois Appellate Court. Plaintiffs were truly frustrated by CPS’ endless litigation battles against homeless families instead of simply serving the students as required by a law enacted 12 years before.

### **Brokering Another Settlement: Shifting Attitudes**

One positive development occurred as a result of the *Salazar* enforcement motion. CPS re-organized the structure of the Homeless Education Program under the authority of Dr. Blondean Davis, then the CPS Chief of Schools and Regions. Davis was the *only* CPS employee the judge determined to be helpful to CPS’ case.<sup>57</sup> While the appeal was pending, plaintiffs’ counsel approached the private appellate attorney hired by CPS to handle the appeal and Davis to broach the possibility of reaching another settlement. A strong settlement would give CPS the opportunity to be relieved of the restrictive requirements of the court’s broad injunctive order, decrease the wasteful expense of litigation and, hopefully, secure the comprehensive services the

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52. Ibid.

53. Ibid., 10.

54. Ibid., 12-13.

55. Chicago Coalition for the Homeless, “Lawsuit Creates Educational Opportunities for Homeless Kids,” *Homeward Bound Newsletter* (Fall 1999).

56. Ray Quintanilla, “School Board Fined for Violation of Homeless Rule,” *Chicago Tribune* (Chicago, IL), Aug. 4, 1999.

57. *Salazar v. Edwards*, “Memorandum of Opinion.”

students long-deserved. CPS agreed and, after negotiation, the parties reached a second comprehensive settlement in the case in 2000.<sup>58</sup>

An important provision of the new settlement indicated—at long last—a willingness of CPS to truly collaborate: “As a result of the joint efforts of CPS and plaintiffs, CPS is endeavoring to develop the premier homeless education program in the country.”<sup>59</sup> CPS also expressed its dedication to improving its work on behalf of the city’s homeless children and youth.<sup>60</sup>

Once the settlement agreement was entered and approved, a real shift took place. Plaintiffs’ lead counsel began to meet monthly, one-on-one, with Davis. As Chief of Schools and Regions, Davis reported directly to the CEO and her leadership position enabled her to cut through the bureaucracy and accomplish important changes to better serve homeless children and families. These meetings led to a close working relationship, a frank discussion of issues and problems, and a solution-focused approach with an emphasis on ensuring that families and students who lacked housing received needed services promptly. Davis’ leadership communicated a clear message from the top to the CPS bureaucracy that the needs of homeless students were now a priority for the district. Davis led mandatory trainings of all school staff herself and set a new tone and attitude. While problems remained and there were still instances of non-compliance at local schools, a restructured system was put in place to deliver solutions. The time between the achievement of the 2000 Settlement and the departure of Davis from CPS in 2002 was a high point for the active involvement of CPS’ top leadership in meeting the needs of homeless students.

### **More Progress: Compassionate and Professional Management of the Program**

While Davis’ subsequent departure was a loss for attention to the program by senior CPS leadership, progress was made with the day-to-day management of what was then known as the Homeless Education Program (HEP). In 2003, Patricia Rivera was hired as manager of the HEP. Rivera was a long-time CPS school social worker with a master’s degree, licensed in clinical social work, and highly skilled at working with low-income and minority families and addressing their needs.

Under Rivera’s leadership, the program changed its name to Ensuring Support for Students in Temporary Living Situations or “STLS.” This program encouraged families to seek support and services without being labeled as “homeless,” a term stigmatizing to some. As Jamilah Scott, a parent without permanent housing expressed, “The word ‘homeless’ shouldn’t be used. It sounds harsh and negative. Even though I lost my own housing...I didn’t consider myself homeless. To me, the word “homeless” doesn’t open the door to conversation.”<sup>61</sup>

In an effort to shift the attitudes of school staff, Rivera often invited homeless or formerly homeless students and parents to participate in the mandatory staff training. One individual who told her story at a series of trainings was Cary Martin, an impressive young graduate of Northwestern University School of Law who experienced homelessness when she was a CPS student. Martin benefited from the ability to stay in her school of origin, noting:

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58. *Salazar v. Edwards*, “Settlement Agreement and Stipulation to Dismiss,” 2000. By the time settlement was reached, the judge had retired and Judge Julia Nowicki was assigned to the case.

59. *Ibid.*, “Introduction.”

60. *Ibid.*

61. Jamilah Scott, telephone interview with authors, July 16, 2014.

having access to a stable learning environment was a necessary component to my academic success. School essentially became my safe haven, as it was often the only stable environment that I encountered. Staying in my school of origin also helped me to establish relationships with teachers who were committed to helping me reach my full potential.<sup>62</sup>

Rivera also made efforts to recognize the contributions of school liaisons who provided outstanding service to students by hosting events and honoring their work. These efforts were successful in part. However, given continued challenges in ensuring that all schools participated in mandatory training, the turnover of staff at the school level, and the sheer number of schools in the system, hostile and negative attitudes toward homeless families persisted in some schools.

Rivera made a number of other significant contributions leading the STLS program during her tenure from 2003-2010, including:

- Working with CCH to establish a scholarship program for CPS graduates who experienced homelessness in high school. The scholarship program is now in its 11<sup>th</sup> year and has been expanded to serve more students.
- Immediately enrolling students who relocated to Chicago following Hurricane Katrina and working with other government agencies to ensure the students were served.
- Establishing a tutoring program for students living in shelters. Ms. Rivera now continues this work as Director of Chicago HOPES for Kids.
- Applying for grant funds when the state of Illinois first provided homeless education funds available in Fiscal Year 2009. Ms. Rivera used the grant funds to hire youth workers who were placed at high schools with high concentrations of students experiencing homelessness. The youth workers reached out to students to ensure that they remained on track to graduate and the STLS program achieved higher graduation rates than the rest of CPS. Rivera continues to advocate for restoration of this state funding.
- Launching a pilot project to provide 500 doubled-up CPS families with housing and other services.<sup>63</sup>

Despite Rivera's strong efforts to lead the program and her significant contributions, the failure of CPS leadership to embrace HEP and consider the needs of homeless students in its major decision-making stymied the success of STLS.

### **“Chaos on Clark Street:” Progress Stalled by Lack of Investment**

“Chaos on Clark Street” was a term coined by the Chicago Teachers Union, referring to the onset of a new regime of CPS leaders after the election of Mayor Rahm Emanuel. This leadership was characterized by high-level staff turnover and frequent organizational changes at CPS' headquarters at 125 Clark Street in 2013. When current CEO Barbara Byrd-Bennett took

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62. Cary Martin, “Homeless Education: Unveiling the Truth Behind Beating the Odds,” *Public Interest Law Reporter* (Summer 2009): 299.

63. Lauren R. Harrison, “The Hidden Homeless: Englewood Students Targeted for Pilot Project,” *Chicago Tribune* (Chicago, IL), July 10, 2009.



over the Chicago schools in October 2012, she became the 5<sup>th</sup> CEO in four years.<sup>64</sup> This revolving door of leadership and seemingly constant reorganization negatively impacted the operation of the STLS program—and, indeed, began under Chicago’s previous mayor, Richard M. Daley.

Frequently during both HEP and STLS there was no consistent person or department to which the staff serving homeless families reported. During Rivera’s tenure, she reported over time to four different departments (Office of Specialized Services, Office of Elementary Areas and Schools, Grants Management and Office of School Management), each one seemingly puzzled by—and ignorant of the purpose and scope of the program. On one occasion, STLS was simply eliminated from the CPS budget. (Rivera email September 20, 2014). The Department currently is part of Student Support and Engagement in the Office of College and Career Success. Since Davis’ departure, the STLS department has had no meaningful oversight by any individual reporting directly to the CEO.

As a result, the needs of homeless students were routinely neglected when CPS undertook system-wide initiatives, such as back-to-school campaigns, early childhood education pre-enrollment, selective school enrollment procedures and more. Furthermore, STLS has suffered from repeated staffing shortages and budget cuts.

## **School Closings: Depriving Students of School Stability**

### ***Renaissance 2010***

A glaring example of CPS neglect of the needs of homeless students was its crafting and execution of an initiative termed “Renaissance 2010” begun under Arnie Duncan’s tenure as CPS CEO and announced at the end of the 2003-04 school year.

In June 2004, just weeks before the end of the school year, CPS suddenly announced it would close 10 schools within 2 weeks. Those closures would displace 3,900 low-income and minority students with many of the closings impacting schools where public housing had been or was slated to be demolished.<sup>65</sup> Over 200 homeless students were impacted by the closures in 2004.<sup>66</sup> These closings were only the first wave of the Renaissance 2010 plan which purported to close between 60 and 90 schools by the year 2010 and open up to 100 new schools during the same period.<sup>67</sup> Because of the sudden nature of the plan, the lack of school and community involvement, the instability the closures would bring and the short time period to transition students, strong community opposition to the plan immediately developed. But despite vigorous community opposition at public hearings, the closings moved forward. No analysis of the possible academic or social impact of such closings on the students affected—and the homeless students, in particular—was conducted by CPS prior to announcing the closures.

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64. Becky Vevea, “Changes in School Leadership Prompts Questions about Revolving Door,” *WBEZ 91.5* (Chicago, IL), October 12, 2012, accessed October 28, 2014, <http://www.wbez.org/news/change-cps-leadership-prompts-questions-about-revolving-door-103112>.

65. Laurene M. Heybach, “In the Courts: Homeless Families Respond to Chicago’s ‘Renaissance 2010’ School Plan,” *Children’s Legal Rights Journal* (Winter 2004): 81.

66. Chicago Coalition for the Homeless, “Law Project Accomplishments,” accessed October 28, 2014, <http://www.chicagohomeless.org/programs-campaigns/legal-aid/law-project/law-project-accomplishments/>.

67. Heybach, “In the Courts,” 81.

### ***Salazar Plaintiffs Return to Court***

The closings had a particularly harmful impact on students who were homeless, creating even more educational disruption and depriving them of the right to continue attending the school of origin. Because of this impact and CPS' exclusion of the *Salazar* class members in planning for school closures and student displacement, the *Salazar* plaintiffs returned to court and moved to enforce the 2000 settlement agreement.<sup>68</sup> As a result, in January 2005, an agreement was reached detailing services and choices to be provided to the students impacted by the ten 2004 closures.<sup>69</sup>

Almost six months after filing the motion to enforce and after court-facilitated settlement negotiations, the parties entered another agreement that would apply to the STLS students impacted by the coming 2005 school closures.<sup>70</sup> The agreement provided that homeless students at a closing school would have a choice to attend significantly higher performing schools, and, in some cases, receive permanent transportation assistance to enable the student to graduate without any further school change. The school selected would become the student's new "school of origin," thus offering stability in that school in the future.<sup>71</sup> The agreement also provided for transition services to assist the student in adjusting to the new school. A transition team consisting of STLS staff, a social worker and a certified teacher would assist the student in adjusting to the new school. The team would review student records; interview the child's teacher at the closing school and receiving school; interview the parent; identify academic, social and emotional needs and recommend services to meet those needs; provide regular follow up; and facilitate a visit to the new school.<sup>72</sup>

Because many of the new schools opening pursuant to Renaissance 2010 were to be public charter schools, the parties also negotiated language to be included in agreements between charter schools and CPS to protect the rights of homeless students. That language would require charter schools to "insure that all homeless children who attend [the charter school] receive the same services as those provided by CPS to homeless children" and to "provide services to homeless children at the same level that CPS provides those services."<sup>73</sup> The contract language makes clear that charter schools must follow the *Salazar* settlement agreement and state and homeless education law and policy.

After achieving these initial agreements, progress stalled. CPS refused to provide data and information that plaintiffs sought in discovery, requiring multiple motions before the court to compel CPS to provide the information. CPS filed motions arguing that the case could not move forward and the judge ruled that the case could move forward and called for CPS to "consider the impact upon homeless students when deciding which schools it will close and implement a

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68. Tracy Dell'Angela, "Homeless Kids' Advocates Sue Chicago Schools," *Chicago Tribune* (Chicago, IL), September 8, 2004. "In the Courts" contains a complete discussion of the harmful impact on school mobility on students and a description of plaintiffs' claims in the motion to enforce.

69. Ed Finkel, "Homelessness Is On the Rise in CPS," *Catalyst Chicago* (Chicago, IL), April 1, 2005. Because of the timing—schools had already been closed and students had already been moved to a new school—the agreement was focused on assessing how those students were transitioning and providing needed services to them.

70. *Salazar v. Edwards*, "Temporary Memorandum Agreement," March 16, 2005. By the time of the agreement, three additional CPS schools had been slated for closure in the 2004-05 school year.

71. *Ibid.*

72. *Ibid.*

73. Chicago Public Schools General Counsel, email message to Chicago Coalition for the Homeless Lead Counsel for *Salazar* plaintiffs, May 18, 2005.

plan to account for the harmful effects on homeless children.”<sup>74</sup> Finally, at a deposition of a senior CPS official, CPS indicated that it would follow the 2005 Temporary Memorandum Agreement allowing for school choice, transportation and transition services in future school closings. Based on this commitment, plaintiffs voluntarily withdrew the motion for enforcement in the spring of 2007 and worked to secure transfers to better-performing schools and needed services for students impacted by school closures.

### ***The Illinois Legislature Responds to School Closings***

The concerns about the impact of the closures on homeless students were concerns for all children. The lack of planning, the impact on poor and minority communities, the destabilizing impact on neighborhoods, the potential for increased violence affected communities citywide. In addition, concerns about the impact on children’s learning and whether the children would have access to higher-performing schools and meaningful transition services were concerns for non-homeless students impacted by the closures as well. These concerns led to the creation of a state legislative task force—the Chicago Educational Facilities Task Force (CEFTF), created in 2009 by pressure from education stakeholders throughout Chicago’s communities. The Task Force appointed by the Illinois General Assembly includes representatives from the state legislature, CPS, the Chicago Teachers Union, the Chicago Principals & Administrators Association as well as community organizations including the Chicago Coalition for the Homeless. Based on widespread public input and a nation-wide review of best practices for maintaining and improving schools as community assets, the CEFTF made policy and legislative recommendations to the General Assembly.

Informed by the CEFTF recommendations, Illinois enacted the School Actions Accountability and Master Planning Act (School Actions Act) in 2011.<sup>75</sup> Among other provisions, the Act requires early notice about any proposed CPS school closures and greater protections for students impacted by closure (including specifically, homeless students). “School transition plans” and transition services for students leaving closed schools are important mandates of the Act.

Despite community opposition and legislative concern about the impact of school closures on students and communities, CPS continued closing schools. Shifting rationales were offered by Mayor Emanuel and CPS for these closures—low enrollment, poor performance, underutilization, facility condition issues, alternative uses, change of educational purpose or conversion to smaller schools or a military academy. CPS also had a variety of other “board actions” that impacted schools: consolidation, boundary changes, phase out, reconstitution and, the complete firing and replacement of all school staff known as a “turnaround.”

### ***Massive School Closures of 2013***

In the fall of 2012, there were press reports of CPS plans to close an unprecedented number of schools. Despite vigorous opposition, CPS sought and received an extension of the December 1 deadline to announce school closures imposed by the legislature in the School Actions Act. Ultimately, CPS announced that as many as 54 schools would be closed and 61 school

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74. David Mendell, “Homeless Suit on School Advances,” *Chicago Tribune* (Chicago, IL), February 2, 2006.

75. *Illinois Public Act 96-803, SB 630, 97th General Assembly* (February 8, 2011).

building structures emptied in addition to school turnarounds and consolidations.<sup>76</sup> These closures were “the largest round of school closings in American history.”<sup>77</sup> More than 47,500 students would be impacted by CPS’ plans, including more than 3,900 students experiencing homelessness. Eight percent of the students impacted by the closures are in temporary living situations, double the rate of homeless students in the overall CPS student population.<sup>78</sup> “Overwhelmingly, and almost exclusively, the communities of Chicago targeted for massive school closures are those on the City’s South and West Side: communities that are dramatically impoverished and predominantly comprised of African Americans.”<sup>79</sup>

The community response in opposition to the proposed closings was dramatic – numerous protests and marches took place, parent and teachers turned out at public hearings and lawsuits were filed raising race discrimination and special education claims. Previous school closing resulted in displacing thousands of students into other struggling schools with no evidence of measureable benefit for students.<sup>80</sup> Despite widespread community opposition, the CPS Board of Education approved 50 school closures.<sup>81</sup>

The closures were approved so close to the end of the school year in May 2013 that there was little time to do meaningful planning or transition with students and families regarding what school students would attend in the fall or what transition services were necessary. The Law Project of the Chicago Coalition for the Homeless worked to assist families in the STLS program but encountered difficulty due to the shortness of time, inadequate contact information for families, large number of students impacted and limited services available.

After the closings took place, concern has continued to surface from advocates and communities about the impact on students. The CEFTF issued a report in June 2014 finding numerous problems with the process including: finalizing the closings so late in the school year; the gross racial disparity of the closings; disregard of research on the negative impact of school closings; disregard of the opinions of independent hearing officers; insufficient transition plans; lack of evaluation of the effects of school closings on students; failure to adequately report on the financial impact; and higher than expected costs of the school closings.<sup>82</sup>

School closings and the impact on Chicago’s homeless families clearly illustrates that while progress has been made in CPS’ treatment of homeless students, many challenges remain.

76. Cindy Tapper, “An Open Letter Seeking Justice in the School Closing Crisis,” *Chicago Lawyers’ Committee for Civil Rights Under Law, Inc.*, May 18, 2013, accessed October 28, 2014, <http://clcrul.org/postwidely/798>.

77. Becky Vevea, “CTU, Parents File Lawsuit Against School Closures,” *WBEZ91.5* (Chicago, IL), May 29, 2013, accessed October 28, 2014, <http://www.wbez.org/news/ctu-parents-file-lawsuit-against-school-closures-107419>.

78. Chicago Coalition for the Homeless, “Homeless Children are 8% of 31,438 Students Impacted by Chicago Public Schools’ Closing/merger Plans,” May 22, 2013, accessed October 28, 2014, <http://www.chicagohomeless.org/cpsclosures/#sthash.WQMGxYPv.dpuf>.

79. Taper, “An Open Letter.”

80. *Ibid.* For an excellent overview of Chicago Public Schools’ continuing disparate racial treatment of African American students, see Complaint against Chicago Public Schools under Title IV and Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (Advancement Project May 13, 2014) available at [http://b3cdn.net/advancement/05d51d8dad82f1f1cd\\_lh1m6sitf.pdf](http://b3cdn.net/advancement/05d51d8dad82f1f1cd_lh1m6sitf.pdf).

81. Chicago Teachers Union, “CTU, Parents File Lawsuit,” June 3, 2013, accessed October 28, 2014, <http://www.ctunet.com/blog/ctu-and-parents-file-new-lawsuit>.

82. “The Report of the Illinois General Assembly’s Chicago Educational Facilities Task 2012-2013,” June 2014, accessed October 28, 2014, <http://www.isbe.net/CEF/pdf/ceftf-annual-rpt12-13.pdf>.

## Achievements of *Salazar* and Ongoing Challenges in Chicago

Measuring progress from the inception of the *Salazar* lawsuit in 1992, there has been remarkable change in Chicago:

- More than 160,000 homeless students have been served;
- STLS has been established centrally and provides technical support throughout the CPS school labyrinth;
- A plan for in-district and inter-district transportation services for students and accompanying parents has been in place and functioning for 14 years;
- More than \$100 million in resources has been targeted specifically to homeless student services in CPS;
- More than \$1 million in school fees have been waived for homeless students;
- Annual and regular repeat trainings have occurred for CPS staff for 14 years developing much greater awareness and responsiveness of school staff to homeless parents and students;
- Title I federal dollars have been set-aside annually in the CPS budget and at CPS schools specifically for expenditures on homeless student needs;
- Though compelled to do so, CPS meets monthly and negotiates problems and solutions with homeless parents' and students' legal representatives at the Law Project;
- Preschools throughout CPS regularly must accept and serve homeless students;
- Tutoring services are mandated to be provided to all CPS homeless students;
- Every CPS school and charter school has an assigned homeless liaison;
- Homeless students are now provided uniforms, clothing, coats and supplies as needed;
- A reduction in mid-year school transfers (2009-2012, 74.1% of STLS students did not transfer, CPS STLS Training slide August, 2014);
- At least yearly notice is provided to all families enrolling in CPS with additional informational materials produced and utilized throughout Chicago;
- Charter schools are clearly required to comply with the mandates pertaining to homeless students;
- Linkages to housing and shelter, youth services, community agencies, health care, mental health services, immunizations, food pantries and other programs are a routine part of CPS responsibilities to homeless students;
- Very valuable monthly and yearly data is produced by CPS to indicate numbers of homeless students broken down by grades, ethnicity, race, school, disability, living arrangements, reason for school separation and, most currently attendance.

Challenges that remain for serving homeless students, however, are formidable. In addition to the school closings, there are many issues that need significant attention to ensure that the requirements of the *Salazar* agreement and homeless education laws are met for students without housing in the Chicago Public Schools. These include:

- Adequate funding, including better utilization of Title I set-aside for STLS students;
- Adequate staffing of the STLS program with better qualified personnel (including school-based liaisons);



- Consideration of STLS students in the process of access for students to selective enrollment schools and in all system-wide initiatives and informational materials;
- Ensuring connections are made by school staff to all needed services for homeless families and unaccompanied youth;
- Developing awareness throughout all neighborhoods of the City, including community outreach, materials and website;
- Training of all school-level staff (not simply liaisons, principals or clerks) at all schools throughout a 600 plus-school system;
- Greater outreach and cultural competency regarding African-American, Latino, Arabic-speaking and immigrant communities;
- Removal of barriers to attendance; attendance improvement and truancy prevention for more than 22,000 STLS students;
- Ensuring full and immediate participation of homeless students in all school activities, including sports;
- Ensuring that homeless parents are supported and recruited for school involvement and input;
- Identification of and services targeted to unaccompanied youth;
- Expansion and full access to all early childhood services;
- Ensuring prohibition on charging school fees is fully complied with, especially with charter schools;
- Greater linkage to housing for families and youth in STLS program; expansion of pilot program linking families to housing;
- Constant changes in CPS management, policies, priorities, department re-organizations and other structures which create ill-thought out and executed approaches to serving homeless families and youth and generates practical chaos at the school level.

Over two decades of vigorous advocacy in Chicago has resulted in significant progress in addressing the needs of the dramatically increasing population of children and youth without housing. Legal advocacy has been critical in achieving this progress. The *Salazar v. Edwards* case has been an effective tool to increase CPS' compliance with the law—both in court and out of court. As Barbara Duffield at NAEHCY notes, “The presence of the Law Project of the Chicago Coalition for the Homeless has been instrumental in Chicago and Illinois. I can count on one hand the number of legal organizations in the country with expertise on the legal rights of children and families experiencing homelessness.”<sup>83</sup> Continued advocacy is needed to ensure that all barriers are removed to the enrollment, attendance and success of students in temporary living situations in Chicago.

### **Focus on Illinois: Law, Leadership and Partnership**

#### **The Illinois Education for Homeless Children Act—Charlie's Law**

2014 marks the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of “Charlie's Law,” the Illinois Education for Homeless Children Act.<sup>84</sup>

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83. Duffield, “Interview.”

84. *Education for Homeless Children Act*, 105 ILCS 45/Art. 1, 88th General Assembly, accessed October 28, 2014, [http://www.ilga.gov/legislation/ilcs/ilcs4.asp?DocName=010500450HArt.1&ActID=1013&ChapAct=105%](http://www.ilga.gov/legislation/ilcs/ilcs4.asp?DocName=010500450HArt.1&ActID=1013&ChapAct=105%20)

### ***Suburban District's Denial of Enrollment Prompts State Law***

The impetus to pass a law in Illinois protecting homeless children's educational access came in the fall of 1993. A family in the Hesed House shelter located in Aurora, Illinois was denied continued enrollment by Indian Prairie Unit School District 204 in Naperville, the district the students attended before losing their housing.<sup>85</sup> Although the federal McKinney Act was in effect and required school districts to remove barriers to the enrollment of homeless students, the school district filed a lawsuit challenging the family's right to continued enrollment. In the court hearing, Dr. Joy J. Rogers, PhD., a professor at Loyola University School of Education, testified that moving the children to another school (after multiple previous school moves), would be extremely destructive in terms of their academic achievement, their behavior and their self-esteem."<sup>86</sup> (In another case, Dr. Rogers testified that children, on average, lose four to six months of academic time with each school move). Despite McKinney's language about removing barriers, the court ruled that the children could not enroll in Indian Prairie schools.<sup>87</sup>

### ***Advocates Work for Passage of State Law***

Following the frustrating court process, advocates became convinced that a state legislative solution was needed and worked to pass legislation in the Illinois General Assembly that would strengthen the rights created by the then-existing McKinney Act language.<sup>88</sup> Representative Mary Lou Colishaw from Aurora sponsored the law and then-Illinois Representative Judy Biggert was one of the co-sponsors. Informed by the experience gained in representing numerous homeless families in Chicago and the experience of the family at Hesed House, a bill was drafted to make clear and specific for Illinois schools requirements which were non-existence or ambiguous in the 1990 McKinney Act.<sup>89</sup> Two advocates from Aurora—Diane Nilan, then the Director of the PADS emergency shelter and the Associate Director of Hesed House and Sister Rose Marie Lorentzen, Executive Director of Hesed House—took repeated trips to the General Assembly in Springfield to advocate for the bill. Diane Nilan remembers that "A lot of legislators had no idea about homelessness at that time. We took the opportunity to enlighten them and to build relationships. Once we persisted in the legislative process, the bill got a surprisingly positive reception."<sup>90</sup>

The Illinois Education for Homeless Children Act passed in May 1994 with broad bipartisan support. It contained clear and strong provisions regarding: the choice to remain in the

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85. Casey Banas, "Homeless Kids Test School Boundaries," *Chicago Tribune* (Chicago, IL), Sept. 4, 1993.

86. Casey Banas, "Homeless Kids Lose Bid to Stay in Their Schools," *Chicago Tribune* (Chicago, IL), Oct. 13, 1993.

87. Ibid.

88. For a detailed discussion of the advocacy efforts in passing the law, see Diane Nilan, *Crossing the Line: Taking Steps to End Homelessness* (Bradenton, FL: Booklocker.com, Inc., 2005). Excerpt available at [www.hearus.us](http://www.hearus.us).

89. Heybach, "Advocacy and Obstacles," 284-85. The Legal Assistance Foundation of Metropolitan Chicago, the largest legal services for the poor agency in Illinois (now re-named LAF) played a significant role in drafting, lobbying and negotiating as well.

90. Diane Nilan, telephone interview.

school of origin;<sup>91</sup> the right of the parent or guardian to make the decision about the choice of schools; the right to transportation to and from the school of origin (including a process for sharing cost and responsibility if more than one school district is involved); the right to immediate enrollment even without records normally required for enrollment such as previous academic records, medical records or proof of residency; and most critically, due process protections for the students which included not only the right to challenge a school's refusal to admit through "dispute resolution" and court enforcement but the right to be admitted and transported *during the resolution* even if the school contested the student's right to enroll.<sup>92</sup>

Recently, in recognition of the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the state law, Governor Quinn issued a proclamation declaring May 2014 as Homeless Students' Educational Rights Month. The proclamation noted that the Illinois law became the foundation for the reauthorization of the McKinney-Vento Act in 2001 under the leadership of Illinois Congresswoman Judy Biggert (now retired). The proclamation also highlighted the dramatic increase in the number of identified students experiencing homelessness in Illinois—over 50,000 in the 2012-13 school year.<sup>93</sup>

### Bringing Illinois' Law to the Federal Level

*"It was delightfully surprising that Rep. Biggert picked up the charge and went forth as a legislative advocate for students who were homeless. She maintained her passion for the issue and went above and beyond."*  
--Diane Nilan<sup>94</sup>

*"Representative Biggert maintained vigilant persistence on homeless education issues during her fourteen years in Congress and secured broad bipartisan support. Because she pushed to include elements of the Illinois law to the federal level, millions of children have benefitted."*  
--Barbara Duffield<sup>95</sup>

In 2001, The McKinney Act was both reauthorized and renamed as the McKinney-Vento Act. The reauthorization legislation "drew much of its inspiration and language from the Illinois Education for Homeless Children Act and Illinois' experience in implementing the McKinney Act."<sup>96</sup> H.R. 623, the reauthorization legislation introduced by Representative Biggert, specifically noted that the purpose of the legislation was to "include the innovative practices, such as those enacted in Illinois, proven to be effective in helping homeless children and youth enroll in, attend and succeed in school."<sup>97</sup> Representative Biggert said that she was motivated to be a legislative champion for homeless children based on her visits to Hesed House in Aurora, arranged by

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91. "School of origin" is defined in the law (105 ILCS 45/1-5) as the school that the child attended when permanently housed or the school in which the child was last enrolled.

92. *Education for Homeless Children Act*.

93. State of Illinois Proclamation (March 27, 2014). ISBE data for the 2013-14 school year shows 59,112 homeless students identified in Illinois.

94. Nilan, "Interview."

95. Duffield, "Interview."

96. Laurene M. Heybach and Patricia Nix-Hodes, *The Educational Rights of Homeless Children: Creating a Model Program in Illinois* (Chicago: Chicago Coalition for the Homeless, October 1, 2000).

97. Ibid. H.R. 623 was not passed but provided the framework for H.R. 1, the bill that was enacted.

Diane Nilan, and her knowledge and support as a co-sponsor of the Illinois law when she was in the Illinois Legislature.<sup>98</sup>

The reauthorized federal law did indeed reflect many aspects of the Illinois law and the *Salazar* settlement. Important provisions of the law include:

- Immediate enrollment;
- Broad definition of homelessness;
- Definition of enrollment to include “attending classes and participating fully in school activities;”
- Designation of a homeless liaison in each school district;
- Requirements for public notice of the educational rights of homeless students;
- Providing school stability by giving students choice to remain in the school of origin;
- Requiring districts to ensure transportation is provided to the school of origin and requiring districts to work together to share cost and responsibility;
- Protecting students from segregation in separate schools;
- Requiring districts to give special attention to those children and youth who are not currently enrolled in school;
- Increasing the authorized funding for the program to \$70 million.<sup>99</sup>

Representative Biggert says that she is very proud that she was instrumental in incorporating provisions of federal law, particularly the requirement for immediate enrollment “without any red tape” so that homeless students did not need to miss any school.<sup>100</sup>

### **Efforts to Weaken State Law**

In the years following passage of Charlie’s Law, there were numerous efforts to weaken its provisions, often prompted by school districts unhappy with the law. One of these efforts, S.B. 1886 (introduced in 2008), attempted to change the definition of the “school of origin” in the law and make that definition more ambiguous. Amending the law in this way would have been inconsistent with the federal McKinney-Vento Act and put Illinois at risk of losing federal funds. It also would have created confusion for school districts and families by changing longstanding rules and created barriers for homeless children wishing to remain in a familiar school. The Chicago Coalition for the Homeless and others successfully fought against this change. Another bill would have removed the word “immediate” from the immediate enrollment requirement in the state law. Again, this change would be inconsistent with federal law and create delays in the enrollment of students experiencing homelessness. CCH and other advocates vigorously opposed this bill and it, too, did not move forward.

Yet another proposed bill in 2005 would have limited protection under the law to 18 months. The bill demonstrated a lack of understanding of the plight of homelessness for some families who experience long periods of homelessness. This bill was also inconsistent with federal law, which contains no time limits on homelessness. CCH worked to improve this bill and, in a compromise, the law was indeed changed. However, instead of a strict time limit, the law

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98. Judy Biggert, telephone interview.

99. Heybach and Nix-Hodes, *The Educational Rights of Homeless Children*.

100. Biggert, “Interview.”

was changed to give school districts the opportunity to review the living situation of a family who was sharing housing of another for more than 18 months to determine whether hardship still existed. The amended law had protections for students. If a school district determines that the family no longer suffers from hardship, it must notify the family in writing and follow the dispute process. Further, any change as a result of the 18-month review process must be made only at the end of the school year. Finally, the dispute resolution provisions of the Act were improved making them more fair to families.<sup>101</sup> The new provision required a fair and impartial individual to resolve disputes and that individual was required to be familiar with the “educational rights and needs of homeless children.”<sup>102</sup>

### ISBE Policy and Regulation

At the time of the 1996 *Salazar* Settlement, the ISBE adopted a Policy on the Education of Homeless Children and Youth. While that policy had useful language and provided basic guidance, it became clear that more specific guidance was needed particularly with respect to disputes. In addition, the 2001 reauthorization of the McKinney-Vento Act changed the landscape and created additional rights for homeless students. In 2005, after working closely with CCH on areas to be addressed by the policy, ISBE adopted a new state policy that was much stronger and more effective.<sup>103</sup>

Another helpful change took place in Illinois in 2007 when the “Equal Opportunities for All Students” regulation was adopted.<sup>104</sup> This regulation prohibits exclusion, discrimination or segregation of any homeless student by an Illinois school district.

### State Coordinator and Lead Area Liaison System In Illinois

In an effort to make limited federal funds assist students statewide, Illinois developed a system of dividing the state into seven areas and appointing a lead liaison for each area of the state.<sup>105</sup> The lead liaisons offer technical assistance and training to school districts in their area as well as providing resources to and working with families, children and youth. The lead liaisons and the liaisons working in each area—as a group—are highly committed individuals with a “great depth of experience who provide leadership in homeless education in Illinois,” according to Barbara Duffield of NAEHCY.

Illinois does not have a full-time State Coordinator dedicated solely to the needs of homeless students. This is a weakness of Illinois’ program. Barbara Duffield of NAEHCY states, “It is so important to have an adequate level of staffing at the state level. Many states that are much smaller than Illinois have a full-time State Coordinator and additional staff.”

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101. *Education for Homeless Children Act*.

102. *Ibid*. This change also removed the ability of suburban Cook County school districts to appoint their own ombudsperson. In one previous dispute, Oak Park and River Forest High School District 200 appointed the same individual who denied transportation to a homeless student to resolve the dispute about transportation.

103. Illinois State Board of Education, “Policy of the Illinois State Board of Education on the Education of Homeless Children and Youth,” accessed October 28, 2014, [www.isbe.net/homeless/pdf/policy.pdf](http://www.isbe.net/homeless/pdf/policy.pdf).

104. *Illinois Administrative Code 1*, 23 Ill. Adm. Code 1.240, accessed October 28, 2014, <http://www.isbe.net/rules/archive/pdfs/oneark.pdf>.

105. For a map of the state with the lead liaisons identified, see [www.isbe.net](http://www.isbe.net).

### Uneven Compliance with Law and Policy by Illinois Districts

Despite setting a national example with a strong state law and policy, treatment of homeless students has sometimes been far from exemplary in Illinois. In addition to the challenges of Chicago students described above, students without housing in other Illinois districts have also struggled to receive fair treatment in accordance with the law.

CCH has assisted families in dozens of Illinois districts, in some cases representing families in dispute resolution proceedings or court proceedings. Very often the families represented in disputes are African-American or other students of color. One egregious case involved an African-American family in the south suburban Sauk Village. On behalf of the family, CCH filed a race and housing status discrimination complaint with the Cook County Commission on Human Rights. After the family lost their housing, the Sauk Village schools—rather than identifying them as McKinney-Vento eligible, kicked the students out and the children missed nine days of school. When an ISBE official attempted to get the children re-enrolled, the superintendent made racially discriminatory remarks about the family. The case was ultimately settled in the family's favor with the district agreeing to revise its policies.<sup>106</sup> CCH assisted other families in Sauk Village, including a family of a 14-year old student who was homeless excluded from school and threatened with exclusion from graduation because she could not afford to pay school fees.<sup>107</sup> CCH has represented homeless families in several cases in court involving various suburban school districts, including Homewood School District 153 and Homewood-Flossmoor High School District 233, Evergreen Park High School District 231 and Crete-Monee Community Unit School District 201-U.<sup>108</sup>

Another suburban district, Thornton Fractional District 215, blatantly violated state and federal law by refusing to enroll a homeless student for five days until her family provided an eviction notice to prove her homelessness. In addition, the district turned away numerous families that could not provide documentation of homelessness prompting the involvement of the Civil Rights Bureau of the Illinois Attorney General.<sup>109</sup> In Schaumburg, Illinois, Township High School District 211 refused enrollment to a teen who was living with her grandmother in the district.<sup>110</sup> CCH has represented numerous families in disputes with Oak Park and River Forest High School District 200.<sup>111</sup> Both the Oak Park Elementary District (District 97) and the OPRF High School District 200 instituted “residency re-verification” processes that did not accurately communicate information about the rights of homeless families.<sup>112</sup> In addition, CCH has assisted

106. Chicago Coalition for the Homeless, “A Strong Family Stands Up Against Injustice and CCH Law Project Scores Three Important Victories,” *Homeward Bound Newsletter* (Fall 2002).

107. Stanley Ziemba, “Sauk Village District Taken to Task: Homeless Student Can Join Graduation,” *Chicago Tribune* (Chicago, IL), May 22, 2004.

108. “Who’s Been Sued?” *Southtown Star* (Chicago, IL), Dec. 17, 2003.

109. Colleen Mastony, “Suburban High School Bars Homeless Youth,” *Chicago Tribune* (Chicago, IL), September 9, 2003; Colleen Mastony, “District Ordered to Locate Homeless; Thornton Schools Turned Kids Away,” *Chicago Tribune* (Chicago, IL), September 14, 2003; Sam Dillon, “School Is a Haven When Children Have No Home,” *New York Times* (New York, NY), Nov. 27, 2003.

110. Kimberly Pohl, “Why District 211 Won’t Let Teen Into School,” *Daily Herald* (Chicago, IL), August 16, 2007; Patricia Nix-Hodes, “State School Code on Cordeidre’s Side,” *Daily Herald* (Chicago, IL), Letter to Editor, August 20, 2007.

111. Sun Times Staff, “OPRF Checks on Residency Questioned,” *Oak Park Oak Leaves* (Chicago, IL), Oct. 26, 2005.

112. Laurene M. Heybach, “Protecting the Rights of Homeless Children,” *Powered by Wednesday Journal* (Oak Park, IL), Letter to Editor, Aug. 17, 2011, accessed November 1, 2014, <http://www.oakpark.com/Search/?Search=>

families in disputes with numerous other Illinois school districts in, among others, Lansing, Zion, Evergreen Park, Homewood, Flossmoor, Maywood, Berwyn, Matteson, Plainfield, Wheaton, Tinley Park, Riverside, Brookfield, Cicero, and Melrose Park.

In several of these disputes, districts investigated families in an extremely intrusive way including employing off-duty police officers and other investigators to question students, parents and neighbors about a family's living situation. Offending districts may engage in the practice of "staking out" residences and video-taping children, often sharing confidential student information with strangers. These techniques raise serious privacy concerns under the Illinois School Student Records Act.<sup>113</sup> Families are easily intimidated by these tactics. Jamilah Scott, a parent who went through a lengthy dispute said:

An investigator interrogated my daughter without my knowledge, permission or presence. It was intimidating and extremely upsetting to my daughter. Instead of having a private, one-on-one sensitive conversation with me about my living situation, the school district called me into a meeting with numerous individuals from the school, including their legal counsel.<sup>114</sup>

Ensuring compliance with the homeless education law and policy and ensuring fair treatment of homeless families in the dispute process is a key area of focus for the state moving forward.

### State Funding for Homeless Education

In Fiscal Year 2009, after advocacy by CCH and others, Illinois included \$3 million for homeless education in the state budget. These funds were distributed through a "Request for Proposal" (RFP) process to 36 school districts with some districts collaborating to apply jointly for funds. With relatively modest grants, school districts were able to greatly improve services to homeless students and improve efforts to identify homeless students. Because the need for state funding is even greater now than in FY2009, advocates including CCH, sought to restore the \$3 million in state funding in the FY2015 budget. The 59,112 students identified as homeless in the 2013-14 school year is more than double the number identified in FY2009. Because of the dramatically increasing need, both the ISBE and Governor Quinn included \$3 million for homeless education in their recommended FY2015 budget. The legislative session ended without the funding included but efforts continue to secure the funding in the veto session in the fall.

In February 2014, CCH issued a report, *Gaps in Educational Supports for Illinois Homeless Students*. The report was based on a statewide survey that found more than half of homeless students who needed school support were not receiving the following services: tutoring; pre-school; counseling; help with public benefits and housing. Forty-four of respondents said their capacity to identify and enroll homeless children and youth not in school was limited or very limited. The survey results indicate a strong need for increased funding such as the \$3 million for homeless education.

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Protecting+the+Rights+of+Homeless+Children; Terry Dean, "OPRF Denied 167 Students Over 'Questionable' Residency, Highest Number Turned Away in Years," *Powered by Wednesday Journal* (Oak Park, IL), June 24, 2014, accessed November 1, 2014, <http://www.oakpark.com/News/Articles/6-24-2014/OPRF-denied-167-students-over-%27questionable%27-residency/>.

113. *Illinois School Students Record Act*, 105 ILCS 10/2, 94th General Assembly, accessed November 2, 2014, <http://www.ilga.gov/legislation/ilcs/ilcs3.asp?ActID=1006&ChapterID=17>.

114. Scott, "Interview."

### Reflections on 27 Years of Work in Illinois

Illinois has made significant progress since the initial passage of the McKinney-Vento Act and in the years since *Salazar v. Edwards* was filed.<sup>115</sup> It took a broad array of parents, advocates, state coordinators, youth, teachers, legislators, school administrators academics, researchers, legal aid organizations and social service agencies to bring Illinois to this point. Continued collaboration will be the key to further progress. Reflections from those with whom CCH has closely worked provide a snapshot of Illinois' successes and failures:

#### **Barbara Duffield, NAEHCY:**

“Illinois provides a wonderful model for the rest of the country with its strong state law and state policy and its network of experienced area liaisons. However, especially for a state of its size, the staffing of its program is not in conformity with clear best practice.”<sup>116</sup>

#### **Jamilah Scott, suburban parent:**

“There is no real effort to make the community aware of McKinney-Vento rights. I never heard of McKinney-Vento and the onus was put on me as a parent to find out. Our school looked for reasons to exclude my daughter instead of educating her and did not treat me with dignity or respect.”<sup>117</sup>

#### **Former United States Representative Judy Biggert:**

“Illinois is unique for its strong advocates for students who are homeless, including Diane Nilan (formerly of Hesed House shelter in Aurora). I am proud that I was able to incorporate strong provisions of the Illinois law—including immediate enrollment—into the federal McKinney-Vento Act.”<sup>118</sup>

#### **Diane Nilan, Founder/President, HEAR US:**

“I am quite proud of Illinois being the first state to enact a state law to protect students who are homeless. Compliance is hit-or-miss though and now that I am traveling across the country, I see that other states take their responsibility to children and youth who are homeless much more seriously. The secret to success is a full-time dedicated State Coordinator.”<sup>119</sup>

Without doubt, in Illinois there has been a steady—but hard fought—incremental increase in shaping legal rights for homeless families and youth, knowledge, data-gathering, training, resources, outreach, delivery of basic rights and services to the students, legislative and policy de-

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115. *Salazar V. Edwards*. See Section II.A. for a discussion of Illinois' failure to properly implement the McKinney Act and its failure to ensure CPS' compliance in the years before the filing of the *Salazar* complaint in 1992.

116. Ibid.

117. Scott, “Interview.”

118. Biggert, “Interview.”

119. Nilan, “Interview.”



velopments, technical support and professional focus on the needs of homeless families and youth.

### Conclusion

Since 1987 many thousands of Illinois students experiencing homelessness have received educational access, needed services, transportation and school stability. Yet so many of our homeless students—particularly students of color—continue to be underserved or excluded from services. And the structural inequities which created their economic impoverishment persist in housing, employment, income, wealth accumulation and education. Though imperfect, the McKinney-Vento Act creates a strong tool to assist in breaking at least one of those barriers.

This past summer was the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Freedom Summer in 1964—a time in our nation’s history when very brave and thoughtful youth, white and black, barely into adulthood gathered in Mississippi and lead the fight for racial equality. Some lost their lives doing so. All faced the terror of the White Citizen’s Council. Mississippi was a state that repealed its compulsory education mandate rather than be forced to comply with *Brown v. Board of Education*. Many of the students who went south that summer wrote home of the deplorable state of education for black children there. While the Freedom Summer organizing focus then was primarily on voting rights, of course, the youth set up “freedom schools” throughout rural Mississippi to expand educational access in the face of deep poverty. They did so because they knew equality and dignity rest upon education. It falls to us now, 50 years later in a different place and time to remember and carry forward this struggle. The McKinney-Vento Act is but one part of that struggle.

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# Literacy, Education, and Inequality: Assimilation and Resistance Narratives from Families Residing at a Homeless Shelter

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## **Abstract**

*In this article, I draw on data from my qualitative dissertation study of the literacy practices of five families who resided in a homeless shelter to complicate the relationship between literacy, education, and inequality. Homelessness is examined through the lens of sponsorship to understand the differential access the families have to powerful sponsors of literacy and how schools and the marketplace may dismiss existing literacies that families use in their everyday lives. Their assimilation narratives reveal that the parents believed strongly in the promise of education to change the life trajectory of their children. Parents engaged in literacy for social and cultural purposes as well as middle class literacy practices that are valued in schools. Despite these attempts to assimilate, the parents and the children in the study did not benefit in significant ways and continually struggled against and resisted deficit perspectives surrounding homelessness and the inner city neighborhoods from which they came. The wide gulf between the official portrait of homelessness, largely defined by statistics and influenced by deficit perspectives, and the counterportraits that illustrate the lived realities of the families suggests educational reform must address the larger context of inequality in the United States.*

**Keywords:** family literacy sponsorship, homeless shelter

*“Brianna retrieved the Bible from a stack of three identical bright pink books on the bedside table. She quickly flipped to a page bookmarked with a bracelet. On page 936 of the book, titled God’s Word for Girls, Brianna squinted to read the tiny print. She determined her mother would be reading on the topic of love next. ‘I braid my mom’s hair while she reads the Bible.’”*

## **Introduction**

Beginning in June of 2011, one day a week I visited a local shelter to facilitate a family art and story hour for parents and children. Many of the families who resided at the shelter, like Brianna’s, voluntarily participated in the program. During my weekly visits I engaged with families for a variety of purposes related to literacy tied to their lives in and out of school. I noticed both

parents and children initiated literacy practices that served the purpose of meeting school expectations such as homework, but also routines and rituals that sustained their long days at the shelter where they had limited privacy and often were a long distance from their extended families. I wanted to know more about the literacy practices families engaged in while experiencing homelessness and how their life, literacy, and schooling histories shaped what they believed was possible once they transitioned from the shelter. After six months of facilitating the family art and story hour, I began a qualitative research study to examine the literacy practices of families within the context of homelessness.

Located in a Mid-western university town that I will refer to as College Town, with a population of approximately 70,000, the transitional shelter where the families resided was a highly contested community issue before its completion in November 2010. Formerly located in an old house nestled in amongst single-family homes and rental properties just a few blocks from the community's downtown and university campus, the decision was made to build the new shelter several miles from this location in an area reputable for low-income housing and heightened police presence, increasing the distance between the shelter residents and many of the community services available to them. Conversely, the new facility offers more benefits to families than the old site. The new building is able to provide rooms for families, located in a separate wing from the women's and men's dormitories. On the second floor is a room devoted to children stocked with donated toys and books. This is the setting in which the family art and story hour took place.

According to the 2013 Annual Homeless Assessment Report (AHAR) to Congress, of 610,042 people experiencing homelessness on a given night in January of 2013, 65 percent were living in emergency shelters or transitional housing programs and 23 percent were children, under the age of 18.<sup>1</sup> 222,197 people in families experienced homelessness, which accounts for 36 percent of all homeless people and approximately 50 percent of people living in shelters.<sup>2</sup> The families in the study came to the shelter for diverse reasons. In Brianna's family's case, chronic homelessness caused by a lack of steady employment and the gun violence of their former Chicago neighborhood pushed her mother, Sandy, to move her three daughters, Brittany (13), Julien (11), and Brianna (9) to a shelter in a nearby state.<sup>3</sup>

The purpose of this article is to illuminate the literacy practices and beliefs of families who resided at the shelter and the stories parents told about their lives to examine the challenges of homelessness. Based on the narratives that emerged from the parent stories, families believed their lives were not finalized, but could improve despite struggles with steady employment and secure housing. Parent optimism for the future was strongly supported by their common belief that education played a key role in changing their children's lives for the better. In this article, it is my intention to complicate the relationship between what the families valued about education and the neoliberal policies that do little to address differential access within the context of sharply rising standards for literacy<sup>4</sup> and increasing inequality.<sup>5</sup>

My role as the facilitator of the art and story hour illustrates the notion of literacy spon-

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1. The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, "The 2013 Annual Homeless Assessment Report (AHAR) To Congress," 2013, accessed October 25, 2014, <https://www.hudexchange.info/resources/documents/ahar-2013-part1.pdf>, 6.

2. *Ibid.*, 22.

3. Alex Kotlowitz, *The Interrupters*, On-line Documentary, Directed by Steve James (Chicago: Kartemquin Films, 2011), accessed August 7, 2014, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/interrupters>.

4. Deborah Brandt, *Literacy In American Lives* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

5. Richard G. Wilkinson and Kate Pickett, *The Spirit Level* (London: Penguin Books, 2010).

sorship.<sup>6</sup> Sponsors of literacy, both in and out of school settings, shape the contexts in which people engage in literacy practices. Deborah Brandt describes sponsors of literacy as “...any agents, local or distant, concrete or abstract, who enable, support, teach, and model, as well as recruit, regulate, suppress, or withhold, literacy—and gain advantage by it in some way”.<sup>7</sup> While literacy sponsorship is often regarded as a benevolent act of helping others, access to literacy sponsors of one kind or another is often distributed along class lines. Social and cultural differences, past experiences with schooling and the sponsor’s expectations for the participants complicate the potential of literacy sponsorship to both constrain and empower individuals. In the context of the family art and story hour, I attempted to engage in literacy sponsorship by co-authoring activities with participating families related to their social and cultural goals such as play, reflection, and messages to loved ones, but also to provide support for navigating the bureaucratic texts of housing, employment, and school.<sup>8</sup> Even as a researcher intent on revealing the complexity of family literacy in the context of homelessness, at times I did more to constrain literacy practices than to recognize and value them during the family art and story hour.

Literacy cannot be separated from the material conditions and social relations in which individuals make sense of their lives.<sup>9</sup> Literacy events happen within a social context, in a particular place and time. In this way, literacy practices are culturally constructed and historically situated<sup>10</sup> and change with the times and within the society of which they are a part.<sup>11</sup> Drawing on critical sociocultural theory, Brian Street uses the term “ideological model” to describe the rich cultural variation of literacy practices in different contexts.<sup>12</sup> He contends, “literacy practices are aspects not only of ‘culture’ but also of power structures” and suggests the dominant approach to defining literacy, the “autonomous” model, disguises the power relations inherent in literacy practices through its position of neutrality.<sup>13</sup> Reducing literacy to a neutral set of skills dismissive of context privileges particular literacies, rigidly defines what is proper, and marginalizes the diverse ways people use literacy. The ideological model concerns not only the literacy events and practices that occur within them, but the ideological preconceptions that are embedded in them.<sup>14</sup>

The conceptualization of literacy as an ideological practice rather than a neutral cognitive tool of individuals complicates issues of power and privilege as they relate to class and cultural backgrounds. When individuals and groups engage in literacy for social and cultural purposes, opportunities for raising social consciousness and imagining new possibilities can emerge.<sup>15</sup> School literacy is more akin to the formal acquisition of reading and writing skills and often does not connect strongly with the lived realities of students.<sup>16</sup> The school literacy that many students from historically underserved groups experience undermines what they know and can do,<sup>17</sup> and

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6. Brandt, *Literacy In American Lives*.

7. *Ibid.*, 19.

8. Denny Taylor, *Toxic Literacies* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1996).

9. Brian Street, “The New Literacy Studies,” in *Literacy: a Critical Sourcebook*, ed. E.L. Cushman, et al. (Boston, MA: Bedford/St. Martin's Press, 2001).

10. Brandt, *Literacy In American Lives*.

11. David Barton and Mary Hamilton, *Local Literacies* (London: Routledge, 1998).

12. Street, “The New Literacy Studies.”

13. *Ibid.*, 434.

14. Street, “The New Literacy Studies.”

15. Frank Smith, “Overselling Literacy,” *Phi Delta Kappan* 70, no. 5 (1989): 352-59.

16. Debbie Smith and Kathryn F. Whitmore, *Literacy And Advocacy In Adolescent Family, Gang, School, And Juvenile Court Communities* (Mahwah, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2006).

17. James Paul Gee, *Situated Language and Learning* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

rarely invites them to engage in critical literacies that allow them to question the status quo from a position of marginality.<sup>18</sup> Neoliberal education policy ascribes value to particular literacy practices within the institution of school, while limiting and denying access to people on the margins of these practices, boosted by economic policies that lead to racial, ethnic, and class exclusion such as gentrification and the encroaching privatization of education.<sup>19</sup>

Neoliberal education policy, which privileges the “autonomous” model of literacy, upholds the rich/poor gap in terms of socioeconomic, sociopolitical and sociocultural power through the naturalization of white middle-class ways of knowing.<sup>20</sup> Wider interpretations of what constitutes literacy practices within an ideological model of literacy, such as Brianna’s family’s Bible reading ritual, are paramount to understanding and valuing the literacies families on the margins of middle-class discourses possess.

### Literature Review

Historically, family literacy has been studied from the perspective of schools and has been largely defined as parental involvement in school.<sup>21</sup> For this reason, families from underrepresented groups who have limited access to school discourse and practices are frequently targeted for school-to-home literacy initiatives in order to increase parental involvement.<sup>22</sup> Family literacy research is often related to family literacy programs that intend to strengthen the literacy of the home by engaging families outside of school in school literacy practices closely aligned with white middle class ways of knowing.<sup>23</sup> This thinking is largely based on a cultural deficit model which attempts to explain failure in school by blaming families and the literacy practices, or lack thereof in the home.<sup>24</sup> Additionally, a recent review of family literacy scholarship by Catherine Compton-Lilly, Rebecca Rogers, and Tisha Y. Lewis reveals a dominance of white female scholars in family literacy research and limited concern for issues of diversity in a majority of family literacy studies.<sup>25</sup>

The number of studies on adult literacy pales in comparison to the extensive body of research on childhood literacy. Much of the existing literature on adult literacy tends to put emphasis on remediation in adult literacy programs.<sup>26</sup> This may be due to a dominant belief in society that literacy is a final outcome measured by school achievement. For the purposes of the larger

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18. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy Of The Oppressed* (New York: Continuum, 2000).

19. Pauline Lipman, *The New Political Economy of Urban Education* (New York: Routledge, 2011).

20. Street, “The New Literacy Studies.”

21. Elsa Roberts Auerbach, “Toward A Social-Contextual Approach To Family Literacy,” *Harvard Educational Review* 59, no. 2 (1989): 165-182.

22. Curt Dudley-Marling, “Home-School Literacy Connections: The Perceptions of African American and Immigrant ESL Parents in Two Urban Communities,” *The Teachers College Record* 111, no. 7 (1989): 1713-1752.

23. Shirley Brice Heath, *Ways With Words* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983); Deborah Hicks, *Reading Lives* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2002); Rebecca Rogers, “Between Contexts: A Critical Discourse Analysis Of Family Literacy, Discursive Practices, And Literate Subjectivities,” *Reading Research Quarterly* 37, no. 3 (2002): 248-277; Denny Taylor and Catherine Dorsey-Gaines, *Growing Up Literate* (Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann, 1988).

24. Brian Street, “Family Literacy and the Politics of Literacy,” in *Many Families, Many Literacies: An International Declaration Of Principles* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1997), 207-210.

25. Catherine Compton-Lilly, Rebecca Rogers, and Tisha Y Lewis, “Analyzing Epistemological Considerations Related to Diversity: an Integrative Critical Literature Review of Family Literacy Scholarship,” *Reading Research Quarterly* 47, no. 1 (2012): 33-60.

26. Eric J. Weiner, “Keeping Adults Behind: Adult Literacy Education in the Age of Official Reading Regimes,” *Journal Of Adolescent & Adult Literacy* 49, no. 4 (2005): 286-301.

study on which this article is based, I reviewed studies of adult literacy that examine the literacy practices in the everyday lives of adults; particularly adults who are marginalized and whose voices are often silenced by notions of literacy as simply academic achievement.<sup>27</sup>

Even more scant than the studies on adult literacy is the research on family literacy in a shelter setting. Laurie MacGillivray, Amy Lassiter Ardell, and Margaret Saucedo Curwen examined the literacies of families living in homeless shelters using a qualitative design with participant observation and over 70 interviews to illuminate five unique and critical perspectives that illustrate the complexity surrounding children who live without permanent homes.<sup>28</sup> Additionally, MacGillivray, Ardell, and Curwen examined the literacy practices of mothers and children living in a transitional shelter and the institutions that influenced these practices: libraries, churches and schools.<sup>29</sup> The researchers examined the different ways mothers and children talked about their literacy practices across these three institutions. The library and church were contexts for choosing literacy practices that were meaningful to the families, whereas talk about *school* literacy focused on evaluation, daily routines and procedures. Judith Wells Lindfors (2008) studied early interactions with books and written text during her work at SafePlace, a classroom for kindergarten and first grade children at a domestic violence shelter where the children resided with their mothers.<sup>30</sup> Lindfors' work acknowledges that children living without homes, like all children, need to engage with reading and writing experiences connected to their lived realities.

More research is needed to understand literacy in the lives of families experiencing homelessness and the larger implications of the intersection between literacy and inequality. My research attempts to contest the dominant deficit perspectives about homelessness by complicating what it means to be homeless in an era of politics and schooling that yields starkly disproportionate advantages to privileged individuals who can compete in an increasingly global and corporate marketplace.<sup>31</sup>

## Methods

The study on which this article is based attempted to understand the literacy practices families engaged in while experiencing homelessness, the stories they told about their transition in and out of the shelter, and how their life, literacy, and schooling histories shaped their beliefs about the future. The methodology for the study draws from the qualitative research traditions of ethnography<sup>32</sup> and portraiture.<sup>33</sup>

Portraiture allowed me to recognize shifts in the changing landscape of the lives of the families at the shelter, how their experiences evolved, and how the participants constructed meaning in their lives. I set out to examine the literacy practices of families with high expectations for the strengths I would find and to represent the unique portraits of each of the families. I

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27. Mike Rose, *The Mind At Work* (New York: Viking, 2004).

28. Laurie MacGillivray, Amy Lassiter Ardell, and Margaret Saucedo Curwen, "Supporting the Literacy Development of Children Living in Homeless," *The Reading Teacher* 63, no. 5 (2010): 384-392.

29. Laurie MacGillivray, Amy Lassiter Ardell, and Margaret Saucedo Curwen, "Libraries, Churches, and Schools: the Literate Lives of Mothers and Children in a Homeless Shelter," *Urban Education* 45, no. 2 (2010): 221-245.

30. Judith Wells Lindfors, *Children's Language* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2008).

31. Larry Cuban, *The Blackboard and the Bottom Line* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004).

32. Bonnie S. Sunstein and Elizabeth Chiseri-Strater, *Fieldworking* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martins, 2007).

33. Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot and Jessica Hoffmann Davis, *The Art and Science of Portraiture* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997).



developed counterportraits,<sup>34</sup> derived from portraiture, to do the political work of exposing and critiquing the narrow views of homelessness portrayed in official portraits such as statistics and official documents, including the unexamined assumptions and deficit myths surrounding people living in poverty.<sup>35</sup> Developing counterportraits of families experiencing homelessness includes the circumstances, interests, strengths, and needs of individual families as well as the larger contexts that shape them. The counterportraits call on the listener or reader to take up the perspectives of families experiencing homelessness that are often silenced by official portraits.

Data collection methods included semi-structured interviews with parents, fieldnotes from the family art and story hour, and document analysis. Semi-structured interviews with individual parents were conducted at the shelter outside of the family art and story hour and ranged from one hour to ninety minutes in length. Responses from semi-structured interviews were fully transcribed and coded line by line, allowing me to identify themes and categories central to family literacy practices and patterns of response across parent interviews related to their life, literacy and schooling histories. A codebook was used to record and reflect the major themes and categories that emerged from the coding process.<sup>36</sup> I searched for multiple forms of evidence across interview transcripts, literacy artifacts and field notes from the family art and story hour to provide justification and support for identifying initial themes and categories in my tentative interpretations of the data. The analytical tool dialogical narrative analysis<sup>37</sup> allowed me to identify stories from parent interviews, what the stories communicated about literacy practices families engaged in, and what the parents believed was possible in their lives.<sup>38</sup>

My subjectivity as a middle-class white woman, a mother of two young children, a former elementary teacher of many students from underrepresented groups, and my interest in social justice issues influenced the ways I engaged with the families and what I chose to reveal in the research. My role as researcher and literacy sponsor further complicated what I was able to “see” in the space of the shelter. Reflecting on my biases as they emerged in the analysis of data was critical to understanding why particular stories and pieces of the data were more relevant to the aims of the study than others and increased the transparency of the ways I selected, analyzed and disseminated what I learned about the families. I used a double-entry notetaking<sup>39</sup> format to record my reactions to my observations and raise awareness to shifts in my perspectives, attitudes, and insights influenced by new data.

## Participants

Like Brianna’s family, several families voluntarily chose to participate in the family art and story hour which gave parents and children access to art materials, writing tools, puppets, book collections, volunteer reading buddies, library cards, and support with homework and official documents from school. I invited all parents and children who attended to enroll in the study.

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34. Richard J. Meyer, *Official Portraits and Unofficial Counterportraits of “At Risk” Students* (New York: Routledge, 2007).

35. Randy Bomer, Joel Dworin, Laura May, and Peggy Semingson, “Miseducating Teachers about the Poor: a Critical Analysis of Ruby Payne’s Claims about Poverty,” *The Teachers College Record* 110, no. 12 (2008): 2497-2531.

36. Corrine Glesne, *Becoming Qualitative Researchers* (Boston: Pearson/Allyn & Bacon, 2006).

37. Arthur Frank, “Practicing Dialogical Narrative Analysis” in *Varieties Of Narrative Analysis*, ed. J.A. Holstein and J.F. Gubrium (Los Angeles: Sage, 2012).

38. Arthur Frank, *Letting Stories Breathe* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010).

39. Sunstein and Chiseri-Strater, *Fieldworking*.

By virtue of their participation in a literacy program, I assumed that the five mothers and one father who consented to be part of the study valued literacy. Four boys and eight girls, whose ages ranged from 4 to 13, enrolled in the study with their parents. Five parents self-identified as Black or African American and one mother identified herself as Puerto Rican. After losing her job and her home in Chicago's inner city, Shana moved to College Town with her two school-aged daughters Mia (11) and Rhoda (9) to start anew. William & Julissa left Gary, Indiana to provide a safer environment and better schools for their three young children, Lawrence (6), Darius (4), and baby Ezme (7 months). The loss of her children's father caused emotional and economic constraints that led Kendra to move her two daughters, Mariah (10) and Makayla (6) from Chicago to College Town. Melody never intended to stay at the shelter when she moved to College Town, but when she arrived with her three children from an inner city neighborhood of Chicago, problems with her Section 8 housing voucher disrupted her transition to a new home. Melody too wanted better schools and safer streets for her sons, Martez (11) and Dylen (4), and her daughter, Alex (9). Like Brianna's family, all of the families in the study moved from inner city neighborhoods to College Town in search of a better life. Despite their interest in literacy and education, the parents and their children are representative of groups from urban areas who are linguistically and culturally diverse, have been historically underserved in schools, and disproportionately struggle with low achievement in school.<sup>40</sup>

### Family Literacy Practices

According to my observations, literacy practices were prevalent in the lives of the families at the shelter. During my weekly visits, I found literacy artifacts such as post-it notes shared between parent and child, changing displays of favorite books, scripts for plays, score keeping records, artwork and writing scattered about the children's room at the shelter. Additionally, the chalkboard in the children's room was often embellished with the intentional scribbles of a toddler at the bottom and the writing routines of an older child who aspired to play "teacher" toward the top. Religious literacy practices and texts were also significant in the lives of some of the families as they participated in church communities outside the shelter.

All parents were burdened with the bureaucratic texts associated with social programs. The literacy practices people choose to use and are coerced to use do not always provide solutions to problems or fulfillment of goals.<sup>41</sup> Forms of literacy can also subject people experiencing homelessness to delays best illustrated in a constant cycle of applications, refusals and red tape.<sup>42</sup> For many of the parents in the study, the number of official forms they were required to fill out in order to gain access to housing, jobs, healthcare, and childcare occupied much of their time. In some ways, my literacy sponsorship at the shelter, allowed for parents to have additional time to address the official documents of homelessness while their children were in my care.

Many of the literacy practices families engaged in were consistent with what is expected of middle class families from schools. Despite their attempts to engage in literacies most valued by school, the parents and children in the study were marginalized by their position in a largely middle class and upper middle class community that wrestles with its own housing policies

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40. Gloria Ladson-Billings, "From the Achievement Gap to the Education Debt: Understanding Achievement in US Schools," *Educational Researcher* 35, no.7 (2006): 3-12.

41. Brandt, *Literacy In American Lives*.

42. Taylor, *Toxic Literacies*.

which enact defacto segregation and reinforce lowered expectations for children of color from low-income areas and the schools that serve them.<sup>43</sup>

## Context

The College Town website boasts a population of “well-educated and highly-productive workers” (citation withheld to preserve confidentiality) and a thriving economy fueled by the university, the city’s largest employer. The city is routinely ranked for its livability, education, safety, health, and economic viability. Absent from this portrait is the large population of people experiencing homelessness in College Town, particularly the people who seek refuge on the city’s downtown plaza. The local Public Housing Authority of College Town administers housing vouchers for 81 public housing units.<sup>44</sup> Many people are waitlisted for the city’s public housing units as affordable housing is limited in the city. The majority of people on the wait list are families with children or individuals with disabilities. Location of affordable housing throughout College Town has been a hot topic to limit the concentration of poverty in areas of the city, particularly as it relates to enrollment at public elementary schools. Community opposition to property rezoning reflected in NIMBY attitudes as well as high land prices and restrictive covenants in many subdivisions that limit construction to single-family residential dwellings, prevent construction of multifamily or transitional housing rental properties throughout College Town. These issues and policies limit affordable rental options for families transitioning from the shelter leading to economically segregated areas of the city. People of color are increasingly spatially concentrated in these areas of College Town. While there have been attempts in College Town to plan housing development aligned with school district goals for development, affordable housing continues to be an issue in areas where new schools are built. Additionally, homelessness in the downtown pedestrian area of College Town has become a growing concern leading to the city council’s adoption of an ordinance that prohibits panhandling, sitting and lying in flowerbeds, and sleeping on public benches. Limited affordable housing in the community leads to chronic homelessness for some people. The city is beginning to engage in strategies such as Rapid Re-housing<sup>45</sup> to address the limited affordable housing for residents experiencing homelessness that leads to overcrowded shelters turning people away. This step is essential to preventing rather than criminalizing chronic homelessness in College Town.

### Counterportraits: Assimilation and Resistance in the Quest for a Better Life

Though the reasons for homelessness among the families were diverse, the stories parents told were joined in unison by a common “quest narrative”<sup>46</sup> suggesting the families did not believe their lives were “finalized”, but could change for the better.<sup>47</sup> Resonate in these stories are narratives of assimilation to the middle class ideal and resistance to the deficit perspectives that surrounded them as families experiencing homelessness and people of color from inner city

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43. Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis, *Schooling in Capitalist America* (Chicago, Ill.: Haymarket Books, 2011).

44. Information from a 2014 public policy document outlining impediments to fair housing choice in the city. Citation withheld to protect anonymity.

45. National Alliance to End Homelessness, “Rapid Rehousing,” accessed October 24, 2014, <http://www.endhomelessness.org/pages/overview-rapid-re-housing>.

46. Arthur Frank, *The Wounded Storyteller* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

47. Frank, “Practicing Dialogical Narrative Analysis.”

neighborhoods. The “quest narrative” was most recognizable in the stories of the parents as it suggested that their ongoing struggle was part of what made their efforts worth taking, for their children, for themselves, for the promise of a better life. Central to this quest, as illustrated in the following partial counterportraits, is a quality education.

All parents saw themselves as teachers in the lives of their children. While they deferred to official school records to define the achievement of their children, they exercised agency in their beliefs that their children could learn and would learn at school and outside of school despite whatever struggles might exist. Some parents also questioned the school’s approach to literacy sponsorship, through a resistance narrative, especially if they were concerned for their children’s progress or recognized strengths in their children that were undervalued in school.

Parents didn’t depend solely on the teacher’s judgment of their child’s needs or progress as expressed in their attitudes about homework or in their views on what their children could learn at home. In some instances, parents worked to respect the views of the teacher, but challenged the school’s literacy sponsorship when their perspectives differed. At other times, parents expressed doubt about their child’s progress as they deferred to the perspectives of the school.

Shana questioned some of the ways the school defined her daughter Rhoda’s difficulty with reading and how she learned best. She was willing to cooperate, plan and support the literacy sponsorship at school, but she also strongly believed that there was more than one way to learn how to read and some ways worked better than others for any particular person. When Shana purchased *Hooked on Phonics*<sup>48</sup> for Rhoda following a teacher’s suggestion, she came to the conclusion that the reading program wasn’t for everyone when it didn’t help. In this story, Shana described Rhoda’s early struggles with reading:

...she would make you think that she knew how to read and that she knew how to write because you would read a story to her and you would tell her to read the story back to you out of the same book but she wasn't actually reading the story, she memorized it...so she used to ask me, "Mom, how do you spell 'and'," and I tell her to point it out to me in the book and she couldn't point it out to me. If she reading it in the sentence, she remembers it's in the sentence because that's what you read to her, but when it came time for her to show you what she actually knew, she couldn't.

Shana’s observations of Rhoda as a young reader illustrate her attention to her daughter’s developing understanding of the reading process. When I asked her what makes Rhoda a good reader now, she explained:

Anybody who...knows how to read but still understand that you don't know every word. Because there's new words every day...I don't know every word. So if you ask for help...if you ask someone you know "what does this mean? how do you pronounce this?"...there's a lot of words out here that's more professional and then you have the Ebonics of words, then you have the words in between. You need to know all those words because a majority of them mean the same thing it's just you say them a different way.

Shana’s perspective is consistent with sociolinguistic theory related to flexible language practices such as code-switching.<sup>49</sup> In school, academic discourse is far more privileged than the

48. *Hooked on Phonics*, accessed October 24, 2014, <https://www.hookedonphonics.com>.

49. Heath, *Ways With Words*.

vernacular varieties of language from home, particularly homes of underrepresented children whose primary discourse does not closely match with the academic language of school.<sup>50</sup> Shana realized that it is important for her daughters to use language flexibly acknowledging the hierarchy of power associated with language use and word choice in an increasingly competitive school and work environment.<sup>51</sup>

Kendra questioned the ways official school report cards described her daughter Mariah as a reader:

K: ...just because she's a slow reader, don't mean she is not a magnificent-she is a magnificent reader. Because she comprehends. The whole thing about reading is comprehending what you're reading. If you can comprehend what you're reading it doesn't matter how fast you read it or how slow you read it, as long as you comprehend. It might take you longer, but you know what you just read.

The confidence Kendra asserted in talking about Mariah as a reader revealed her willingness to entertain an alternative explanation for Mariah's reading achievement scores. Her resistance narrative of her daughter as a reader placed deficits within the school's literacy sponsorship rather than deficits inherent in her daughter's ability to read. Kendra's observation of Mariah's strengths as a reader illuminate her willingness to contest deficits defined by the official texts of school. Observations such as the one Kendra made here about Mariah are critical to how Mariah will view herself as a reader despite the challenges she faces in school. Her mother's insight into Mariah's reading process will provide a buffer, though potentially not great enough to combat failure on high stakes reading measures in school based on an autonomous model.<sup>52</sup>

Literacy sponsorship in schools extended beyond reading to language use. Julissa shared that her oldest son, Lawrence, had a teacher in Gary, Indiana who advised her to speak English only with her children. The following story illustrates Julissa's willingness to question the teacher's advice based on her own history as a bilingual student:

J: I was talking to my son's teacher and she said it's harder on their brains because the teacher was saying that um...something about a part in the brain-

M: -Who told? What? Where?

J: The teacher named Ms. Smith in Gary. And she said it was hard for them to learn both so I started like teaching them my way...like I showed them something like this is this in Spanish and this in English and then make them repeat it and then hide it and then come back minutes later or an hour later and say what's this and they started learning it.

Julissa's experience moving from Puerto Rico to the U.S. as a young child influenced her desire for her children to learn both English and Spanish. Once they were settled in their new home, Julissa planned to use post-it notes to label things in the apartment in English and Spanish, not unlike the practice of many early childhood classroom teachers. Julissa said she'd seen many job

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50. Gee, *Situated Language And Learning*.

51. James Paul Gee, *Social Linguistics and Literacies* (London: Routledge, 2008).

52. Street, "The New Literacy Studies."

postings online that paid more if the applicant was bilingual. She saw an important link between her children's potential to be bilingual and their future job prospects.<sup>53</sup>

Both resistance and assimilation were part of her quest to teach her children Spanish. Bilingualism, though in this case deemed a disruptive force<sup>54</sup> in Lawrence's education, is widely valued and accessible to middle class families who can afford to pay for private tutors or attend schools where second language acquisition is a priority.<sup>55</sup>

In addition to being cautioned about speaking Spanish with Lawrence, Julissa showed me that her six-year old son also had an Individualized Education Plan for speech and language. Language development was a concern shared by Julissa and Melody influenced by conversations with teachers in schools. Melody expressed doubt about her youngest son Dylen's speech during an interview with me:

M: Yes, because certain letters he can't pronounce it right. I don't know what it is, but it's having an effect on putting letters to make a word, even with his alphabet, when he says his alphabet, even certain letters he says different. So when you try...for a long time...what is it? Like, now we've been working on BAT.

D: BAT.

M: And he wasn't saying the T. He was saying BA.

D: B (letter name)-A (letter name)-C?

Melody became concerned with Dylen's speech after teachers in his pre-K program suggested that his speech should improve. Like Lawrence, William and Julissa's oldest son, I wondered if Dylen's cultural and linguistic background influenced the perspectives of the teachers who had decided that he had a speech problem so early in his schooling because they did not understand the legitimacy of the language structures he already possessed.<sup>56</sup> In both cases, the literacy sponsorship extended to the parents and children at school may have been based on a cultural deficit framework rather than one that understands the complexity of language and secondary discourses.<sup>57</sup> Children from underrepresented groups who are linguistically diverse and employ dialects and languages that differ from the dominant standard English are often perceived as deficient in language skills. Lowered teacher expectations based on deficit perspectives of "non-standard" forms of English fail to understand and build upon what students know as well as limit the opportunities they have to use this knowledge to acquire the standard ascribed value by the academy; the language of political and economic power.<sup>58</sup> In this case, not only are Lawrence and Dylen perceived as deficient in their language development, but the language strengths they do possess are not utilized to provide a more meaningful and equitable experience in school.<sup>59</sup>

All of the parents in the study demonstrated high expectations for the education of their children. Shana was concerned with the discriminatory practices related to the voucher system and the push to label schools and privatize education in her former community:

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53. Lipman, *The New Political Economy Of Urban Education*.

54. Sonia Nieto, *Language, Culture and Teaching: Critical Perspectives* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2010).

55. Samina Hadi-Tabassum, *Language, Space, and Power: A Critical Look at Bilingual Education* (UK: Multilingual Matters, Ltd., 2006).

56. William Labov, *Language in the Inner City* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1972).

57. Gee, *Social Linguistics and Literacies*.

58. Lisa Delpit, *Other People's Children 1st Edition* (New York: New Press, 1995).

59. Courtney B. Cazden, *Classroom Discourse: The Language of Teaching and Learning* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2001).

...they don't want bad kids quote unquote to go to these schools so they started doing this test where the kid got a score of a certain amount to be able to go to this school. So underprivileged kids, if their parents are not spending the time with them and teaching them and they're relying on the teacher to teach them, they would never be able to learn everything...they place the great—you know the really good teachers in the schools where you have to take the test and they tell you to take the test but that's because they know you're not going to get in there because where you living...where you from...

Shana's concern over the privatization of public education demonstrates the value she places on learning versus the competition that characterizes the admission requirements and voucher restrictions for charter schools supported by neoliberal education policy that increasingly privatizes education for profit rather than addressing disparities in the public system.<sup>60</sup>

Conversely, Melody, made many attempts to keep her kids out of the public schools in her Chicago neighborhood. She viewed the charter system as a better opportunity for them to get out of their "typical" neighborhood environment:

But what made me go charter was the public schools in the area I was in, it's the typical neighborhood kids. So it's like instantly, if you're in the neighborhood, they put you in your neighborhood school. The really wild bunch goes to the neighborhood school. And then if you have the opportunity to go to a charter school or a private school, it's a good thing. One because you're out of your environment, two because the school, like I said the school they attended would teach them a grade ahead so they're being taught in advance, three the atmosphere of being in a private school, even though it was charter, where a lot of neighborhood schools you did wear the basic clothing because of gang...whatever. But the private school...I've always felt like it makes a child feel different, think different.

Melody's portrayal of an inner city public school illustrates the pull for parents to abandon their neighborhood schools in hopes for a better opportunity for their children. She also clearly felt her children needed to be protected from the activities of the neighborhood. In this portrayal Melody did not question the prevalence of the dispossession and displacement of African American and Latino/as in U.S. cities, economic segregation, poverty and violence in the inner city exacerbated by neoliberal policies.<sup>61</sup> Instead in her quest to make sure her children attended "good schools," Melody took up a perspective that sustains the historical struggle for racial equality within a post-racial political discourse in the U.S., a perspective that works against her and her children.<sup>62</sup>

Even after she moved to College Town to give her children a "slower pace of life," Melody had strong opinions about the schools in her new community. After transitioning from the shelter, she and her children walked long distances to remain at Lighthouse, the school where children residing at the shelter were bussed, even though there was a school just a half block from her house:

Lighthouse is away from where I live at because their neighborhood school is Washington and that's the neighborhood school for "I'm on the side of the lower class or the bad

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60. Diane Ravitch, *The Death and Life of the Great American School System* (New York: Basic Books, 2010).

61. Lipman, *The New Political Economy Of Urban Education*.

62. Lisa D. Delpit, *Multiplication is for White People* (New York: New Press, 2012).

area or the stereotyping of what side of town you're on." Instantly it's like, even when I go to the park, I don't want that for them. I just left this. I see it. If I wanted this I would have stayed where I was. So I do, they do, go out of their way to go to Lighthouse and that's because I want them to be in better education, better environment, better teachers, better staff, better principal.

Melody's story illustrates both a resistance narrative to what she saw in her new neighborhood and an assimilation narrative in her attempts to privilege a school community much farther away that only differed in the ethnic and class backgrounds of the children, not the qualifications of the teachers or principal. Her own schooling history shaped what she believed was possible in a school setting where economic segregation coupled with a high percentage of students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds meant in terms of access and opportunity.<sup>63</sup>

Of all the participating families, only Melody's two oldest children remained at Lighthouse after transitioning from the shelter because they were willing to walk for almost two miles across a busy highway to school. After three months in the shelter, Julissa and William were unable to obtain stable housing in College Town and were forced to return to Gary, Indiana in order to use their Section 8 housing voucher. After an extended wait for housing in College Town and pressure from extended family, Brianna's family returned to Chicago to live in her grandmother's one-bedroom apartment while her mother looked for a job that could provide enough for the family of four to get their own place. Kendra and Shana both moved their families to a nearby community where housing was more affordable than in College Town.

### Conclusion

Through the act of storytelling parents saw themselves as teachers, learners, role models and advocates for their children. The parents attempted to sustain a narrative of improving their lives for their families (the quest to do better) through assimilation narratives on middle class life opportunities and literacies and resistance narratives to distance themselves from deficit discourses surrounding their linguistic, cultural, and class backgrounds. Better schools, safer streets, and secure housing were the possibilities the parents imagined, illustrated in stories of life in their former neighborhoods and the hope a new community could offer them and their children.

Although parents did not always challenge the school perspective, the counterportraits represented partially in this article illustrate the ways parents were willing to collaborate and take seriously advice from teachers and adopt literacy practices sanctioned by schools. Parents also were willing to assume responsibility for guiding their children's development outside of school and consider whether they needed to do more to confront potential problems with learning in school. Despite these attempts to engage in literacy practices most closely associated with middle class ways of knowing, parents repeatedly suffered setbacks in employment, affordable child-care, transportation to and from jobs and school, and stable housing which made it difficult for some of the families to stay in the same school community, or to remain in College Town after they transitioned from the shelter.

Economic struggle seems to be entangled with epistemic struggle.<sup>64</sup> In order to counter deficit ideologies, it is necessary to question the association between literacy and affluence har-

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63. Jonathan Kozol, *The Shame of the Nation* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2005).

64. Gerald Campano, *Immigrant Students and Literacy* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2007).



bored in our dominant narrative about school achievement and social class<sup>65</sup> and to contest the social and educational reform policies that sustain this narrative.<sup>66</sup> By examining the stories of people whose everyday lives and literacies are largely underrepresented and misunderstood in schools we can begin to compose a more inclusive portrait of homelessness. In the context of College Town, the tendency to adopt deficit perspectives concerning the children and families displaced from Chicago's inner city makes it unlikely that both the value families ascribe to education and the literacy practices families engage in will be recognized in schools. Rejecting a "culture of poverty" framework<sup>67</sup> by attempting to understand a child's sociocultural knowledge and the literacies families engage in for social and cultural purposes,<sup>68</sup> can provide more powerful connections to school curricula,<sup>69</sup> support culturally responsive pedagogy<sup>70</sup> and engage students in school experiences that address the social realities and injustices their families, neighborhoods, and communities face.<sup>71</sup> Additionally, shifting from deficit discourse to conversations regarding deep inequities in the U.S. may support more just explanations for school failure linked to poverty in terms of access and opportunity rather than ability or merit.<sup>72</sup>

Within this perspective of valuing the sociocultural knowledge of all families it is critical to understand the role of differential access to the economic, political, and social securities of a steady and living wage, healthy and secure homes, safe neighborhoods, and high quality public education. Dismissing the disparities evident in the lives of families experiencing homelessness reinforces deficit perspectives of what it means to be homeless<sup>73</sup> and undermines the quest for a better life families are working toward. Literacy sponsorship, teaching practices, and advocacy in and out of school shape attitudes, beliefs, and dispositions about inclusion of youth experiencing homelessness in communities as much as the housing policies and local ordinances that increasingly criminalize homelessness. Providing opportunities for families experiencing homelessness to participate more fully in school communities by engaging in teaching and advocacy that supports meaningful and collaborative efforts to provide literacy sponsorship pushes back against neoliberal policies that disguise differential access as differences in "grit" or "merit."<sup>74</sup> Contesting the discourses of a supposed U.S. meritocracy by challenging exclusionary practices such as emphasis on high-stakes testing, corporate takeover of schools, and underfunded public schools and early childhood education programs, validates the lives of children and their families whose efforts often go unrewarded in their quest for the "American Dream." The self-determination of the families illustrated in these partial counterportraits is a collective of voices that challenge the dominant deficit perspectives surrounding homelessness, particularly in schools. These counterportraits "talk back to"<sup>75</sup> the discourses and policies that work politically to finalize their margin-

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65. Jean Anyon, "Social Class and School Knowledge," *Curriculum Inquiry* 11, no. 1 (1981): 3-42.

66. Bowles and Gintis, *Schooling in Capitalist America*.

67. Bomer et al., "Miseducating Teachers About the Poor."

68. Street, "The New Literacy Studies."

69. Jabari Mahiri, *Shooting for Excellence: African American and Youth Culture in New Century Schools* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1998).

70. Gloria Ladson-Billings, *The Dreamkeepers: Successful Teachers of African American Children* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1994).

71. Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.

72. Bowles and Gintis, *Schooling in Capitalist America*.

73. Paul C. Gorski, "Peddling Poverty for Profit: Elements of Oppression in Ruby Payne's Framework," *Equity & Excellence in Education* 41, no. 1 (2008): 130-148.

74. Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis, "Broken Promises: School Reform in Retrospect" in *Foundations of Education* (ed.) Susan F. Semel (New York: Routledge, 2010).

75. bell hooks, *Talking back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black* (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 1989).

alized position in society rather than to imagine and make possible transformative opportunities in which families experiencing homelessness can secure a better future.

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## The Voices Behind the Numbers: Understanding the Experiences of Homeless Students

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### Abstract

*In a given year, approximately 1.6 million children in the United States experience homelessness, and research shows that their living conditions generally place these children at risk for educational underperformance and failure at school (Hall, 2007; Love, 2009). Although lack of education or low levels of education on the part of a head of household are often identified as indicators of poverty, or associated with the persistence of poverty, too few researchers have attempted to understand the lived experience of poverty and its impact on educational experiences through the eyes of children and youth. In this article, we bring the harsh realities of children's experiences to light through portraits of five homeless children. After situating homelessness within the context of the McKinney-Vento Act, and within the broader context of empirical research on homelessness and its impact on children's educational experiences, we attempt to put a human face on the challenge of child homelessness and poverty in America.*

**Keywords:** *homelessness, poverty, McKinney-Vento Act, portraiture*

*"The equation is simple: education is the most basic insurance against poverty. Education represents opportunity. At all ages, it empowers people with the knowledge, skills and confidence they need to shape a better future."*

*--Irina Bokova<sup>1</sup>*

Despite Lyndon Johnson's "war on poverty," explicitly initiated over 50 years ago, 46 million Americans, eight million of them children, live in households with incomes the government considers inadequate. In a given year, approximately 1.6 million children are not only considered poor, but homeless, due to no fault of their own, and research shows that their living conditions generally place these children at risk for educational under performance and failure at school.<sup>2</sup>

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1. Irina Bokova, "Foreword," "Education Counts: Towards the Millenium Development Goals," *United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization*, accessed November 3, 2014, <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0019/001902/190214e.pdf>.

2. Ramona A. Hall, "Homeless Students and the Public School System," *The Delta Kappa Gamma Bulletin* 73, (Spring 2007), 9-12; David A. Love, "Commentary: We shouldn't have Homeless Children in America," *McClatchy Washington Bureau*, September 24, 2009, accessed November 3, 2014, [http://www.homelesschildrenamerica.org/documents/McClatchy\\_CommentaryWeShouldntHave.pdf](http://www.homelesschildrenamerica.org/documents/McClatchy_CommentaryWeShouldntHave.pdf).

The prevalence and extent of poverty have been extensively studied and documented. Scholars have identified and written about numerous indicators of multi-dimensional poverty, most of them associated with lack of resources, unemployment, and lack of education.<sup>3</sup> In most cases, the authors focus on understanding the characteristics of poverty so that it can be addressed through public policy or social interventions. Although lack of education or low levels of education on the part of a head of household are often identified as indicators of poverty, or associated with the persistence of poverty, too few researchers have attempted to understand the lived experience of poverty and its impact on educational experiences through the eyes of children and youth. Indeed, the authors of this paper, much of whose work addresses the influence of poverty and homelessness on children and schools, are frequently surprised by the numerous prevailing misconceptions about children living in poverty, their housing and economic situations, and their educational rights and opportunities (or lack thereof).

Thus, in this article, we bring the harsh realities of children's experiences to light through portraits of five homeless children. Each situation described here, each comment, each challenge is real—drawn directly from our data. It is our intent to put a human face on the challenge of child homelessness and poverty in America. First, however, we situate homelessness within the context of the McKinney-Vento Act and within the broader context of empirical research on homelessness and its impact on children's educational experiences.

### Background

The signing of the McKinney–Vento Homeless Assistance Act of 1987 by President Ronald Reagan (since reauthorized several times) represented the first large-scale federal response to homelessness.<sup>4</sup> Although the McKinney-Vento Act has a broad range of programs that directly and indirectly affect homeless children, our interest here is in the “Education for Homeless Children and Youth Program.” The definition of homeless children provided in the Act has become the prevailing definition used by most agencies and entities and is the definition used for the purpose of this paper. It includes: children and youths who are sharing the housing of others due to loss of housing, economic hardship, or a similar reason; who are living in motels, hotels, trailer parks, or camping grounds due to the lack of alternative adequate accommodations; who are living in emergency or transitional shelters; who are awaiting foster care placement; who have a primary night-time residence that is a public or private place not designed for or ordinarily used as a regular sleeping accommodation for human beings; or who are living in cars, parks, public spaces, abandoned buildings, substandard housing, bus or train stations, or similar settings (See the McKinney-Vento Homeless Education Assistance Improvements Act of 2001, section 725). According to the United States Department of Education,

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3. Massimo Amadio, “Inclusive Education in Latin America and the Caribbean: Exploratory Analysis of the National Reports Presented at the 2008 International Conference on Education,” *Springer Prospects*, 39 (2009), 293–305; Diego Battiston, Guillermo Cruces, Luis Lopez-Calva, Maria Lugo, and Maria Santos, “Income and Beyond: Multidimensional Poverty in Six Latin American Countries,” *Springer Soc Indic Res*, 112 (2013), 291–314; Luis F. Gamboa and Fabio L. Waltenberg, “Inequality of Opportunity for Educational Achievement in Latin America: Evidence from PISA 2006–2009,” *Economics of Education Review* 31 (2012), 694–708.

4. National Coalition for the Homeless, “NCH Fact Sheet #18: McKinney-Vento Act,” accessed July 30, 2014, <http://web.archive.org/web/20071203073025/http://www.nationalhomeless.org/publications/facts/McKinney.pdf>.

The McKinney-Vento program is designed to address the problems that homeless children and youth have faced in enrolling, attending, and succeeding in school. Under this program, State educational agencies (SEAs) must ensure that each homeless child and youth has equal access to the same free, appropriate public education, including a public preschool education, as other children and youth...[and] access to the educational and other services that they need to enable them to meet the same challenging State student academic achievement standards to which all students are held. In addition, homeless students may not be separated from the mainstream school environment.<sup>5</sup>

To ensure compliance, every local educational agency must designate a staff person to serve as a McKinney-Vento liaison to identify homeless children and youth and ensure that they have a full and fair opportunity to learn (See Section 722). Further, under the Act, homeless children are automatically eligible for free meals at school and cannot be excluded from any enrichment programs or supplemental services (See Section 722).

Given this comprehensive legislation, one could reasonably expect to find that homeless children, once enrolled in school, are adequately supported and able to fully participate in the academic life of the school. One might also anticipate finding that homeless children perform well compared to their housed, less-mobile peers. Yet, according to Institute for Children, Poverty, and Homelessness, “less than one-quarter of homeless elementary school students nationwide are proficient in math (21.5%) and reading (24.4%), as opposed to over one-third (39.6% and 33.8%, respectively) of their housed peers. Homeless high school students are even less likely to be proficient in these subject areas (11.4% in math and 14.6% in reading, versus 32.2% and 30.9%, respectively).”<sup>6</sup> These and similarly alarming statistics seem to have spawned a recent interest among academics in the experiences and educational outcomes of homeless youth, hence this special issue of *Critical Questions in Education*.

In December 2012, *Educational Researcher* published a special section, “Mobility and Homelessness in School-Aged Children.” The four articles included in this section analyzed quantitative data related to the effects of mobility and homelessness on students’ math and reading skills, executive function (e.g. skills related to planning, organizing, strategizing, paying attention, and time management), and academic achievement. We learned that residential mobility in the early elementary years is associated with lower math and reading scores in third grade and that these gaps in achievement are not made up over time.<sup>7</sup> We also learned that, for children in Philadelphia, “instability in both home and schooling environments is associated with the poorest educational outcomes.”<sup>8</sup> Likewise, Herbers, Cutuli, Supkoff, Heistad, Chan, Hinz, and Masten, pointed to persistent achievement gaps between homeless and highly mobile students and their

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5. See the “Education for Homeless Children and Youth Program,” Title vii-b of the *McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act*, as amended by the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001*, accessed May 7, 2014, <http://www2.ed.gov/programs/homeless/guidance.pdf>.

6. Institute for Children, Poverty, and Homelessness (ICPH), “America Almanac: Improving Special Education Services for Homeless Students with Disabilities,” accessed May 30, 2014, <http://www.icphusa.org/index.asp?page=55&americanalmanac=2&story=85&pg=348>.

7. Adam Voight, Marybeth Shinn, and Maury Nation, “The Longitudinal Effects of Residential Mobility on the Academic Achievement of Urban Elementary and Middle School Students,” *Educational Researcher* 41, no. 9 (December, 2012): 385-392.

8. John W. Fantuzzo, Whitney A. LeBoeuf, Chin-Chih Chen, Heather L. Rouse, and Dennis P. Culhane, “The Unique and Combined Effects of Homelessness and School Mobility on the Educational Outcomes of Young Children,” *Educational Researcher* 41 (December, 2012): 397.

more economically advantaged peers, although they found that “For families living in extreme poverty with high risk for homelessness and residential instability, a strong start in the early school years may have a particular significance as a protective factor for child achievement.”<sup>9</sup> Finally, Masten, Herbers, Desjardins, Cutuli, McCormick, Sapienza, Long, and Zelazo, studied the executive function skills of 138 children living in shelters for homeless families and found that children with stronger executive function skills adjusted better to kindergarten or first grade, experienced better academic achievement and peer acceptance, and demonstrated fewer behavioral issues.<sup>10</sup>

The publication of the special issue of *Educational Researcher* was bookended by two New York Times publications: “Homeless Families, Cloaked in Normality” and “Invisible Child” both of which qualitatively examined the experiences of homeless children and families.<sup>11</sup> More recently, publications by the *Huffington Post* and *One Miracle at a Time* provided additional glimpses of the lived realities of homeless youth—where they might live, the health challenges they face, the social difficulties they often encounter, and various support systems available to them.<sup>12</sup> Still missing, however, is a deep understanding of the daily educational experiences of homeless youth from their perspectives. While not limited to education, the following portraits of homeless students include a focus on their schooling experiences and the impact of their housing status on their educational opportunities and outcomes. We believe that the close and humanizing examination of schooling experiences (which, of course, are influenced by a broad range of other factors) afforded by our data demonstrates the limitations of school policies and isolated school-level interventions and the shortcomings of public policy and the shelter/affordable/transitional/supportive housing systems, while at the same time debunking many of the myths and misperceptions about homeless youth.

### The Lived Experiences of Homelessness

The data presented here come from five interviews conducted with children from urban areas across the US (four female, one male) who are considered homeless under a provision of the McKinney-Vento Act. Participants were identified by a snowball technique starting with educators and personnel from homeless shelters. Parents and siblings were invited to join and participate in the interviews. In every instance, they did so; thus, 17 people participated in the five interviews. Each semi-structured interview was transcribed and analyzed and salient and recurring themes identified. On reflection, we decided that presenting the data through portraits, as

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9. Janette E. Herbers, J.J. Cutuli, Laura M. Supkoff, David Heistad, Chi-Keung Chan, Elizabeth Hinz, and Ann S. Masten, “Early Reading Skills and Academic Achievement Trajectories of Students Facing Poverty, Homelessness, and High Residential Mobility,” *Educational Researcher* 41 (December, 2012): 367.

10. Ann S. Masten, Janette E. Herbers, Christopher David Desjardins, J.J. Cutuli, Christopher M. McCormick, Julianna K. Sapienza, Jeffrey D. Long, and Philip David Zelazo, “Executive Function Skills and School Success in Young Children Experiencing Homelessness,” *Educational Researcher* 41 (December, 2012): 375-384.

11. Alan Feuer, “Homeless Families, Cloaked in Normality,” *New York Times* (New York, NY), February 3, 2012, accessed May 30, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/05/nyregion/ordinary-families-cloaked-in-a-veil-of-homelessness.html?pagewanted=all>; Andrea Elliott, “Invisible Child: Dasani’s Homeless Life,” *New York Times* (New York, NY), December 9, 2013, accessed May 30, 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/projects/2013/invisible-child/#/?chapt=1>.

12. Ann Brenoff, “7 Things About Homeless Kids You Probably Didn’t Know,” *Huffington Post*, May 25, 2014, accessed May 28, 2014, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/05/25/homeless-kids\\_n\\_5359430.html?utm\\_source=Copy+of+Volunteers+go+above+and+beyond+to+help+homeless+children&utm\\_campaign=Huff+Post+Press+Release&utm\\_medium=email](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/05/25/homeless-kids_n_5359430.html?utm_source=Copy+of+Volunteers+go+above+and+beyond+to+help+homeless+children&utm_campaign=Huff+Post+Press+Release&utm_medium=email).



opposed to a thematic analysis, allowed for a better understanding of the experiences of those we interviewed and would more effectively put a human face on the challenge of childhood homelessness.<sup>13</sup> We therefore arranged the data into the following portraits written in the first person and used, to the extent possible, the children's and family members' words. The data were "cleaned up" for readability and to maintain anonymity and then organized into portraits that demonstrate the realities of homelessness, the impact of public policies, and, in some cases, the ways in which schools and community organizations either support or exacerbate the many challenges related to childhood homelessness. Despite the common images evoked by the term "homeless," the realities of childhood homelessness are varied and nuanced—something we hope to portray here.

### **Mariah**

My name is Mariah, I am 10 years old and I am in 5th grade. About five years ago, my family had it all. My mom, dad, and I were living in a three-bedroom house in a quiet neighborhood, with a lemon tree in the backyard and a park down the street. Then my brother was born and things started to fall apart. My mom had really bad post-partum depression and we were robbed. Not knowing what to do or who to turn to, we moved here—two states away—hoping that my grandma could help us out. We ended up in one emergency shelter after another, two weeks here, three weeks there. My parents couldn't find work and I wasn't going to school very much. That was the year I attended four different schools.

We finally got a spot in a transitional house, where we have been for almost two years. The transitional house is for women and children, so my dad had to go to a nearby men's shelter. He decided to leave the shelter because he said it felt like a prison—you have to wake up really early in the morning, you can't unpack your things, you have to leave each day and you can't come back until 5pm, and then you have to line up and hope you get a bed that night. Now he lives in our car on the street outside the transitional house. We have to leave at the end of next month because our time here is up, but I don't know where we are going next.

Finally things are starting to get better for me at school, and I am really worried that I will have to change schools again. My teacher is really nice and I see a counselor at school who has been helping me feel better about myself. At school I get breakfast and lunch and they also have given me some school supplies. They are also trying to get glasses for me because my eyesight isn't so good. There are a lot of families living at the transitional home, so there is a school bus that stops right outside and all the kids take the bus together in the morning and afternoon. The neighborhood isn't very safe, but it is ok because we all take the bus together.

I have a tutor who is helping me with reading, spelling, and math. Math is the only subject I really struggle in and she has helped me so much. In fact, my mom just went to the parent-teacher conference and found out that I am doing really well in every subject. I know a lot of the families living here have lots of problems, but not my family. We just don't have a place to live. We keep waiting to hear if we have been approved for Section 8 housing so we can move into our own place. My mom keeps saying that if we can just get our own place, everything will start to get better. I really hope so.

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13. Sarah Lawrence-Lightfoot and Jessica Hoffman Davis, *The Art and Science of Portraiture* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey Bass, 1997).

**Reba**

My name is Reba. I am 8 years old, and I am in special education. I am so tired of moving around. My mom and my brother and I were living in a nice house, but then my mom quit her job and we had to move in with my grandmother. After a while, she didn't want us anymore, because she said my mom was too loud. I was really glad to leave that apartment though, because while we were there my uncle physically abused us. For a long time, I was too afraid to tell anyone.

We moved to a shelter for a while and then we moved in with my dad. There were three mattresses on the floor and one bed and we all slept in that one room—me, my brother, my mom, and my dad (but mom and dad aren't married). Every morning, me and my dad tried to kill as many gnats as possible because they were everywhere. It's hard to do my homework because there is no room for a desk and when I want to work my brother wants to watch TV.

I've been to two schools this year. At the first one, people were mean to me and scratched me and pulled my hair. People have been a lot nicer at my new school. I have to take a taxi to school and I am so embarrassed when the driver calls out my address, because then the kids know I don't live near the school. I wish I could stay at school and join a club but they say the taxi won't pick me up late. I also hate it when we get to school late because of traffic and they make me go and get breakfast. I already had breakfast at home but they say I have to eat at school. Sometimes they give us things at school. Once they gave some of us backpacks, but they all looked the same, so if you were carrying one, everyone knew you were poor or homeless. My brother brought his home and never used it again. Sometimes the teachers say things like, "Oh, Reba, you don't have to pay for this trip...." We don't have to pay because we are homeless, but when the teacher says it out loud, all of the kids stare at me and know we are poor. I hate that! Then one day I was wearing a coat that I had been given by my school and one of the teachers grabbed me and made fun of it; she said it came from Old Navy and wasn't really a coat at all, but it was one the school had actually given me.

My mom says she wishes the school would help us with rent and then we could live near the school. It would be cheaper than taxis, but I guess rent isn't something they can give us. That's stupid.

**Ramona**

My name is Ramona. I am 13 and I rarely talk to anyone. I am in middle school but it is hard to concentrate on my schoolwork. I don't want anyone to know about my family; when I talk about it, it hurts and I don't know what to do. Now we are living in a townhouse, but the money Catholic Charities pays for our rent runs out in a few months. Two years ago, my mom got really sick with a brain tumor and we were all scared. My dad was so worried he did something stupid and now he is in jail. Of course, that made things much worse. Before we had everything. Now we have nothing. We tried to put our things in storage when we lost our house, but then we couldn't pay for the storage space either.

We ended up sleeping in dad's taxi (which we're not supposed to do). But it was much better than the shelters. I was scared sleeping in a big room with so many other people, and then my big brother couldn't stay with us. After they are 12, boys have to go to the men's shelter—he was scared and so were we. And when we were in the shelter system, we never knew which shel-

ter we would be in on a given night. We sometimes saw other homeless people with babies walking and would give them a ride, because everyone was trying to get there before it was too late. And we all had to be there together, so if mom got an evening job or one of us had an activity at school, we couldn't stay in the shelter either.

I wish I could do cheerleading but I know mom wouldn't want to pay for it and I don't want to tell the school my situation and ask for them to pay. My brother's elementary school principal knows we are homeless and she is amazing. One day she noticed that my brother had been wearing the same shirt for a couple of days and she phoned my mom to ask if we needed help with laundry or something. I heard mom crying on the phone because she was so surprised and happy. She said that no one from a school had ever called to offer help but that they usually call to complain about something.

So Charlie's school knows, but I just can't tell anyone at my middle school. That's probably why, when mom asked about tutoring, they suggested someone really expensive; they say they have no tutoring at my school. But I find school difficult and sometimes I just can't concentrate. Sometimes I am just emotional if I have had a letter from my dad. But mom grounds me if I don't get a B+. It is really important to her that we all do our best in school. But sometimes I just can't. I don't care like I used to. I wish I never grew up.

## **Michael**

My name is Michael and I am 11. I have two brothers and two sisters, and all seven of us live in one hotel room. As you can guess, it is pretty crowded. Four years ago, my parents were buying a house but then the payments got too high, and they got involved with someone who scammed them. The company promised to take over the mortgage for two years, fix the things that needed to be fixed, and then to sell the house back to them, but of course that didn't happen. After several years, they settled out of court, and used the money to rent a really nice house that had three bedrooms, two bathrooms, and even had a washer and dryer so we did not have to go to the Laundromat. But after the settlement money ran out, that house was too expensive too, so Family Services helped us find this hotel room.

We don't like to tell anyone where we live and so sometimes I say we live in an apartment. Once I told my best friend where we live and told him not to tell, but he did anyway, so now we don't tell anyone. I want my own room and not to have to share with my brothers and sisters.

My mom works at Macy's; before she worked at a bank but after someone she worked with drove her home one day, she lost her job. She thinks it's because they didn't want anyone who is homeless to work at the bank. And my dad works too. In fact, he makes pretty good money, \$47,000/year, but he says he doesn't know how to manage money—that's why we are in this situation. He lies awake at night wondering why we are living in a hotel when both of them have jobs. I guess he needs some help to manage money but the real reason we can't rent a place and move out of here is that there are laws about how many people can live in what size apartment. That means that seven people cannot live in a two-bedroom apartment and all of the bigger ones in this area are too expensive.

I suppose we could move to a cheaper area, but mom and dad really want us to be able to stay in our schools. The last schools we went to were awful, but now we are in really good schools. Here I feel part of the school. We found it by accident. The Family Service people had said it was good, and one day we were driving and there it was. It is a good thing we changed

schools. Tommy was a premature baby and has some delays and is a bit hyperactive and the old school did not handle it well. In our new school, they are wonderful. They developed a game plan for him and he is doing really well. No one bullies him anymore. We were the only African Americans in our last school and people used to ask why we were there and why we didn't go to school in the city instead of the suburb.

My parents say they just want us to have a normal life and to fit in. No one would know we are homeless just by looking at us. In fact, just a few days ago, our pastor said, "You don't look like you live there; you don't look like you are homeless." And we thought that was the best compliment. We have each other and we have food and we have a place to sleep, so we can make it!

### **Rosa**

My name is Rosa and I am 9 years old. I live with my mom at a transitional home for women who have been abused. My dad lives about half an hour away with his girlfriend. We've been living here for almost six months and I really like it here, but we just found out that we only have six more months until we have to move out. When we first moved in, all of the other kids living here were really young, but now some older kids my age have moved in, which makes it more fun. I like working in the garden here. We are growing beans, and tomatoes, and potatoes and there are some fruit trees.

I can't remember how many schools I have been to, at least five. My favorite school was the first one I went to, but that was a long time ago and that was really far away. The last school I went to was terrible. The teacher was so mean and she was always yelling at me for something. I like my new school OK. The teachers are really nice and helpful, but I don't have a lot of friends. Actually, I don't have any friends. Everyone teases me about my clothes and being mixed race. I get lunch at school but I never get there in time for breakfast. The morning is so busy trying to get up and get ready and then we have to walk to the school, so I just don't eat breakfast. I have a little sister, too, and it is hard for all of us to get to school on time. The lunch food is really good, though, and so are the snacks. I wish I was in the afterschool program, because I know they do a lot of fun activities and have really good snacks.

I don't really like math and reading, but my mom found me a tutor who is helping a lot. My math grade has gotten so much better this year. I really love history and I like learning about all of the people who changed the world. A lot of them look like me. And I can't wait until I am older so I can do science experiments that bubble and explode! Art was always my favorite subject, but not anymore. The teacher is really mean to me. I forgot to bring my art project to class one day and she yelled and yelled at me. I brought it home to show my mom. The principal called and apologized to my mom, but I am still really angry about it.

I don't know where we are going to move next. Maybe I will go and live with my dad, but I want to stay with my mom and keep going to the same school. Mom is looking for a job, but has had some health problems. We'll just have to wait and see.

### **Discussion and Implications**

From these portraits of five homeless children and their families, we can quickly see that many of the very derogatory stereotypes from popular media (the poor live on streets, do drugs, drink heavily, are lazy, and so forth) do not fit our data. Accordingly, we must question the accu-

racy of much of the currently accepted cultural analysis most clearly expressed in the work of Ruby Payne and, unfortunately, often taken as a given by educational leaders and teachers.<sup>14</sup> Paul Gorski not only critiques Payne's self-proclamation as "The Leading U.S. Expert on the Mindsets of Poverty, Middle Class, and Wealth" but offers a strong and rigorous critique in which he identifies "eight elements of oppression in Payne's framework" including her unproblematic acceptance of the concept of a "culture of poverty."<sup>15</sup> Payne depicts poor children as coming from a "culture of poverty" which, she claims, is characterized by specific speech patterns, stereotypical values, and deficit mindsets. Yet, we did not find that our interviews were characterized by rambling, beating "around the bush" or by non-standard English that Payne calls a "casual register discourse pattern." Similarly, we found no evidence that verbal chastisement or corporal punishment followed by food were normal interaction patterns.<sup>16</sup> Neither, of course, was there any evidence of Payne's belief that "the poor simply see jail as a part of life and not necessarily bad."<sup>17</sup> Several assertions, such as her belief that to be successful, and "to move from poverty to middle class ... an individual must give up relationships for achievement for at least some period of time" are not only incorrect, but run contrary to many of the themes identified here as well as to the cultural capital theories of scholars like Nussbaum and Sen or the additive pedagogical approaches of Cummins or Jensen.<sup>18</sup>

Indeed, the children we interviewed are, to the extent possible under their living circumstances, clean, well fed, and well cared for. They all have at least one parent who is concerned about, and trying to be actively involved in, their education. Strong family ties have sustained them in the face of adversity and the children and parents alike have high expectations for each other. Payne's deficit and paternalistic approaches and her "compassionate conservatism" have no place in the thinking of educators wanting to dispel common misperceptions and effect meaningful and positive change.<sup>19</sup>

### Multiple Causes of Homelessness

There are many causes of the homelessness of our participants who have utilized numerous different housing arrangements (e.g. shelters, transitional homes, staying with family, living in cars, hotels). Some had experienced illness or depression; one was robbed; one fled abuse; others acknowledged that they had simply made "bad choices," in part because they were "not good at managing money" (as Michael's Dad stated). In fact, every participant told us of having lived in a middle class situation until "things changed." None discussed anything suggesting that growing up in a "culture of poverty" was to blame for their current situation. This is not to say

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14. Ruby Payne, *A Framework for Understanding Poverty* (Highlands, TX: aha! Process, Inc., 2005), Kindle Edition.

15. Paul C. Gorski, "Peddling Poverty for Profit: Elements of Oppression in Ruby Payne's Framework," *Equity & Excellence in Education* 41, no. 1 (2008): 130, 133 and 135.

16. Payne, *Framework*, 23.

17. *Ibid.*, 22-23.

18. *Ibid.*, ?; Martha C. Nussbaum, *Frontiers of Justice: Disability, Nationality, Species Membership* (Cambridge, MA: Bellknap Press, 2007), Kindle Edition; Amartya Sen, *Inequality Reexamined* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), Kindle Edition; Jim Cummins, "Empowering Minority Students: a Framework for Intervention," in *Facing Racism in Education*, ed. Nitza M. Hidalgo, Ceasar L. McDowell, and Emilie V. Siddle (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Educational Review), *Reprint Series 21*, 50-68; Eric Jensen, *Engaging Students with Poverty in Mind: Practical Strategies for Raising Achievement* (Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2013).

19. Gorski, "Peddling Poverty," 143.

that generational poverty does not exist; it simply was not the cause of homelessness for our participants. This, of course, points to the need for more resources and opportunities (e.g. affordable housing, accessible healthcare, better mental health services, jobs offering a living wage, career training) for families at risk of or already slipping into poverty.

### **Housing and Housing Policies**

In every interview, housing seemed to be the key variable—if they could simply sort out the housing, everything would get better. Yet, in 2014, the National Low Income Housing Coalition found that “In no state can a full-time minimum wage worker afford a one-bedroom or a two-bedroom rental unit at Fair Market Rent.”<sup>20</sup> Affordable housing is scarce. Moreover, if a state or region then imposes zoning laws that require a certain body-to-bedroom ratio, housing is even less accessible to larger families who then (as in the case of Michael’s family), may find themselves in the ironic situation of living crowded into an even smaller, single hotel room. Other policies that need to be examined are those that separate families because there is an interdiction against men and post-pubescent boys living in the same place as women and girls, as discussed by Mariah and Ramona. Restrictive shelter rules punish intact families and families with teenage boys. Similarly, rules that require the presence of all family members at all times exacerbate the difficulties of parents finding work or of children participating in extra-curricular activities.

### **Schooling**

In the meantime, the homeless children we interviewed are trying to do exactly what they should be doing: persevering in their education, often with a lot of family support and high expectations. Ramona gets grounded if she doesn’t get a B+; Mariah’s mom regularly meets with Mariah’s teacher and counselor; Michael’s parents worked with the school to develop a “game plan” for his younger brother Tommy; Rosa’s mom sought a tutor for her daughter. But succeeding at school is still difficult. The students told us it was hard to concentrate when they did not feel safe, when they did not know where they would be living next, when they did not have a quiet space to work. School assignments that required specific materials placed an additional burden on the families, and students indicated that sometimes, as a result, completing assignments is a challenge.

We know that, according to the McKinney-Vento Act, financial barriers to full participation in classroom and enrichment activities must be removed, but students discussed concerns about not being able to pay for specific activities; sometimes because they were not aware of their rights, but more often because of the shame or embarrassment they felt when they had to ask for money or support. They also told us that it was difficult to hide their situation from friends and they expressed both concern and resilience as they described the number of schools they had attended, despite the intent of the McKinney-Vento legislation to keep children in their home school.<sup>21</sup>

We heard repeatedly that the attitudes of school personnel, both teachers and administrators, made a tremendous difference—that in some schools, homeless families felt able to share their situations and to seek help, while in others, they believed their situations were better kept

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20. Althea Arnold, Sheila Crowley, Elina Bravve, Sarah Brundage, and Christine Biddlecombe, "Out of Reach 2014," accessed May 30, 2014, <http://nlihc.org/oor/2014>, para. 2.

21. See the *McKinney-Vento Homeless Education Assistance Improvements Act of 2001*, Section 722.

secret. These children reported that they were often teased for being poor/homeless and hence did not want their peers to know. Thus, thoughtless comments by a teacher about a child's need to pay for a trip, or by a taxi driver shouting an out-of-area address were cause for concern. Similarly, well-intentioned "gifts" of backpacks or Christmas baskets that actually identified children as homeless or poor need to be reconsidered and handled more judiciously in most cases. School meals were generally appreciated by our respondents, except when they were required to eat specific food at specific times regardless of their desire or need to eat.

Across the board, we found parents doing their best to secure resources and opportunities for their children. Mariah and Rosa both have tutors provided by community-based organizations that seem to be having a significant positive impact on their learning. Beyond Mariah and Rosa, though, the students did not discuss educational support from outside organizations. Surprisingly, although explicitly asked about additional assistance or services they were receiving from school, no one identified their district's McKinney-Vento liaison as a resource. This finding points to clear shortcomings in the outreach efforts of schools and districts and a lack of enforcement of the McKinney-Vento Act on the part of schools, districts, and states. Whether these deficiencies stem from negligence or constraints, we do not know, but the interviewed families' lack of awareness about the services and resources available to them should cause concern among educators at all levels.

### Conclusion

Overall we found that there is a lack of a social safety net for families who unexpectedly encounter difficult economic circumstances. Market-rate housing is simply too expensive; affordable housing is too scarce. But most significant are the uncertainty and the stigmas attached to homelessness and poverty. Mariah, Ramona, Michael, and Rosa all talk about not knowing where they are going next but knowing that they will be moving again soon, and we know from the studies referenced above that homelessness and high mobility are the worst combination for academic outcomes.

Despite the fact that homelessness is never the child's fault, we also know that because of the constant moving and uncertainty, children often experience trauma, self-doubt, and shame that exacerbate their family's challenges and impede their academic progress. They may recognize the individual actions and decisions that have led to their impoverished circumstances, but because of the social stigma attached to homelessness and the pervasive silence related to childhood poverty, children rarely understand that poverty is a social problem and needs widespread social solutions. According to Beegle,

Very early on, children from poverty understand from other people that their "poor" choices or "bad" behavior placed them into poverty. Structural causes of poverty such as a lack of living-wage jobs for people with limited literacy or a lack of affordable housing for people with limited incomes are rarely discussed or understood.<sup>22</sup>

These are issues schools and educators must take up if we are to provide a truly equitable and excellent education for homeless children that might actually break the cycle of poverty and not simply purport to do so.

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22. Donna Beegle, "Overcoming the Silence of Generational Poverty," *Talking Points* 15, no. 1, 16.

The children in our interviews were articulate, resilient, and hopeful but they have been marginalized, stigmatized, and traumatized in numerous and unacceptable ways. Knowing the statistics and the extent of childhood poverty and homelessness in America is important, but hearing their voices, and understanding their situations should create a sense of urgency among policy makers, educators and caring citizens everywhere. Although extensive and current statistical data and analyses are important, we believe it is also critical to keep in mind the voices and stories of the homeless children themselves. They are not nameless, faceless, or hopeless, but certainly fearful and uncertain about their futures. These children deeply want to be accepted. They want to succeed. They want their families to stay together. They want some stability. And mostly they do not want to be blamed, marginalized, or singled out. They need sensitivity and support. They need reassurance and encouragement. They need adults in schools to believe in them. And they need to be able to trust that educators have their best interests at heart. If, as posited by UNESCO, education is “the most basic insurance against poverty,” then we must ensure that the children in our schools today, homeless or housed, have every opportunity to get an excellent education, rise above the constraints of poverty, and shape, for themselves, with our help, a better future.<sup>23</sup> Achieving this goal starts with awareness but must extend beyond talk to action – enforcement of the McKinney-Vento Act and a concerted effort to remove the barriers to educational opportunities that homeless children too often face.

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23. Bokova, “Foreword,” para. 2.



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## The Multi-dimensional Lives of Children who are Homeless

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Steve Grineski, Minnesota State University—Moorhead

### **Abstract**

*It is widely reported that children who are homeless are victimized by overwhelming challenges like poverty and ill-advised policy decisions, such as underfunding the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act. This act is the only federal legislation devoted to this marginalized group. Children who are homeless, however, should not be characterized as single-dimensional and hapless victims solely defined by this unwanted status. This kind of deficiency-thinking leads to presumptions, generalizations, and a narrow ascribing of not just their abilities, but their full humanity as well. Deficit-thinking may cause human service providers to try and 'fix and manage' children who are homeless, instead of building on their interests, gifts, and talents. Viewing children who are homeless as multi-dimensional and unfinished, with "hopes, dreams, and aspirations...passions and commitments... [and] skills, abilities, and capacities..."<sup>1</sup> should be the reality for the more than one million children who are homeless. This manuscript provides a richer understanding for the multi-dimensional lives of children who are homeless. Interviews conducted with key stakeholders and surveys completed by children staying at an emergency homeless shelter located in a Midwestern mid-size city inform preliminary ethnographic findings presented here. Generated from a two-year community- and shelter-based activity program these findings push back against a narrowing social construction of children who are homeless, as do several studies investigating this idea. A more holistic narrative that illustrates multi-dimensional children who act on varied interests, gifts, and talents are suggested.*

**Keywords:** *homelessness, children, deficit-and asset-based thinking, public policy, ethnographic findings*

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1. William Ayers, "Popular Education: Teaching for Social Justice," in *Teaching for Social Justice*, eds. William Ayers and Jean Ann Hunt (New York: The New Press Teachers College Press, 1998), xvii.

*At our local emergency homeless shelter one evening, Mithson, a 14 year-old Haitian-American young man, told me. “You know Steve, it’s not fair for kids like me...you know poor kids, we just don’t get the same opportunities as other kids.” And later during another conversation, Mithson elaborated on his interests with 20<sup>th</sup> century American history: “I am really interested in the Civil Rights Movement, the 1968 Olympics, black athletes, and Mohammed Ali.” Completing college so he can manage and then own a N.B.A. team is his life goal—“there should be more owners of color, he told me.” Once I asked, ‘if I asked your teachers about you, what would they tell me?’ Without missing a beat Mithson said, ‘He is really quiet.’ This young man speaks three languages: English, Creole, and French.*

### **The Social Context of Homelessness: Reasons and Challenges**

In their *America’s Youngest Outcasts* report, The National Center on Family Homelessness questioned whether America really cares about its children: “Children define our future and therefore, lay claim to our nation’s consciences, but little attention has been given to the tragic plight of more than 1.5 million children without homes.”<sup>2</sup> Meritocracy, a mistaken belief held by many conservative policy makers, makes maintaining, let alone expanding, federal initiatives to end child homelessness, difficult.<sup>3</sup> This lack of attention makes living in America an exhausting struggle for the many children who make up the poorest sub-group in the country as large numbers of children lack adequate food, healthcare and stable housing. Children who are homeless have been continually identified as the fastest growing segment of the homeless population for nearly 25 years.<sup>4</sup> Caring about and believing in these children, coupled with appropriate support services, and an authentic commitment to providing stable housing when there is *nowhere to go* is critical because...“homeless children are the most vulnerable of all homeless people.”<sup>5</sup> Although these young people are indeed vulnerable and presented with many challenges, unemployment and homelessness are not inevitable life-trajectories as evidenced by Mithson’s academic and career goals.

### **Reasons**

Reasons for homelessness are wide-ranging and complicated. Unfortunately these reasons resulted in over 600,000 individuals identified as homeless on a given night in 2013, with nearly

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2. National Center on Family Homelessness, “America’s Youngest Outcasts,” 2010, accessed January 6, 2014, <http://www.homelesschildrenamerica.org>.

3. Joel Spring defines meritocracy as “each individual’s social and occupational position [being] determined by merit, not political or economic influence.” A belief in meritocracy would hold that being homeless and poor results from an individual’s lack of effort and accompanying inability to secure housing. As a result, these individuals are not worthy of assistance. See *The American School: a Global Context from the Puritans to the Obama Era (5th ed)* (New York, NY: McGraw Hill, 2011), 271.

4. Jerome Becker and Nancy Boxill, *Homeless Children: the Watchers and the Waiter* (Philadelphia, PA: Haverth Press, 1990).

5. Martha Burt, Laudan Aron, Pamela Lee, and Jesse Valenti, *Helping America’s Homeless: Emergency Shelter or Affordable Housing?* (Washington, DC : The Urban Institute, 2001), 137.

25% under the age of 18.<sup>6</sup> However, when considering other sleeping options, numbers of individuals identified as homeless skyrocketed to the millions.<sup>7</sup> As one would guess poverty leads unemployment and lack of affordable housing as the three uppermost reasons for family homelessness. Currently, 1 in 5 or 16.1 million children live in poverty.<sup>8</sup> In 2010, almost one-third of Hispanic, African-American, American Indian, and Alaska Native families with children faced poverty on a daily basis—three times the rate of white families.<sup>9</sup> Children who are homeless are disproportionately residing in female-headed households with 80% of homeless families led by single women.<sup>10</sup>

Whenever the economy falters, unemployment, reduced work hours, pay cuts, and diminished benefits contribute to families struggling with housing stability. When nearly half of employed individuals who are homeless cannot afford housing, securing housing without a job is nearly impossible.<sup>11</sup> Unemployment and low-wage jobs not offering health care and retirement plans serve to exhaust human and financial resources as families strain under the burden of housing instability.

Lack of affordable housing is another key reason why many families are pushed into homelessness as witnessed during the 2008 recession. Mounting numbers of people in poverty, decreasing federal housing support, and rising costs explain the scarcity of affordable housing options today. As a result over one-half of households carried the label of being *cost-burdened* (i.e., spending 30% of income or more on housing costs) in 2013 while nearly 30% were saddled with the hardships of *severe cost-burden* (i.e., spending 50% of income or more on housing costs).<sup>12</sup> Securing affordable housing is made even more difficult by the color of one's skin as families of color continue to battle for meaningful employment that pays a living wage.<sup>13</sup>

President Harry S. Truman signed into law the 1949 National Housing Act in hopes of remedying the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century housing crisis.<sup>14</sup> The overall goal was to create "...a decent home and suitable living environment for every American family."<sup>15</sup> Currently, 5.8 million housing units are needed to house the country's low-income families.<sup>16</sup> Lack of health care, inadequate education, domestic violence, incarceration, mental illness, and substance abuse are additional reasons for family homelessness. The debilitating effects of racial, gender, sexual orientation, and income discrimination cannot be discounted as factors contributing to family homelessness.<sup>17</sup>

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6. *Annual Homeless Assessment Report to Congress* (Washington, DC: US Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2013).

7. *State of Homelessness in America* (New York: National Alliance to End Homelessness, Homeless Research Institute, 2012).

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9. *Ibid.*

10. US Interagency Council on Homelessness, "Family Homelessness," accessed May 5, 2014, [http://www.usich.gov/resources/uploads/asset\\_library/USICH\\_FamHomeless\\_Facts\\_internal.pdf](http://www.usich.gov/resources/uploads/asset_library/USICH_FamHomeless_Facts_internal.pdf).

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12. *Ibid.*

13. *Ibid.*

14. US Department of Housing and Urban Development, "HUD Historical Background, Homes and Communities, 1940s," accessed March 1, 2014, <http://www.hud.gov/offices/adm/about/admguide/history.cfm>.

15. *Ibid.*

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## Challenges

Children who are homeless are well-acquainted with the challenges caused by housing instability. Nevertheless, how each child responds is dependent upon variables such as level of resiliency, gender, age, available resources, familial and outsider support, current living circumstances, amount of mobility, reasons for homelessness, and length of time and frequency of homeless episodes. As a result of how children respond, some successfully overcome these challenges.<sup>18</sup> These challenges, documented for over 20 years began with Ellen Bassuk and Lenore Rubin who pioneered research efforts to understand the challenges homelessness presented to children.<sup>19</sup> In her initial study, depression and anxiety were identified as mental-health risks associated with school-age children staying in shelters. Karol Reganick described the challenges children face due to homelessness: physical and health problems, such as poor nutrition; social problems, including poor social skills, insecurities and self-consciousness about high mobility and living in poverty; marginalization and trauma from psychological stressors associated with homelessness; and developmental delays caused by lack of intellectual stimulation.<sup>20</sup> Feeling welcomed and experiencing success within school walls is yet another challenge presented to children who are homeless.

Educational success is a life-altering outcome shaped by homelessness. Unfortunately for many children, it is often negatively shaped by variables beyond their control. Enrollment requirements, inadequate funding, and prejudice and discrimination are some reasons students who are homeless face obstacles to fair and equal schooling.<sup>21</sup> Changing schools, poor attendance, unnecessary special education placements, poor academic performance, grade retention, and high drop-out rates characterize the education experienced by some students who are homeless. Government policies such as the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act and HeadStart, intended to provide equal education opportunities and protect the educational rights of these students, can make schooling a more positive experience. Regrettably these policies, desperately needed by many children, fall short of their full reach. This is readily evident through ongoing underfunding of the McKinney-Vento Assistance Act and the significant under-serving (80%+) by Head Start of preschoolers who are homeless.<sup>22</sup>

A good deal of literature reporting on the life trajectories of children who are homeless foretells predictable and hopeless journeys to adulthood.<sup>23</sup> Social Work Professor Paul Shane's writings embody this deficit-based perspective: "A macro effect of homelessness on children is...that they are cast out and lost from society...They don't belong anywhere. They then become potentially damaged members of society that may become dependent upon and/or prey upon so-

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18. Karol Reganick, "Prognosis for Homeless Children and Adolescents," *Childhood Education* 73, no. 3 (1997): 133-135.

19. See for an example of this work Julee Kryder-Coe and Lester Salamon and Janice Molnar, *Children and Youth: a New American Dilemma* (London: Transaction Publishers, 1991); Ellen Bassuk and Lenore Rubin, "Homeless Children: A Neglected Population," *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* 57 (1987): 279-286.

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22. National Coalition for the Homeless, "Education of Homeless Children and Youth," accessed February 20, 2014, <http://www.nationalhomeless.org/factsheet/education>; "Sequestration's Effects on Nonprofits," *State-by-State Impact*, accessed February 20, 2014, <http://www.givevoice.org/state-impact>.

23. See for an example of this work R. da Costa Nunez, "Access to Success: Meeting the Educational Needs of Homeless Children and Families," *Social Work in Education* 16, no. 1 (1994): 21-30.

ciety.”<sup>24</sup> Children who are homeless, without question, are weighed down with a myriad of real, serious, and difficult challenges to overcome. These challenges, however, do not automatically imprint negative life trajectories on these young people. Jozefowicz-Simbeni and Israel provided an alternative asset-based narrative to this deficit-based perspective, “...burgeoning research has begun looking into the strengths of homeless students and has found such youths to possess numerous qualities that can lead to positive adaptation to adulthood, including being strong and resilient, as well as possessing spiritual values.”<sup>25</sup> Effects of homelessness are not an *either-or* proposition, rather they are *and-both* kinds of propositions as evidenced by Emily’s upcoming resilience story.

### Children who are Homeless: Hope and Resilience

Emily is a college student majoring in Art Education who lived at a YWCA Family Shelter as a young child and learned first-hand the challenges associated with divorce, abuse, poverty, and homelessness. Adding to her challenges were the many schools she and her siblings attended. Emily believes that “people come up with a lot of predetermined negative thoughts about what children in those situations are like without really getting to know them or caring what the situation is that put them where they are.” This deficit-based thinking rests on tired stereotypes leading to presumptions and generalization about the future life-outcomes of individuals like Emily. This thinking does not stop there. I believe it narrowly ascribes not just their abilities, but their full humanity as well. But there is so much more to Emily’s story as there is for many of these children of promise. Emily is a successful student and gifted artist, responsible employee, and most importantly a loving mother. Documentation describing the strengths, resilience, and capacities of children who are homeless is available and counteracts much of the literature, as exemplified by the previously cited passage authored by Shane. Ann Douglas clearly frames this issue:

Much of the research evaluating and describing children who are homeless has reported alarming high levels of developmental delays, emotional disturbances, and psychopathology among this population...The research, however, has focused almost exclusively on deficiencies and psychopathology in this population, virtually ignoring competency and strengths...Generalizing about children who are homeless will be inaccurate and misleading unless the varied experiences of homeless children and their families are taken into account.<sup>26</sup>

Cathryn Schmitz, Janet Wagner, and Edna Menke conducted a study to better understand the “...voices of the children [to] illuminate the[ir] underlying strengths and vulnerabilities.”<sup>27</sup> One-hundred and thirty-three poor families, living in unstable housing served as subjects. When assessed on standardized measures of anxiety, depression, and behavior most of these children

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24. Paul Shane, *What about America’s Homeless Children* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1996), 27.

25. Debra M Hernandez Jozefowicz-Simbeni and Nathaniel Israel, “Services to Homeless Students and Families: The McKinney-Vento Act and Its Implications for School Social Work Practice,” *Children and Schools* 28, no. 1: (2006): 37.

26. Ann Douglas, “Rethinking the Effects of homelessness on Children: Resiliency and Competency,” *Child Welfare* LXXV, no. 6 (November-December 1996): 742.

27. Cathryn Schmitz, Janet Wagner and Edna Menke, “The Interconnection of Childhood Poverty and Homelessness: Negative Impact/Points of Access,” *Families in Society* 82, no. 1 (2001): 77.

scored within normal ranges. Some children's scores, however, indicated a need for mental health intervention and about one-third of the children demonstrated social competence problems, such as making and keeping friends.<sup>28</sup>

When interviewed for this study, most mothers viewed their children positively, characterizing them as, "loving," "helpful," and "bright."<sup>29</sup> One child was described by his mother this way, "He's charming, sweet, easy to get along with. He's inquisitive, understanding and lovable. He's the kind of child you would like to have."<sup>30</sup> These mothers also portrayed their children as performing above average in school. On measures of academic achievement most scored within grade level ranges, while some scored above grade level. Nearly all of the children told the interviewers they had career goals and plans for reaching them, such as earning college degrees. Over one-half had dreams of becoming professionals like doctors, lawyers, and teachers; or skilled workers like pilots, truck drivers, and police officers. Possessing values such as working hard, studying and getting good grades, respecting teachers and getting a good job also typified this cohort. The above stated authors articulated a realistic way of thinking about children who are homeless, "Frequently, children living in poverty are considered high risk and approached from a deficit model. While the potential negative consequences of poverty and homelessness are well established...this study identified...strengths that also exist."<sup>31</sup>

Carol Ziesmer & Louise Marcoux queried teachers about the academic performance of their 88 students who were homeless.<sup>32</sup> Teachers reported 35% were functioning at grade level in math and reading, and 40% scored in the normal range on adaptive functioning.<sup>33</sup> An emergent conclusion was that this group displayed a great range across their needs, strengths, and abilities—some children were coping successfully and acting with resiliency while some were not. Carole Ziesemer, Louise Marcoux & Barbara Marwell found little difference when comparing reading and mathematics achievement measures for the 145 mostly African-American children who were homeless, and a matched group of 142 highly mobile and low SES children.<sup>34</sup> About one third of both groups performed at or above grade level in these academic areas. On measures of adaptive functioning about one-half of both groups scored positively outside the clinical range while no significant differences were identified between these groups on measures of problem behaviors. Also, no significant differences regarding measured self-worth emerged between groups. All children rated scholastic competence and behavior as more important than athletic or social performance and physical appearance.

Similar findings regarding the academic competence of children who were homeless have been well documented.<sup>35</sup> Many children who are homeless are hopeful about their futures, despite living with difficult circumstances. Three telling findings were generated when sixty children staying in shelters were asked to make drawings about their hopefulness and then write sto-

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28. Ibid.

29. Ibid, 71.

30. Ibid, 71-72.

31. Ibid, 74.

32. Carol Ziesemer and Louise Marcoux, "Academic and Emotional Needs of Homeless Students," *Social Work in Education* 14, no. 2 (1992): 77-85.

33. Ibid.

34. Carole Ziesemer, Louise Marcoux and Barbara Marwell, "Homeless Children: are they Different from other Low-Income Children," *Social Work* 39, no. 6 (1994): 658-668.

35. See for an example of this work Ann Masten, Donna Miliotis, Sandra Graham-Bermann, MaryLouise Ramirez and Jennifer Neeman, "Children in Homeless Families: Risks to Mental Health and Development," *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology* 61, no. 2 (1993): 335-343.



ries explaining this hope. One, the children described hope in their lives; two, they demonstrated how to generate hope in their lives; and thirdly, the children articulated how to persevere and remain hopeful.<sup>36</sup> The William and Mary, College of Education sponsored-initiative *Project Hope* is a comprehensive, federally funded grant project. Its purposes "...ensure the enrollment, attendance, and the success of homeless children and youth in school through public awareness efforts across the [Virginia] commonwealth and sub-grants to local school divisions." Wide ranging support for children who are homeless, such as seminars and conferences; early childhood education; mentoring, tutoring, and health services; as well as parent education have been offered since 1995. *Project Hope*, through its many publications, unabashedly states that many children who are homeless display resilience and succeed in school, with some identified for participation in programs for gifted students.<sup>37</sup> Documentation obviously exists offering differing perspectives about the life chances of children who are homeless.

### **Preliminary Ethnographic Findings: Four Case Studies**

Over the past two years, I have been privileged to get to know and interact with 35 different families and their 120+ children staying at the nearly 3 decades old Churches United for the Homeless (CUFH) Shelter located in a small northwestern Minnesota city. These children ranged in age from 3 to 16 years and represented several different racial and ethnic groups: Haitian, African-American, Somali, Sudanese, Iraqi, Indigenous, Hispanic, and Caucasian. These young people benefit from the CUFH foundational principles of love, grace, hospitality, and service, and an organizational culture that promotes "seeing" children for who they are and treating them with dignity and respect.

Churches United for the Homeless, founded in 1987, is the region's largest comprehensive shelter and the only shelter serving both single men and women and one- and two-parent families within a 225 mile geographical area. Emergency sheltering services are provided for over 700 homeless men, women and families annually. From July 2011 through December 2013, 395 children and their 189 families stayed at the shelter, with 50% (n= 198) of these children attending K-12 schools. The average stay is approximately 30 days for individuals and up to 90 days for families. While the shelter is staffed for 8 families, usually a minimum of 13 find shelter at CUFH. Medical, mental health, and substance abuse referral services as well as case management and community nursing services are provided on-site with the goal of moving residents to transitional and/or permanent housing. Fifteen full-time staff plan, direct, and facilitate the facility's services.<sup>38</sup>

Over the past two years 35 teacher education students and I have provided on- and off-site activities for children staying at CUFH one to three times per week. These students attend a small regional university where I teach in the Foundations of Education program. Their participation satisfies the service learning requirement for the Social Foundation of Education class and/or a volunteer initiative. Many of these teacher education students reflected that they had been socialized to think about children who are homeless as facing great struggles without help from their families who were thought to be cheating the system. Sadly, this perception appears to

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36. Kaye Herth, "Hope as Seen Through the Eyes of Homeless Children," *Journal of Advanced Nursing* 28, no. 5 (1998): 1053-1062.

37. William and Mary School of Education, "Project Hope," accessed May 2, 2014, <http://www.wm.edu/hope>.

38. Churches United for the Homeless, "Churches United for the Homeless," accessed March 1, 2014, <http://www.churches-united.org>.

be a popular viewpoint held by many in our society. Through their CUFH experiences, the majority of my students grew to share more supportive and affirming perspectives. Comments made by my students revealed the change,

They are curious, like to be involved, show interest in the activities, and ask a lot of questions...Many of the children are very open to exploring and they are very creative...they are not lazy and hopeless...they all have something that they want to do...they are very resilient...Some love to draw...some love motor activities...some are wild and sometimes do not listen...they all have different and unique talents...I think most of the time society just ignores them or they're invisible to society...which is wrong...When I talked with my dad about these children and their needs, he accused me of being a Socialist.

The teacher education students, children and I engage in activities that include various art projects, board and computer games, sports and games, model building, creative dramatics, singing and playing musical instruments, and homework help. We also regularly travel the local community to visit the fire station, art museums, public library and university, parks, and summer festivals. We have formed local partnerships with the public school district, YMCA, Boys and Girls Club, public library, university, food and beverage establishments, churches, and non-profit organizations. An Art Club is also provided on Saturday mornings. Our work with these children, supported by literature acknowledging the strengths of children who are homeless, pushes back against a narrowing kind of deficit-based perspective. Alternatively, we have come to understand these are children of promise, resilient and multi-dimensional, with varied interests, gifts, and talents, who are certainly “unfinished” as suggested by Ayers.<sup>39</sup>

The following college student story illustrates these ideas:

I was working with 7 year-old October [a child staying at the CUFH] one day and we were doing newspaper sculptures and he was so excited. We were going to make a cat. He was making each individual piece of the cat and then we were attaching them. He was having so much fun. I told him when he grew up he could be a sculptor. He looked up at me and his eyes lit up. He was so excited and he was like—“yeah, I could be a sculptor”...and I said “yeah, you could.” It was amazing to see how even with the slightest suggestion of his talents...he realized he could be something.

Another college student gave voice to the multi-dimensional nature of the young man he is mentoring. This young man is being raised by a dad struggling with addiction, unemployment, and the stereotype of homelessness, but who works hard at being a good parent. This dad reads to his son nightly, recently took his son to a Powwow (i.e., Native American dancing, singing, and socializing event) held on our campus, and is keenly aware of his son's social skills, math and reading abilities. The college student stated:

He is always happy to see me. He is interested in lots of stuff. He likes to read about animals and cars and play board games. I have noticed he is good at problem solving and analyzing things. He is really active and wild sometimes, but is smart and successful in

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39. William Ayers, *Teaching Toward Freedom: Moral Commitment and Ethical Action in the Classroom* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2004), 40.

school. Architecture is an example of his interests. I told him architects are like artists and mathematicians who design buildings...he was intrigued by this idea.

Interestingly this boy and his father moved from the shelter to more permanent housing, but continue coming to the shelter each week to participate in activities we provide because he enjoys them so much.

To more systematically catalog the multi-dimensional nature of the children staying at CUFH, I have begun conducting a more formal qualitative research study. The Minnesota State University Moorhead Institutional Review Board, Moorhead School District, and the Churches United for the Homeless Shelter approved this study. My goal is to provide safe and supportive spaces for these children and their advocates to express their voices. Ultimately, I want to move the dialogue around children who are homeless from pathology and victimization to a more balanced discourse emphasizing their interests, gifts, and talents. The study involves three parts. First, I had 20 children complete an *I'M Special* Survey with questions about "My Favorite Things," "Being Famous," and "Best Things about Me."<sup>40</sup> Second, I made fifty 45-minute observations during the activities and Art Club program to gain better understanding for the children's interests, gifts, and talents. Third, I conducted semi-structured interviews with 17 adult stakeholders, including shelter staff (n=3) and parents/guardians (n=3), teacher education mentors (n=5), and school district personnel (n=6) to gain a deeper understanding for their perspectives and knowledge about the multi-dimensional lives of the children staying at the shelter. As of this date, preliminary findings from the past 2 years are available, as data collection will continue for an additional 2 years. Nonetheless, emergent findings are helping us better understand these children and hopefully remind service providers that youth who are homeless are indeed multi-dimensional and should not be defined solely by their status as homeless. Our experiences at the shelter reveal children on a continuum: some struggling with challenges caused by homelessness, and some weathering the challenges associated with homelessness. What follows are preliminary findings for four children.

### Imani

Imani is a 12-year old middle school African-American girl with a 4.0 GPA who dreams of attending college one day. Her love of reading is evident. Recently she read the *Twilight* and *Hunger Games* series and now is enjoying *The Book Thief*.<sup>41</sup> She is a gifted artist who has been drawing caricatures for several years. Imani works diligently to develop her drawing skills and currently is learning to play chess. One of my students made this observation about Imani:

She loves drawing and is a wonderful artist. And she's very good at it for not having taken classes where they teach you how to draw. She understands the mechanics very well, and takes an interest in other people recognizing her talent as well as wanting to help others with their drawing.

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40. The *I'M Special Survey* was adapted for this population of children from *The All About Me Gazette* and queried children about "Favorite Things" such as cartoons and school subjects; about "Being Famous" for example what they would cook if they were a famous chef or invent as a famous inventor; and about "Best Things about Me" like three reasons they are awesome. See <http://www.pinterest.com>

41. Stephanie Meyer, *Twilight* (New York, NY: Little Brown and Company, 2005); Suzanne Collins, *Hunger Games* (New York, NY: Scholastica Press, 2008); Marcus Zusak, *The Book Thief* (New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005).

Her excellent social skills are put to good use in making new friends while transferring between schools, helping teach the younger children at CUFH during various activities, and taking an authentic interest in the lives of the college student mentors. Like the 20 children completing the *I'M Special Survey*, Imani's responses were very age-appropriate and revealed a child's view of the world. Some "Favorite Things" were musician Rihanna, movie *Hunger Games*, sport team Chicago Bears, and she likes Skittles candy, Frosted Flakes cereal and Sprite soda pop.<sup>42</sup> In responding to the "Being Famous" section, if Imani were a super-hero she would save as many people as possible, as an author would write about middle-school 'drama,' and as an inventor she would invent a machine that completes homework. She indicated that some "Best Things About Me" were caring for friends when they needed help, acting nice to her classmates by complimenting them, and being kind to her family in any way she can. Imani also views herself as being smart in Math and able to make people laugh. She demonstrates several strengths, exhibits a positive life-outlook, and views herself positively despite the fact she has been homeless for the past 2 years, changed schools several times, and has been staying at CUFH for the past three months. While experiencing these traumatic events, Imani assists her mother with parenting her seven year- and one year-old sisters. She is adapting well to this stressful situation, like a number of children who are homeless<sup>43</sup>

### Caleb

Caleb is a 13-year old middle school African-American student who traveled cross-country to stay at the shelter for two months with his parents and two younger brothers before moving to more permanent housing. Caleb earns B's in the middle school he attends. He is the most talented basketball player in his middle school of 1350 students. This conclusion is shared by those who have watched him play: his teachers, myself, and his college student mentors. He demonstrates outstanding offensive and defensive skills in addition to great physical abilities and excellent spatial intelligence. While skilled in playing several sports and possessing great knowledge about collegiate and professional sports, Caleb indicated his favorite school subjects were Math and Science. Responses from his *I'M Special Survey* included liking school, trying hard to do his best, completing at least one hour of homework daily, and listening to his parents and teachers. According to Caleb, resisting negative peer pressure by standing up for his beliefs, knowing he has control over things that happen to him, and being optimistic about his future describe "Best Things about Me." Similar to many middle school students, his friends are important. Caleb indicated he is good at making and keeping friends and regularly asks his friends how they are doing so they know he cares about them.

As was seen with Imani, Caleb has experienced homelessness prior to his stay at the CUFH. His parents struggle with securing employment, their marital relationship, and mental health issues. Although quiet and reserved, Caleb is a confident young man who possesses much resilience that will hopefully serve him well in the future. Imani and Caleb's stories demonstrate children who possess several strengths and protective factors, like high academic achievement,

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42. Collins, Suzanne, *Hunger Games*, Film, directed by Gary Ross (2012, Santa Monica, CA: Lionsgate).

43. See for an example of this work Diana Bowman, Christina Dukes and Jan More, *Summary of the State of Research on the Relationship between Homelessness and Academic Achievement Among School-Aged Children and Youth* (Washington, DC: National Center for Homeless Education, US Department of Education, January 2012): 3-26.

strong self-concept, positive relationships with a parent and successful experiences that can ward off negative effects of risk factors associated with poverty and homelessness.<sup>44</sup>

### Shayla

Shayla is a multi-racial 11-year old fifth grade student staying at the shelter with her mother and two older sisters. Emotional intelligence and social competence are her gifts. She responded to a prompt on the *I'M Special* Survey about people liking things about her by indicating she is friendly, asks questions to begin conversations, and has a great personality. Her mother agreed with this assessment and told me that Shayla will “be OK as she gets along well with everybody, regardless of their age...she is well behaved and very mature...has great social and friendship skills...a sweet personality.” Much to the enjoyment of my college students, she took a real interest in their lives as well as with other children and adults staying at the shelter. Responding to a “Best Thing About Me” prompt, Shayla made known she cared for her family by telling them she loves them. Another gift is her sense of humor. In responding to a question about what she should create as a famous inventor, she wrote about making shoes that shoveled snow when a button was pushed. Shayla finds “pure joy” in many of the activities we provide, from board games and hopscotch to reading to balloon play to table tennis. Her interests include painting, drawing, and clay sculpting. The college student CUFH Art Club teacher shared these thoughts about Shayla,

She is so creative and comes running into the room each Saturday morning to help me set up. Shayla has such an amazing attention span...you give her a project, she becomes completely enthralled in it, and stays with it for a long time.

She is an avid reader who recently finished *A Child Called It*, likes to sing and can skillfully ride a long skate board. Shayla hopes her mother will find a job soon so she can take gymnastics.<sup>45</sup>

### Jared

Jared is a White 14-year old student who attends an alternative high school purposed to meet the unique needs of students at risk. Along with his mother, grandmother, brother, and sister, they recently moved to more permanent housing after a three-month shelter stay. On the *I'M Special* Survey this shy young man responded to the section titled, “Being Famous,” this way—as a super hero he would save whomever he could, create 3D animation as an artist, and teach science if he were a famous teacher. Jared, like many young people his age, spends little time reading and much time playing computer games and dreaming of a career in computer graphics. Tim, Jared’s 9-year old brother, has aspirations too—he also wants to be a science teacher. Jared, a gifted chess player, really enjoys beating my college students. He believes that “Best Things About Me” are helping friends, respecting classmates, loving his family, and being polite and patient. Jared is one of the most polite and considerate young men I have had the good fortune to meet—I wholeheartedly agree with his self-assessment. A similar conclusion was reached by

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44. Laura Neiman, “A Critical Review of Resiliency Literature and its Relevance to Homeless Children,” *Children’s Environments Quarterly* 5, no. 1 (1988): 1-25.

45. Dave Pelzer, *A Child Called It: One Child’s Courage to Survive* (Deerfield, Florida: Health Communications, 1995).

local teachers I interviewed regarding their students who were homeless. The alternative high school Jared attends partners with our education department's Social Foundations of Education classes. This semester Jared participated in two partnership projects: creating a public service announcement concerning community gardens and a "Light at the End of the Tunnel" project based on the novel *The Book Thief*.<sup>46</sup> While successfully completing this work with his teacher education mentors Jared was an engaged researcher and collaborator. These four case studies reveal children who are multi-dimensional with varied interests, gifts, and talents that help them respond more successfully to the challenges homelessness presents them.

### **Children who are Homeless: Recommendations for Creating a New Reality**

Changes to the funding, housing, and educational systems that serve children who are homeless, like Imani, Caleb, Shayla, and Jared, must change in order for them to lead healthy, satisfying, and happy lives. Like many American public schools, the district schools the children staying at CUFH attend are persistently underfunded. Interviews conducted with teachers from the schools the children who are homeless attend report being overwhelmed by problems presented by the ever-increasing numbers of children who are homeless—specific problems abound. Here are several examples shared by these teachers. The nearly 200 students who are homeless in this district of 5,000 are served by one part-time Homeless-School liaison. A single Social Worker is employed in this district's 1350 student middle school and the 1500 student high school. Extreme mobility is a persistent and severe problem in the 900 student school serving the elementary children staying at CUFH. Several teachers reported up to 15 students joining and leaving their classrooms within the first six months of the school year. Class sizes of 25 to 30 students compound these problems. Ninety per cent of all new students enrolling in this elementary school are served by Individual Educational Plans, 450 qualify for Free and/or Reduced Lunch, many scored below grade level on state tests, and over 70 students qualify for ELL services. Many of the children staying at the CUFH are over-represented in these numbers.

This elementary school currently employs a part-time Social Worker, one Counselor, and 1.5 FTE English Language Learners teachers. These teachers try to serve the 71 children qualifying for this service. And yet this staff produces herculean efforts on behalf of the children each day. The CUFH staff equally struggle with serving the needs of such a large number of children: over 200 school-age children have stayed at the shelter in the past 2.5 years. Obviously this challenge cannot be resolved by teachers and shelter staff simply working *harder* than they already are. Educational policies, like the ones listed below, would help the schools in the above district as well as the nation's schools better serve students who are homeless.

- Hiring Social Workers, Counselors, English Language Learner teachers.
- Hiring additional classroom teachers to reduce class sizes.
- Establishing community-school health clinics.
- Improving drop-out prevention programs.
- Increasing funding to low-income schools.
- Creating relevant and culturally meaningful curriculum and instruction.
- Providing high-quality summer/after school programs.<sup>47</sup>

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46. Zusak, *The Book Thief*.

47. Broader, Bolder Approach to Education, "Broader, Bolder Approach to Education," accessed February 16, 2014, <http://www.broadapproach.org>.

Social and economic policies, exemplified below, are also needed to smooth the “outside of school” burden for families who are homeless.

- Safe and comfortable accessible housing.
- Expanded job training and living wage scales.
- Universal healthcare.
- Universal early childhood education.
- Expanded earned income tax credits.
- Elimination of food insecurity would go a long way in responding to the myriad of needs experienced by those who are homeless.<sup>48</sup>

A family-friendly shelter offering high quality onsite child care, age appropriate children and youth programming, and parent support groups and educational opportunities is sorely needed in this community, like in many of the nation’s communities. In 2006, 30% of family shelter requests went unmet according to a survey of 23 cities.<sup>49</sup> The successful “Housing First” model has a proven track record in ending and preventing family homelessness.<sup>50</sup>

In addition to improving systems that serve children who are homeless, an ideological shift needs to occur in order for these children to be viewed more holistically as they live out the multi-dimensional stories of their lives. A pressing need exists to create a new reality that considers the strengths and resilience of children who are homeless. Children who are homeless face real challenges, including lack of government and private sector support, prejudice and discrimination, and the deficit-based approach sanctioned in much of the literature. This new reality, while acknowledging and responding to the hardships of homelessness, views these children as multi-dimensional and unfinished, with “hopes, dreams, and aspirations...passions and commitments...[and] skills, abilities, and capacities....”<sup>51</sup> Seeing children who are homeless, as children of promise, like Imani, Caleb, Shayla, and Jared, will create the conditions to grow and nurture capacities, resourcefulness, and resilience. When children who are homeless are seen in this way, not only do they benefit, but society as well.

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# A Question of Priorities: A Critical Investigation of the McKinney-Vento Act

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## Abstract

*This critical policy ethnography analyzes the McKinney-Vento Act and how the policy is put into practice at a school district within Central Texas. Data comes from conversations with educators occupying key roles within the McKinney-Vento operational bureaucracy at the school district and the researcher's experience as an educator and volunteer at a homeless shelter. Analysis was informed by an ethic of care framework and a historiography was created to chronicle the policy's genealogy, intent, and guiding values. The findings are presented in a deliberate effort to put a human face to some of those the policy impacts. Major findings and recommendations include a need for increased awareness and compliance, monitoring of the policy, as well as an investment of additional resources to adequately respond to McKinney-Vento issues within the district.*

**Keywords:** *McKinney-Vento, homelessness, homeless student, education policy, policy ethnography, marginalized youth*

## The Problem

The United States has experienced an epidemic of youth homelessness since the 1980s.<sup>1</sup> The children impacted risk a plethora of problems associated with homelessness including a lack of educational success manifesting in such detrimental forms as learning disabilities, high rates of absenteeism, or increased rates of dropping out.<sup>2</sup> The potentially marginalizing impact of a negative educational experience on one's future opportunities is likewise well-established in the form of increased rates of poverty and accompanying issues.<sup>3</sup> In short, a bout of youth homelessness

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1. Ronald Hallett, *Educational Experiences of Hidden Homeless Teenagers: Living Doubled-up* (New York: Routledge, 2012); Joseph Murphy and Kerri Tobin, *Homelessness Comes to School* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin, 2011).

2. Henrietta S. Evans Attles, *The Effects of Homelessness on the Academic Achievement of Children* (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1997); Jane Boyd-Zaharias and Helen Pate-Bain, "Class Matters: in and out of School," *Phi Delta Kappan* 90, no 1 (2008): 40-44; Hallett, *Educational Experiences*; Murphy and Tobin, *Homelessness Comes to School*; James H. Stronge, "Educating Homeless Children and Youth: An Introduction." In *Educating Homeless Students: Promising Practices*, eds. James H. Stronge and Evelyn Reed-Victor (Larchmont, NY: Eye on Education, Inc., 2000), 1-20. C.C. Tower and D.J. White, *Homeless Students* (Washington, DC: National Education Association, 1989).

3. Karl Ashworth, Martha Hill, and Robert Walker, "Patterns of Childhood Poverty: New Challenges for Policy," *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management* 13 (1994): 658-680; Boyd-Zaharias and Pate-Bain, H., "Class

might reverberate for a very long time.

The question then turns toward how best to tackle the problem. It seems inescapable in the ubiquitously bureaucratic modern nation-state that government will play a large role in most efforts at impacting society at large. Guiding these state-led endeavors are policies through which the desired social change is supposed to occur. Working from the assumption that homelessness is detrimental to a child's education and that modern nations deal with large problems via state bureaucracies, this study investigated the policy the United States has crafted to handle the education of homeless students. I also assumed the stated purpose and spirit of this policy – “The McKinney-Vento program is designed to address the problems that homeless children and youth have faced in...succeeding in school”—was truly intended.<sup>4</sup> By this standard I analyzed the policy's intent, process, and output.

The McKinney-Vento Act is the federal policy that for the past two and a half decades has governed the education of homeless youth in the United States. According to McKinney-Vento “the term ‘homeless child and youth’ means individuals who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence and includes children and youth who are sharing the housing of other persons due to loss of housing, economic hardship, or a similar reason.”<sup>5</sup> It also encompasses those forced to live in motels, etc., places not generally intended for habitation, as well as any sort of shelter situation. In 2009 (the government did not issue its final ruling on this definition of “homeless” until late 2011) a new wrinkle was added to the mix when McKinney-Vento was reauthorized as part of a larger federal homelessness policy effort, the Homeless Emergency Assistance and Rapid Transition to Housing (HEARTH) Act (HUD, 2011b). While the bulk of HEARTH—as does much of McKinney-Vento itself—concerns wider homelessness issues in general, it impacts educational systems by expanding the definition of who is considered a homeless youth in the eyes of the law.<sup>6</sup>

HEARTH considers people homeless if they are at risk of losing their housing within 14 days (the previous standard had been 7 days). It also adds a new category of homelessness: families with children or unaccompanied youth who are “unstably housed.” People fitting this description are families with children or unaccompanied youths up to 24 years old “who have not had a lease or ownership interest in a housing unit in the last 60 or more days, have had two or more moves in the last 60 days, and who are likely to continue to be unstably housed because of

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Matters”; David Brady, Andrew S. Fullerton, and Jennifer Moren Cross, “Putting Poverty in Political Context: A Multi-level Analysis of Poverty Across 18 Affluent Democracies,” *Social Forces* 88, no. 1 (2009): 271-299. Judith N. DeSena and George Ansalone, “Gentrification, Schooling, and Social Inequality,” *Educational Research Quarterly* 33, no. 1 (2009): 60-74; Vincent J. Felitti, Robert F. Anda, Dale Nordenberg, David F. Williamson, Alison M. Spitz, and Valerie Edwards, et al., “Relationship of Childhood Abuse and Household Dysfunction to many of the Leading Causes of Death in Adults,” *American Journal of Preventable Medicine* 14, no. 4 (1998): 245-58; Michelle Fine, *Framing Dropouts: Notes on the Politics of an Urban Public High School* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991); Jonathan Kozol, *Rachel and Her Children: Homeless Families in America* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 1988); Jonathan Kozol, *Savage Inequalities: Children in America's Schools* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1991); Ann R. Tickamyer and Cynthia M. Duncan, “Poverty and Opportunity Structure in Rural America,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 16, (1990): 67-86; LaTonya Waters and Sandra Harris, “Exploration of the Lived Experiences of Illiterate African American Adults,” *Western Journal of Black Studies* 33, no. 4 (2009): 250-258; Les B. Whitbeck and Dan R. Hoyt, *Nowhere to Grow: Homeless and Runaway Adolescents and their Families* (New York, NY: Aldine de Gruyter, 1999).

4. ED, 2004, p.2

5. *Stewart B. McKinney Homeless Assistance Act of 1987*, H.R. 558, 100th Congress (1987).

6. HUD, 2009; National Alliance to End Homeless, 2012e; National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth, 2011.

disability or multiple barriers to employment.”<sup>7</sup>

Even though this policy is intended to serve large numbers of vulnerable students there are definite gaps in our knowledge about how, and how well, it is working in schools.<sup>8</sup> This study looked to contribute to our knowledge by investigating the policy itself, the bureaucracy that has grown around its implementation, and the impact it has on those it is supposed to serve.

## Research Questions

The objective of this work was to determine how well McKinney-Vento was serving the homeless students it was designed to help. Part of the answer to this question involved determining how educators implementing the policy interpreted and turned it into practice at a local education agency (LEA). My inquiry was narrowed to the following three guiding questions:

1. How is McKinney-Vento being implemented at the LEA, including identification, learning, and support?
2. How does the McKinney-Vento bureaucratic framework impact the practice of the policy at the LEA?
3. How compliant is the LEA with the spirit and mandates of McKinney-Vento?

## Methodology

This study took the form of a critical policy analysis of the McKinney-Vento Act. I chose an ethnographic research design for the purpose of bringing to life how this policy works and the effect it has on the humans it touches. I wanted to tell a story through the perspective of those living with the policy.<sup>9</sup> In particular, the focus was on the intersection of policy and practice and how this affected how schools interacted with homeless students.

Based on an extensive examination of the literature I created a historiography of McKinney-Vento to serve as context for the study. I then had conversations with knowledgeable informants to learn how the policy was understood and implemented, and the impacts this was having on homeless youth. I then compared these findings with the literature, the policy itself, and the aforementioned historiography. My own personal experience as a volunteer at a shelter for two-plus years, personal friend to those on the streets for the two decades of my adult life, or through the multiple, ongoing times my own residence has served as a sort of informal shelter to others in need added perspective to the study.

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7. National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2012e

8. James P. Canfield, Martell L. Teasley, Neil Abell, and Karen A. Randolph, “Validation of a McKinney-Vento Act Implementation Scale,” *Research on Social Work Practice* 22, no. 4 (2012): 410-419; Mary K. Cunningham, Robin Harwood and Sam Hall, *Residential Instability and the McKinney-Vento Homeless Children and Education Program: What We Know, Plus Gaps in Research*, 2010, accessed August 12, 2012, <http://www.urban.org/publications/412115.html>; Peter Michael Miller, “An Examination of the McKinney-Vento Act and its Influence on the Homeless Education Situation,” *Educational Policy* 25, no. 3 (2011), 424-450.

9. Michael J. Crotty, *The Foundations of social Research: Meaning and Perspective in the Research Process* (London: SAGE, 1998); David M. Fetterman, *Ethnography: Step-by-step* (London: SAGE, 2010); Joseph A. Maxwell, *Qualitative Research Design: an Interactive Approach* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2005); Gretchen B. Rossman and Sharon F. Rallis, *Learning in the Field: an Introduction to Qualitative Research* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2003).

The research mainly took place in a large Central Texas suburban high school with a growing homeless population and the central administration of the LEA of which the high school is a part. In accordance with qualitative methodology, my research partners were purposefully selected.<sup>10</sup> Each possessed knowledge about homeless education not known by the average person. All participants were voluntary and provided permission in compliance with Institution Review Board protocol. The participants were as follows:

**District Homeless Liaisons:** Liaisons are responsible for ensuring that their school district is McKinney-Vento compliant. My primary informant had recently become the district's liaison after many years as a social worker. I had two in-depth and several smaller interviews with her over the course of my research. I also talked with a liaison with more than five years worth of experience at her particular LEA which was well-known for having a very effective homeless student service organization; it too was in Central Texas.

**Campus Principal:** He had been running this public high school for several years at the time of the study and had noted a greater homeless presence recently. He is responsible for ensuring campus McKinney-Vento compliance. I had two lengthy interviews and several shorter conversations with him during this project.

Open-ended, semi-structured interviews were conducted with my partners to gather the rich data needed for ethnography.<sup>11</sup> The process allowed for back and forth discussions with participants regarding their experiences educating homeless children. The goal was to engage in deep conversations to learn their stories, perspectives, and understandings surrounding McKinney-Vento and homeless students.

My initial step in data analysis began when I became a participant observer at a homeless shelter. This became more formalized when I began recording my thoughts in a reflective journal and engaging in back-and-forth conversations with my participants. I initially hand sorted my data with the open/initial coding method, breaking it into discrete parts in the transcript margins to construct categories before naming and sorting these categories into separate computer files.<sup>12</sup> From these categories I developed the larger themes used to compose the study's narrative. I utilized structural coding in the first cycle and pattern coding in the second in the method described by Saldaña.<sup>13</sup>

Ultimately my analysis and output took the form of critical policy ethnography. Here I followed a path laid out by Dubois, who interprets critical policy ethnography in the following manner:

Two main premises lead researchers to carry out an in-depth fieldwork in order to analyze the concrete practices through which a policy is enforced in everyday life...The first consists in positing that subordinate officers in administrations can play a key role in defining a policy...The second premise consists in considering that a policy principally exists through the experience of its recipients.<sup>14</sup>

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10. Maxwell, *Qualitative Research Design*; Rossman and Rallis, *Learning in the Field*; Robert S. Weiss, *Learning from Strangers: the Art and Method of Qualitative Interview Studies* (New York: Free Press, 1994).

11. Fetterman, *Ethnography*; Rossman and Rallis, *Learning in the Field*.

12. Johnny Saladana, *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers* (Los Angeles: Sage, 2009).

13. Ibid.

14. Vincent V. Dubois, "Towards a Critical Policy Ethnography: the 'Undeserving Poor' and the New Welfare State, *Critical Policy Studies* 3 (2009): 219-237.

In other words, to gain a better understanding of how a policy works, one must look not only at the policy from the top, but also at the different levels charged with its implementation. Furthermore, it must take into account the experiences of those the policy is intended to serve. It involved delving into a human story that could not be told through a quantitative analysis.

One of the main challenges in this investigation lay in that several of the participants were held specifically responsible for proper implementation of McKinney-Vento by law. There was, therefore, a reasonable possibility that any one of them might have been inclined to downplay information that might not make them look good or overstate that which did. It was critical, then, that I gathered rich data during our conversations and compared it to my own experiences and the literature to discover any anomalies that needed to be investigated more thoroughly.

### Findings

**The School:** Schools are where the McKinney-Vento policy turns into direct practice. It is in classrooms where a homeless child's learning problem is most likely going to come to the attention of someone with knowledge of what to do about it. At the very beginning of our conversation the principal of the high school I investigated openly acknowledged they were underidentifying homeless students, an issue that has long been problematic.<sup>15</sup> According to him, this mainly stemmed from the students' general reluctance to self-report their housing loss as well as his staff's ignorance of signs to look for that a child was homeless. That this underidentification was knowingly occurring was especially telling because he claimed to possess an earnest desire to treat the school's homeless students decently out of a sense of moral imperative. It was also a campus with a level of funding that enabled it to have nine counselors and a social worker on staff for little over 1000 students. It was situated within a district that actively participated in the McKinney-Vento subgrant process, in a wealthy suburb where the average home property value was well over \$200,000, with relatively few homeless students to deal with (400 had been identified in the district by the end of the school year in question out of a student body over around 20,000) compared to a large urban area. In other words, it was in as about as favorable a situation as could be hoped for a school to achieve full McKinney-Vento implementation. Yet students were still slipping through the cracks here by the principal's own admission. The campus had around 30 students identified and receiving services out of a total student population of over 1000 at the time. Even if the number of hidden homeless children—which, of course, no one knows—of such students was perhaps relatively small it was still notable that this school and principal were well aware that they were missing children.

The principal also opined that the manner in which information about McKinney-Vento was disseminated from the state to his school left much to be desired. One of the main charges of the policy requires that states develop plans to heighten awareness of the needs of homeless students. Obviously, this entails providing explicit information to districts. Yet a full decade after its 2002 reauthorization as part of NCLB, this experienced principal was still gaining information about McKinney-Vento in piecemeal fashion as he went along. Basically he would be confronted with an issue and then seek information on how to legally address the concern. In other words his McKinney-Vento knowledge had been gathered in a reactive and self-directed manner, not delivered proactively by higher state or federal authorities. When I asked him if he had any contact

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15. Murphy and Tobin, *Homelessness Comes to School*; Stronge, *Educating Homeless Children and Youth*.

with the state about McKinney-Vento he laughed “only when we do something wrong!” Again, this is a principal who wanted to do right by these students; what would it have looked like if he had not possessed this ethos? It would be far simpler to tell a kid that he cannot attend because his parents are not around to sign paperwork and not bother with seeking solutions to the child’s situation.

He also noted some homeless students had behavioral and/or attendance issues that had a negative impact on their academics. He expressed frustration at the school’s frequent inability to overcome these obstacles and believed that forging caring student/teacher relationships was key to addressing the problem, but in many cases these youth faced so many issues that it was almost impossible to do so. He noted that many of them had “been through the wringer” and had more pressing needs like finding food understandably taking their focus from schooling. In other words, even when identified, he claimed that homeless students were among the most difficult to educate at his school.

These difficulties were illustrated during an attempt to establish a tutoring program specifically for the school’s homeless population. Despite the incentive of free food, the support of numerous stakeholders, and a conscious effort to keep the affair as private as possible, the average attendance at each of the sessions during several weeks near the end of the fall semester was less than two students. The principal and liaison attributed the failure to timing (the sessions were after school), transportation (almost all of the homeless students were dependent on the bus), or simply because many of the students were so far behind in their classes by that point that they saw little point in making the extra effort. Regardless of the reason, it highlighted the inherent difficulties this school had in systematically addressing the academic needs of their homeless students, even when they made a conscious effort to do so.

The principal also recognized that it would be beneficial to educate his staff about student homelessness. Adequately training school faculty and staff would enable them to properly identify homeless youth, and provide a better understanding of what life was like for these vulnerable students. Speaking, perhaps, to priorities, as of this writing (two full school years later), no such professional development had taken place at either the campus or district at large.

This seems especially noteworthy because the district is largely reliant upon teachers to identify students that become homeless during the school year after the Student Residency Questionnaire (SRQ)<sup>16</sup>—the vehicle by which the homeless population is initially identified—has been filled out. Given this, it would seem prudent that all staff be well-informed regarding McKinney-Vento; it is an undeniable underutilization of resources that the vast majority is not so knowledgeable.

To this point, I have been teaching in the area for a decade at public schools with high poverty rates, places that have likely had higher than average homeless populations. Yet I have received but *one* in-service (a brief online video with simplistic questions accompanying; you had to get a 70 to receive credit, with as many attempts allowed as you needed to pass) concerning homeless students during this time. Clearly the state has done an insufficient job of systematically disseminating McKinney-Vento information or mandating districts do so themselves. And it seems a basic truth that the policy requires a pervasive awareness to stand a chance at being optimally implemented. This had obviously not happened here; I assume it is hardly the exception. Indeed, when I asked a counselor who ran her campus’ McKinney-Vento program for several years to assess the general knowledge of the law and special needs of homeless students she had found the average teacher possessed her laughter spoke volumes about the need for change

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16. See appendix for SRQ form with LEA identifiers removed.

in the way we systematically distribute information about this policy and the vulnerable children it is intended to serve.

**The District:** The district functions as the administrative arm for McKinney-Vento on the local level; it sets the tone for what happens within the LEA. If it possesses a strong commitment to serving homeless children, McKinney-Vento would presumably stand a better chance for success and vice-versa. A liaison is in charge of homeless services for a LEA. This position greatly influences how the system treats homeless students. I talked extensively with the liaison at the LEA of the high school detailed above. Not surprisingly, since they are part of the same system, many of the issues found at the high school also applied here. For instance, there was a strong sense that students were being underidentified. Part of this stemmed from the liaison's workload as the only district-wide employee dealing with McKinney-Vento; in an organization of 20,000 students it seems impossible for one person to determine who qualifies for service and not overlook some percentage.

The potential for underidentification is exacerbated by the primary method in which the district attempted to locate homeless students, namely two self-reported questions on the SRQ filled out upon enrollment. We know that many are hesitant to self-report homelessness, assuming they are even aware that something like being doubled-up qualifies.<sup>17</sup> Another problem was that there was no systematic way to discover those who lost housing in the middle of the year. Again the onus lay with a student self-identifying or someone at the school noticing, methods we know are problematic.<sup>18</sup>

A more disturbing of the district's underidentification involved overt noncompliance. For instance, the liaison had been contacted by one student early in the year and informed he was being denied access due to absent parents. When she told the principal this was illegal, she met resistance on the grounds that the child was an alleged "drug user." The student was eventually admitted, but the implications were clear: if he had not contacted the liaison no one would have been the wiser. Much as it pained her, it seemed naïve to pretend this had not happened before. If there was any doubt about this it was dispelled when she was told by another administrator that homeless families needed to "jump through some hoops" before they were serviced!

Providing further evidence the district had been under-identifying homeless youth the liaison stated that the number of homeless students in the district jumped from about 30 in 2011 to nearly 400 in 2013. Some of this might be attributed to a natural increase, but more likely a significant portion stemmed from the new liaison more thoroughly finding eligible children; notably, there had been no obvious precipitating event to attribute such an increase like the shutdown of a large regional employer or the closure of a large housing project. It seems much more plausible that the cause for the increase was due to the fact that the liaison position was now staffed by an experienced social worker whereas the previous liaison had been a paraprofessional stretched thin by multiple responsibilities over and above serving the district's homeless population.

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17. Pdraig Collins and Chris Barker, "Psychological Help-seeking in Homeless Adolescents," *International Journal of Social Psychiatry* 55, no. 4 (2009): 372-384; Maria Foscarinis and S. McCarthy, "Removing Educational Barriers for Homeless Students: Legal Requirements and Recommended Practices, in Stronge and Reed-Victor, *Educating Homeless Students*: 135-163. James H. Stronge, *Educating Homeless Children and Youth: an Introduction*. C.C Tower, "The Psychosocial Context: Supporting Education for Homeless Children and Youth, in Stronge and Reed-Victor, *Educating Homeless Children*: 42-61. Yvonne M. Vissing, *Out of Sight, Out of Mind: Homeless Children and Families in Small-Town America* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1996).

18. Collins and Barker, "Psychological Help-Seeking."



The liaison also reported a lack of clarity regarding her McKinney-Vento duties; she described herself as frequently defining the job on the fly. Granted, she had just started her position when we first talked, and as the months progressed she grew increasingly comfortable. But, this did not erase that she had been thrown into this important role and basically forced to figure it out on her own. She also described the job as being on an island with minimal monitoring. Tucked into a distant corner with no supervisor actively following her actions, she admitted it would have been easy to simply sit at her desk and collect a paycheck. She did not take advantage of this situation, but the implications of this lack of oversight seemed clear.

The liaison regularly lamented a lack of time to fulfill her duties. She was so busy identifying and procuring resources for students she had little time for anything else. This situation was exacerbated because she was also in charge of another important district-wide program (overseeing student mental illness issues, obviously a large and time-consuming task in itself considering the size of the district and perhaps telling in that it was combined with the homeless program). Unfortunately, this was nothing new at the LEA. Indeed, the previous liaison had five or six different duties besides McKinney-Vento. This was especially significant because the current liaison believed that the job actually required a “fulltime plus someone” if it was to be done adequately. In short, the liaison position at this LEA, by its very structure, was almost destined to fall short and fail to meet the needs of homeless youth.

Much of these circumstances hint at the unavoidable truth that McKinney-Vento appears to not be a top priority at the district (or by extension the state). Note, this does not mean that there were not diligent, humane, and competent people diligently striving to meet the needs of homeless students. Indeed, I found that most of those I met were quite dedicated; however, they were frequently running uphill as they attempted to perform their good work. The significant accomplishments that did occur did so almost despite the forces aligned against them. If thoroughly serving homeless children were treated as a priority of the district to the same degree as it approaches athletics, surely it would merit sufficient staffing. To this point, the LEA deemed it worthwhile to pay someone in excess of \$100,000 (plus a secretary) to act as its athletic director—clearly demonstrating a willingness to support programs it considered important.

One last issue about the district’s program concerned the McKinney-Vento subgrant they received from the state. Although the amount received was under \$30,000, the required documentation was disproportionately tedious. The liaison’s supervisor was shocked by what was required, describing it as significantly more time-consuming (the liaison spent the bulk of a work week simply gathering all the requested documentation) than another grant the district received worth several million and hardly worth the effort involved. One wonders if such disincentive has driven other districts away from pursuing the grant dollars.

Demonstrating further potential flaws in this process, at one point when the state auditor was going over the district’s documentation, the liaison was asked for evidence that she had communicated with local service providers as required. Unsure how to prove this, the liaison proffered her Roll-A-Dex with handwritten phone numbers and notations. The auditor glanced at them and this somehow served as ample evidence this aspect of the policy was being followed. The potential for abuse or mistake with such oversight was obvious.

### **Recommendations**

McKinney-Vento aims to ensure that homelessness does not cause a child’s academic failure (ED, 2004, p. 2). I am going to consider this the standard while making my recommenda-

tions for how it can better meet this promise. I acknowledge that some of these recommendations require a rethinking of how schools address homelessness in general. They entail a higher level of commitment, assuming, once again, the stated objective of McKinney-Vento is more than a platitudinous catchphrase designed so we can pat ourselves on our collective backs, content that we have “done something.” The United States can, and should, do better. Here are some ideas for moving the country in that direction.

**Awareness:** One of the most persistent themes that emerged was a general lack of awareness throughout the district concerning homeless students. LEA’s must make a concerted effort to increase the pervasiveness of knowledge about McKinney-Vento throughout their entire systems. This is especially true regarding individuals who directly interact with students and would therefore be more likely to help identify eligible youth, an issue that repeatedly emerged during my investigation. The loss of housing is an intensely personal experience that many prefer to keep private. I was recently privy to a heartbreaking illustration of this when my son’s 7 year-old best friend told him his “big secret” in a hush: “We used to sleep in our van.” This was a child whose seven-member family had lived with us for a couple months in rather close quarters after we discovered their plight and welcomed them into our home until they could get back on their feet. Even though he had been my son’s best friend for over a year, he obviously still felt embarrassed by the situation. Imagine how difficult it must be to open up in a school setting. However, if a homeless child does open up, it will most likely happen with a teacher or counselor who has forged a bond with them. Thus, it is imperative the adults forming relationships with students are informed of McKinney-Vento so they can better identify and help vulnerable youth survive their ordeal. Quite frankly, it is unacceptable that so many educators are unaware of McKinney-Vento after more than two decades. This fact alone shows the policy has failed to some degree. The law mandates that states “create programs for school personnel (including principals, attendance officers, teachers, enrollment personnel, and pupil services personnel) to heighten the awareness of such personnel of the specific needs of runaway and homeless youths.”<sup>19</sup> Obviously, this was not sufficiently happening in this LEA despite it being a critical component of a well run homeless student service organization.

Liaisons should therefore establish strong professional development programs to educate the *entire* district of the policy’s intent. This instruction must cover the basics of the law as well as information to counter the deficit thinking surrounding the issue of homelessness in general and the blaming of homeless people for what they are going through. A nonjudgmental mindset, which focuses attention on what matters for the students, must be embraced by the liaison and communicated to the entire district. It must be repeated consistently in different forums. The more people in the district who can look past these kids as objects to be judged and become aware of their mutual humanity, the closer the district will move towards serving them in a more substantive manner.

Another way a district might improve how they approach their homeless program would be to make the wider community more aware of their efforts. In the course of my investigation I was informed of a nearby LEA with a reputation for having a very well run McKinney-Vento program. I arranged an interview with the liaison from this district and inquired about why their program was so effective. She told me that other than having the clear backing of the superintendent and the time needed to accomplish her duties—McKinney Vento was clearly a priority at this LEA—there was nothing more critical than the support of the local community. She described efforts such as rallying local churches to provide funding for various efforts aimed at

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19. ED, 2004.

helping the district's homeless students feel more integrated into "regular" student life; these efforts ranged from procuring prom dresses to basic school supplies to computers for a graduate to take on to college. It included efforts to coordinate the various aid organizations in the community so that they could better work with the schools and each other to provide better service for everyone involved. She described the effort as a slow and time consuming, but well worth the trouble, not only because it made for a more effective network of service across the board, but it also helped change the way many in the community saw their local homeless population. She described witnessing a shift in attitude amongst many people she worked with, moving from an attitude of hardly recognizing the problem of homelessness in their community at the beginning (and a tendency to blame the homeless if they did notice them) to a growing sense of viewing the issue in human terms that deserved a collective response. The end result was a more solid, humane homeless service organization to benefit the entire community.

**Resources:** Another problematic issue seen during the investigation involved a consistent resource shortage for implementing McKinney-Vento. To counteract this trend, district leadership should give liaisons the resources needed to thoroughly address the basic mechanics of the job; for example, provide the time to thoroughly identify all homeless students. At the very least this entails freeing the liaison from extraneous duties if the district is of sufficient size to require this level of support (it seems patently ludicrous to expect that a single person is sufficient for an organization with 20,000 students). Once again, as we have seen with examples like the athletic director, districts are more than capable of rearranging resources for causes they consider important. LEA's need to treat homeless children with at least the same level of prioritization as football. As seen in the effective example mentioned just above, such prioritization can pay big dividends.

As part of this increased effort district leadership must also make it widely known that the liaison has their support and that it will be considered unacceptable to obstruct their McKinney-Vento activities. According to virtually every liaison I have spoken with, having this level of top administrative support was absolutely imperative. Given that we can almost guarantee there is going to be at least some level of prejudice and/or deficit type thinking in every organization—this tendency of blaming the victim for their situation has simply permeated society's view of homelessness for such a long time—someone like the superintendent must be visibly unambiguous in declaring their unqualified support.<sup>20</sup> Again, the liaison in the effective LEA concurred that this support was critical to her organizations success.

**Compliance:** My final recommendation is to change how the state ensures districts comply with McKinney-Vento. At the LEA I investigated there was very little oversight from the state about how they were operating their program. This was evidenced by the dearth of professional development opportunities provided for teachers to better understand this vulnerable population, even though providing increased awareness was part of the charge of McKinney-Vento. It was obvious in the almost afterthought position of the liaison who was almost completely free of regular supervision. It was demonstrated by the principal's admission that his school was underidentifying children and his obvious frustration at having to hunt for information about the law on his own. It was seen in the existence of those in the district who were trying to consciously and illegally turn away homeless students deemed undesirable and would have gotten away with it but not for a determined child making a phone call. And all of these un-

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20. Ashlee Anderson, "Teach for America and the Dangers of Deficit Thinking," *Critical Education* 4, no. 11 (2013): 28-46; Richard R. Valencia, *The Evolution of Deficit Thinking: Educational Thought and Practice* (London: Falmer Press, 1997).

fortunate examples were occurring with virtually no one at the state aware of what is going on; they certainly were not proactively working with the LEA to rectify these sorts of problems.

In other words, the state has duly passed along news of the McKinney-Vento mandate to this LEA and is more or less hoping they follow the law. If there are any problems, the Texas Education Agency is largely relying upon the victims—these belonging to a long-marginalized group whom we know are hesitant to bring attention to their homelessness—to report violations of a policy of which the majority of people are ignorant, to a hotline they *might* be aware of. There a system in place if a homeless student is denied access to a school; it consists of a 1-800 number to seek an appeal if a LEA refuses to provide service as the law requires. The question here is how many eligible students even know this process exists or if they are eligible? How easy is it for a school to simply tell a scared 16 year old kid on his or her own that they are not welcome and that be the end of it? Who holds the power of position and has the knowledge of how to manipulate the system in this situation? It hardly seems like a level playing field. Indeed, using as evidence the district I studied that increased its homeless numbers from 30 to around 400 after they received a subgrant and a more effective liaison, it seems safe to hypothesize that self-reporting does not appear to be working very well. A more noticeable compliance presence on the part of the state would likely increase the level of McKinney-Vento implementation simply on account of districts having a more tangible example that it was now being taken more serious.

Ultimately, all three of these recommendations demand that schools and policy makers give the issue of educating homeless children the level of urgency it deserves. We must make it a priority and act accordingly. How many students have we lost in the past decades by not doing so? How many are we losing now? At what point will we say enough is enough?



- o In the home of a friend or relative because I lost my housing (*due to flood, fire, lost job, divorce, domestic violence, kicked out by parents, parent in military and was deployed, parents in jail, etc.*)
- o In a shelter because I do not have permanent housing (*examples: living in a family shelter, domestic violence shelter, child/youth shelter, FEMA housing, etc.*)
- o In transitional housing (*housing that is available for a specific length of time only & partly paid for by a church or another organization*)
- o In a hotel or motel (*because of economic hardship, eviction, cannot get deposits for permanent home, flood, fire, hurricane, etc.*)
- o In a tent, car, van, abandoned building, on the streets, campground or other unsheltered location
- o None of the above describes my present conditions. *Briefly describe the situation:*

Please provide the following information for school-age siblings (brothers and/or sisters) of the student:

Name	Campus
1. _____	_____
2. _____	_____
3. _____	_____
4. _____	_____

**X:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Signature of Parent/Legal Guardian/Caregiver/Unaccompanied Student**

*Please scan or fax a copy to XXX at Support Services*

*For School Use Only*

**I certify the above named student qualifies for the Child Nutrition Program under the provisions of the McKinney-Vento Act.**

\_\_\_\_\_  
McKinney-Vento Liaison Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

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## *Sleep Out on the Quad: An Opportunity for Experiential Education and Servant Based Leadership*

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### **Abstract**

*One of the purposes of higher education is to promote citizenship and social justice. This article explores the way Aurora University is helping students to discover what matters through the impact of Sleep Out on the Quad, which is an event that uses multiple pedagogies to impact student learning of homelessness. It serves as a call to action for one of our nation's most important issues.*

**Keywords:** *experiential education, servant leadership, student learning, simulation*

### **Introduction**

In the United States, approximately one in every seven Americans lives in poverty. While statistically this percentage rate has remained fairly constant (11-15%) over the past 30 years, the actual number of American's living in poverty has increased 35% during this same time period.<sup>1</sup> As the number of people living in poverty in both the United States and abroad continues to rise, higher education has a moral imperative to educate students using multiple pedagogies about the issues surrounding poverty and homelessness. Best practices seek to transform students who will go into the world and serve others. This transformation often happens when students are engaged inside the classroom and also immersed in co-curricular experiences. Aurora University has been addressing issues of poverty through both academic and co-curricular programs by instilling a sense of social responsibility within students. One of their latest programmatic successes has been the *Sleep Out on the Quad*, which is developed, implemented, and evaluated by a group of undergraduate students in the Leadership Education and Development (L.E.A.D.) program.<sup>2</sup> Over the past three years, approximately 400 students, faculty, and staff have attended an evening of educational sessions related to poverty and homelessness culminating in an actual *Sleep Out on the Quad* during a frigid evening in order to simulate homelessness. The authors note that this brief simulation is not designed to be a comprehensive experience of what it is like to be

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1. Charles Hokayem and Misty Heggeness, "Living in Near Poverty in the United States: 1966-2012," *United States Census Bureau*, Washington, D.C., accessed July 28, 2014, <http://www.census.gov/prod/2014pubs/p60-248.pdf>.

2. The L.E.A.D. program at Aurora University seeks to develop the leadership knowledge and skills of students. It combines principles from both Social Change and Servant Models of Leadership. <http://www.aurora.edu/student-life/activities/lead.html#axzz386waVfOi>.

homeless. Rather it seeks to plant the seed of social justice through experienced dissonance in order to make participants agents of change.<sup>3</sup> The purpose of this paper will be to discuss the programmatic goals for *Sleep Out on the Quad* as well as highlight qualitative outcomes.

### The Role of Colleges and Universities

One of the most important outcomes for students in higher education is the development of leadership skills,<sup>4</sup> and these skills should exist for the purpose of serving others.<sup>5</sup> However, “one of the greatest failings of the American education system...is that young people can graduate from a university without any understanding of poverty at home or abroad.”<sup>6</sup> These sentiments gave rise to the development of the L.E.A.D. program at Aurora University and the subsequent development of *Sleep Out on the Quad*, which is an event designed to increase awareness of homelessness.

To begin with, the L.E.A.D. program was developed in 2007 by a university-wide task force in response to students seeking further leadership knowledge and skills in conjunction with their course-work. After much research and discussion, the task force combined principles from both the Social Change and Servant Models of Leadership to provide a framework for the L.E.A.D. program. The Social Change Model of Leadership was chosen because it of its focus on increasing self-knowledge to enhance leadership competence and results in an eventual positive social change in the community.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, Servant Leadership also focuses the development of positive social change, but does so through the paradoxical power shift of serving before leading.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, the two overarching goals of the L.E.A.D. program are the enhancement of student development related to the content areas of self-knowledge and leadership competence, and the facilitation of positive social change through community service. Students voluntarily register for the program, which originally started with two sequential tiers. Recently it has grown to be comprised of four tiers. Each tier is a year-long program consisting of mandatory workshops and engagement, and leadership in service-oriented programs.

Overall, the L.E.A.D. program’s purpose is to evoke a sense of social responsibility within students through experientially based leadership. These types of experiences would have likely been supported by John Dewey, who believed that learning is most useful when students are immersed in their studies and in their communities of learning and practices.<sup>9</sup> In fact, he believed that learning needed to involve the whole person (intellectual, physical, and moral); as well as be rooted in inquiry, and have an innate sense of risk.<sup>10</sup>

*Sleep Out on the Quad* was developed by students in the third tier of the L.E.A.D. program entitled Enhancing Campus Leadership. The event is an overnight experience seeking to

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3. Sam Marullo and Bob Edwards, “From Charity to Justice,” *The American Behavioral Scientist* 43, no. 5 (2000): 897.

4. Dennis C. Roberts, *Deeper Learning in Leadership: Helping College Students Find the Potential Within* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2007).

5. Tony Baron, *The Art of Servant Leadership: Designing Your Organization for the Sake of Others* (Tucson, AZ: Wheatmark, 2010).

6. Nicholas D. Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn, *Half the Sky: Turning Oppression into Opportunity for Women Worldwide* (New York: First Vintage Books, 2009), 88.

7. Roberts, *Deeper Learning in Leadership*, 57.

8. Robert K. Greenleaf, *Servant Leadership: a Journey into the Nature of Legitimate Power and Greatness* (New York: Paulist Press, 1977), 21.

9. John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (New York: The Free Press, 1916).

10. John Dewey, *Experience and Education* (New York: Collier Books, 1938).

promote awareness of poverty and homelessness, and is aligned with the ideologies of experiential education outlined by Dewey. Through individual, group, and community exploration and experiences during the evening, the student's personal development is often connected with a desire to serve which results in positive social changes on campus and in the community.

The evening begins with a series of educational workshops where students participate in a variety of different activities. These activities are designed by students in the L.E.A.D. program with some guidance from the Director of Student Leadership and feedback from university students who have been homeless. This past year, participants went through a checklist to see if they had the skill-sets necessary to live in poverty, an experiential money game where tough real-life decisions were simulated, and a presentation from a family who was living in a transition program at a local homeless shelter. Following the workshops, students adjourned to the quad to "sleep" during a cold and uncomfortable evening. A wake-up call was made at 5:00 a.m. and participants congregated for a group reflection. This was a somber and heart-felt discussion, and participants reflected on what they had learned, stereotypes that were broken, and what they plan to do to contribute to their communities in the future. Lastly, students organized a food and clothing drive in conjunction with this event, which benefited the local homeless shelter.

This program represents the deliberate and continuing paradigm shift in education, away from the more detached type of intellectual learning found in traditional classrooms towards learning that is informed by the needs of the students and their communities.<sup>11</sup> This continues to support the work of not only Dewey, but also of Kurt Hahn, considered by many to be the founder of adventure education which is an offshoot of experiential education. Hahn thought the purpose of school was to prepare the youth for active citizenship.<sup>12</sup> Students were to be evaluated on items such as their sense of justice, their ability to do what is right, their use of imagination, and their ability to organize.<sup>13</sup>

To this day, as the face of higher education continues to evolve, so must the way curriculum is delivered. The most effective student learning continues to often be the result of student engagement through experiences both in and outside the classroom.<sup>14</sup> After all, education should serve to infuse people back into their own communities to be agents of social change.

### The Role of Experiential Education

*Sleep Out on the Quad* is heavily focused on both behavioral and cognitive aspects of experiential education because they represent a powerful learning pedagogy. The actual sleep out takes the complexity of simulated homelessness and places the learning in the hands of the participants. This is because the sequence of traditional information assimilation is flipped as they begin the learning sequence with an action that leads to specific applications of learning instead of visa versa. The learning occurs because the students are in a situation where the result is unknown, they have a role in their knowledge acquisition (based on past experiences and belief systems), and there is a perceived risk.<sup>15</sup>

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11. Roberts, *Deeper Learning in Leadership*.

12. Anthony Richards, "Kurt Hahn," in *Adventure Programming*, eds. John C. Priest and Simon Priest (State College, PA: Venture Publishing, 1999), 66.

13. Kurt Hahn, "Juvenile Irresponsibility," *Gordonstown Record* 22, no.2 (1956): 15-21.

14. Dewey, *Experience and Education*. See also Alexander Astin, "Involvement in Learning Revisited: Lessons We Have Learned," *Journal of College Student Development* 49 (1999): 587-598.

15. Simon Priest, "The Semantics of Adventure Programming," in *Adventure Education*, eds. John C. Miles and Simon Priest (State College, PA: Venture Publishing, 1991), 112-117.

During the *Sleep Out on the Quad* event, participants often grapple with their role as contributing community members after hearing stories from individuals who are homeless talk about their struggles for basic necessities, when they themselves often have enough. The participants also feel vulnerable sleeping outside in the cold, and herein lies the power. It is in the “not-knowing” and the “discomfort” that the participants often find themselves confronting their own physical and cognitive dissonance.

Often when challenging this dissonance, the students come face to face with their innate desire to change the less desirable situation to a more desirable one.<sup>16</sup> This represents a budding paradigm shift as they are motivated to resolve the dissonance. Through their actions, the participants often find a deeper purpose and meaning in life. For example, this past year, students, faculty, and staff heard a recently divorced mother and her three children speak about their recent struggles with homelessness. This family was excited about their pending move into their own apartment; however, they were still missing some of the basics necessities, including a bed for one of the family members. The students, faculty, and staff were so moved by their story, that they did a “flash-fundraiser” and raised enough money in a week to purchase a bed for the family.

In addition, students have been motivated to serve in other ways following *Sleep Out on the Quad*. The local homeless shelter has experienced an increase in the number of volunteers, students have switched majors to be in a more intentionally service-oriented industry, and work has begun on a university level to ensure comprehensive services are made known to university students who are homeless. All of this supports the ideology of experiential learning as being an influential tool used to provoke positive change on both personal as well as community levels.

### The Role of Servant Based Leadership

*Sleep Out on the Quad* also utilizes some of the basic tenants of Servant Leadership. Robert Greenleaf, a recent theorist of Servant Leadership, was concerned about the effect leadership had on the least privileged of society.<sup>17</sup> He placed special emphasis on serving those with the greatest need. So it should come as no surprise that the students in the L.E.A.D. program chose to educate the university community about issues of poverty as well as serve the homeless and inspire others to do the same.

According to William B Turner’s “*The Learning of Love: A Journey Toward Servant Leadership*” (quoted in Keith, 2008), at the core of servant leadership is the belief that “there is a deep spiritual hunger...to find a place where people really care for one another, where we can find something to believe in and something and someone to trust. When these things are discovered together in a community, great things can happen.”<sup>18</sup> For students, faculty, and staff, *Sleep Out on the Quad* seems to provide just that opportunity. It often ignites a visceral response in participants resulting in an increased desire to serve. For many, it helps to clarify values and signify personal epiphanies.<sup>19</sup> To illustrate this point, a faculty member, who has a brother that is

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16. Simon Priest and Michael A. Glass, *Effective Leadership in Adventure Programming, 2nd ed.* (Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics, 2005), 21.

17. Robert Greenleaf, *Servant Leadership: A Journey into the Nature of Legitimate Power and Greatness* (New York: Paulist Press, 1977), 27.

18. William Turner as cited in Kent M. Keith, *The Case for Servant Leadership* (Westfield, IN: Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership, 2008), 28.

19. Tony Baron, *The Art of Servant Leadership: Designing Your Organization for the Sake of Others* (Tucson, AZ: Wheatmark, 2010).

homeless, participated for the first time this year. He was so moved by the end of the event, that he talked about needing to connect with his brother more often and is also encouraging all of his students to participate in the event this coming year.

Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, the growing numbers of students willing to identify as having been homeless are volunteering to help with the *Sleep Out on the Quad*. They have shared their stories with fellow students and faculty members, and in doing so have continued their journey out of shame that often is associated with being marginalized by society. They have served the greater university community by bringing the issue of poverty close to home, and helping participants realize that this is not an issue that exists outside of their frame of reference.

### Student Reflection Vignettes

The following are two stories from undergraduate students at Aurora University who participated in *Sleep Out on the Quad*. Both narratives serve to illustrate how this event has the potential to be a transformational experience that both motivates and heals. The first story is from Jessica, who decided on a different career path after participating in *Sleep Out on the Quad*. The second story is from Joshua who is homeless when he is not attending the university. He has found the educational sessions which he leads during *Sleep Out on the Quad* to be nothing short of therapeutic.

#### Jessica's Story

My name is Jessica Grazulis, and I am a recent graduate of Aurora University with a degree in Psychology. I participated in *Sleep Out on the Quad* as an undergraduate student and note that few events in my life have impacted me as much as *Sleep Out on the Quad*. In fact, I have written about this event in graduate school applications, in scholarship essays, and also in my internship requests. My hope is that through this article readers can begin to understand why this event was so transformative.

On a cold and late October evening, students assembled in front of the Wackerlin Center for Faith and Action at Aurora University waiting to see what was in store for the evening. I had read that *Sleep Out on the Quad* was an event to raise awareness of homelessness and had hoped that through my participation I would understand what a person who is homeless goes through on a daily basis. However, once the activities began, I realized their struggles were much more extensive than I had anticipated.

One of the activities involved listening to families from the local homeless shelter explain their experiences to the audience. As I sat listening to the accounts of a woman unable to buy her child new shoes for school and a man struggling to find food every day, I became overwhelmed with the desire to help. For the first time in my life, I felt in touch with my own humanity.

That night we slept outside. Some people slept in sleeping bags, some in cardboard boxes, and some with nothing but a willingness to subject themselves to the full experience of sleeping in the elements. Though I had brought my sleeping bag, I barely slept with the sting of the cold. When I awoke that morning and returned to my room, it was impossible to not be grateful for all that I had.

In all honesty, *Sleep Out on the Quad* did not help me understand what a person who is homeless goes through on a daily basis. In fact, it made me realize that I can have only a fraction of this understanding. What I do know is that I cannot imagine spending every night sleeping out

in the cold and all the while hiding from the police. As a college student from a comfortable socioeconomic background, it is easy to take the basic necessities of life for granted. It is not until meeting someone who does not have the basic human rights of a roof over their head, a warm bed to sleep in, or even a place to call home, that one can truly appreciate all that they are fortunate enough to have.

After participating in *Sleep Out on the Quad*, I decided to do something more active with my career path. This event, along with other subsequent volunteer experiences, inspired me to serve as an AmeriCorps VISTA and obtain my ultimate goal of working with Spanish-speaking Americans and at-risk youth through counseling and social work opportunities. This experience taught me that everyone has a story and a struggle, and that everyone also has the capacity to help and to give hope.

### Joshua's Story

My name is Joshua Kyle White,<sup>20</sup> and I am a student in the School of Social Work at Aurora University. I think it is important to state that it was not an easy path for me to get into Aurora University. I struggled with homelessness for seven years before I was able to find a way to afford to go to school. My homelessness was the result of multiple events that occurred around the same time. It was the perfect storm of a strong-willed teenager, a mother who was pregnant immediately after going through a tumultuous divorce, and the fact that she jumped into another tenuous relationship before I could even blink.

Over my seven years of homelessness, the small acts of generosity extended by those who had nothing is what inspired me to become a social worker. During my first year at Aurora University, I heard about *Sleep Out on the Quad* and I was really unsure about it. I knew that a fellow student and friend, who had spent a large portion of her life in hotel rooms with her family, was speaking at the event. But rather than attend the event, I chose to stay away. I was afraid about getting emotional or having the event trigger memories of a time when I had no control over my life. I also thought that there was no way that one event could help people understand the feelings that go with having no bed to sleep in at night or being forced to steal food for dinner. So rather than reach out, I chose to close myself off.

Soon after that initial *Sleep Out on the Quad*, I began classes in the social work program. In one course in particular, my fellow classmates were making incorrect claims about poor people that stigmatized the homeless. One day during class, I broke down and told the class about my experience. I told them how I did not choose to be homeless and explained several reasons why someone who is poor or homeless may choose to spend money on a cell phone rather than on food. After all, the chances of getting a job that would provide the money necessary to purchase food without a cell phone were slim to none.

Somewhere in my mind, that simple personal revelation changed my outlook in an instant. My choice to shut the world out was similar to not having a phone. I could not expect to get my message across without first providing the mechanism for effective communication. After this, I sprang into action and shared my experiences with my classes throughout the remainder of the semester and I finished with a renewed sense of purpose.

I spent the summer thinking about how I could utilize my negative experience in a way that could benefit my fellow students. As summer passed, I thought back to my courageous friend who could stand in front of a crowd of people during *Sleep Out on the Quad* and tell her

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20. Joshua Kyle White indicated that he would like his full name to be included in this article.

story, and I was determined to use her courage to inspire myself to speak out about my own personal experiences.

Coming to Aurora University has helped me tap into the side of me that I had tried so hard to forget and hide. Returning from my summer break I was determined to speak-out, help, and inspire people. I volunteered to run a workshop at the next *Sleep Out on the Quad*. Knowing that some of the students in the L.E.A.D. program were running a session that simulated some of the structural components of homelessness (i.e., lack of affordable housing, lack of a living minimum wage, lack of access to social services), I decided to lead a session about the skill-sets needed for people to successfully live in poverty. I was truly surprised to find out how little the average student knows about how to survive in poverty and was flooded with mixed emotions. At first I was upset, saddened, and slightly offended. It was at that moment that I realized the true extent of the knowledge gap my peers had, so I chose to let go and educate rather than stay mad. As the three separate rotating groups came through my session and I explained the skills needed to survive on the streets, I saw their reactions on their faces and I realized the impact I was making. I also made a personal discovery—after every group I spoke to, I began to feel better about whom I was.

After participating in the *Sleep Out on the Quad* event, I feel more confident speaking about my experiences and feel as if a large weight has been lifted off my shoulders. I did not realize until after I spoke about how much anger I carried with me. I would treat people who had more money, privilege, or nicer things than me with a certain prejudice. After the event, I stopped looking at myself as a victim and more as a survivor. I hope to participate in all future *Sleep Out on the Quad* events, and continue to help educate my fellow students. The *Sleep Out on the Quad* event completely changed my outlook on life, and I hope this event continues for a long time to come.

I am currently homeless again, because I chose to give up everything I had earned to go back to school, but I have found a new home on the campus of Aurora University. With the help and guidance from the amazing and dedicated staff at Aurora University, I have been able to achieve beyond what I ever imagined for myself. I have found teachers who inspire, students who encourage and support, and a campus that I always feel welcome to come back to. I hope that by writing this that someone, somewhere has a sense of renewed vigor to pursue something better, because if you want something bad enough there are people and programs who will help you .

### Conclusion

When educators and students immerse themselves in co-curricular experiences such as *Sleep Out on the Quad*, it is evident that learning, healing, and hope can become transformational. The educational institutions that support events such as these know that they can captivate and maximize student learning. However, the realization of what Dewey termed as “miseducative”<sup>21</sup> or a harmful experience is always present. With the understanding that “miseducative experiences” can derail programs such as *Sleep Out on the Quad*, the Director of Student Leadership goes through a multitude of potential adverse experiences that might arise and the L.E.A.D. students discuss how to best handle each situation. This has included what to do if fellow students make fun of or berate students participating in the experience (such as when they are “looking for food in the garbage” as a part of the on-campus scavenger hunt) or how to deal with the lighting of a

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21. Dewey, *Experience and Education*.

firecracker at night (the sound resembles gunfire) when participants are trying to sleep. All these potential negative experiences, when reframed correctly, ironically contribute to the participant's deeper learning and empathy for the homeless.

Learning also occurs because the educational sessions challenge all the common stereotypes participants have developed about those who are homeless. This was evident when an educated and well-spoken working mother and her three equally well-spoken children spoke of their experience of homelessness, when a teenager talked about being thrown out of his home because he is gay, and when a middle-class businessman suffered a catastrophic medical emergency and could no longer afford his home due to mounting medical bills. All these stories shattered misconceptions.

Perhaps one of the reasons educational institutions are typically not as eager to offer these types of programs is the standardization of curriculum and fear of the "less controlled" aspect of experiential education. However, there is benefit to putting the popular standardized learning assessments aside. Educators must embrace the notion that different lessons are imbedded in the experience for all learners, depending on the life experiences each individual brings to the event. If educators are willing to let the experience teach and then have the courage to act in service to others, the ultimate goal of living with purpose becomes apparent.

Finally, there has been advocacy and progress for students experiencing homelessness, but still more needs to be done. *Sleep Out on the Quad* is just one of the many efforts being made across campuses to raise awareness of those who are homeless. One comprehensive free online publication is entitled "College Access and Success for Students Experiencing Homelessness: A Toolkit of Educators and Service Providers."<sup>22</sup> It covers topics such as choosing a college, advanced placement tests and fee reductions, free applications for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), and more. It is a solid starting point to begin the understanding of the needs of student experiencing homelessness. Overall, most campus communities need to do more. Experiences such as *Sleep Out on the Quad* should serve as a call to action for students, faculty, and staff to involve themselves in service for the greater good.

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22. Christina Dukes, "College Access and Success for Student Experiencing Homelessness: A Toolkit for Educators and Service Providers," *The National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth*, accessed July 29, 2014, <http://www.naehcy.org/sites/default/files/dl/toolkit.pdf>.



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