

**Colorado  
Educators  
Study Homeless  
and Highly  
Mobile Students**



**Colorado Department of Education**

**Center for Research Strategies**

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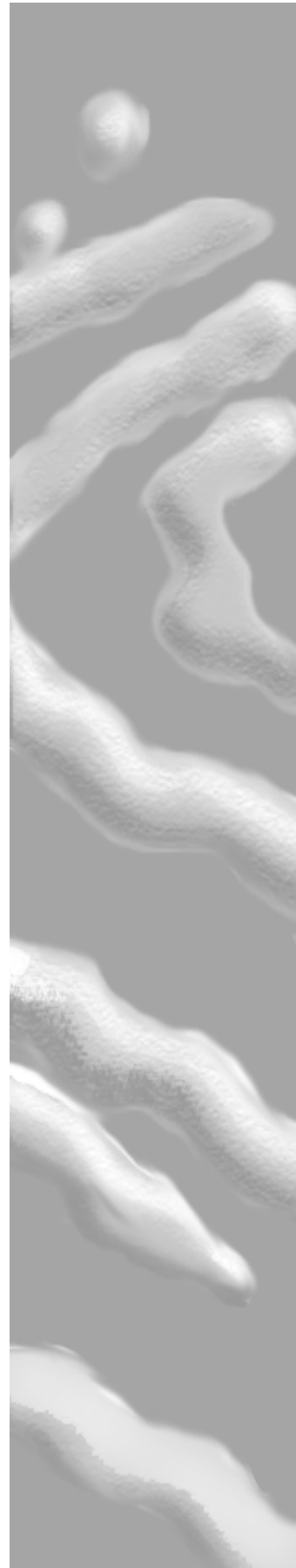
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## FOREWARD

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Teachers wonder how to teach students who come and go. Nurses express frustration in delayed medical records due to frequent student movement. Principals worry when a student comes to school without a warm jacket or sufficient food to eat. Shelter providers cringe when they talk with youth who dropped out rather than feel unwelcome at their high school.

“These children do not experience residential mobility as an aberration or anomaly; it is an ongoing characteristic of their life” (P. D. Lopez, 2002). This is the reality for many children and youth who experience homelessness. However, complacency and inattention to the lives of these young people must turn to thoughtful and intentional problem solving and decision-making. Comprehensive action needs to expand at national, state and local levels, not only through research centers at universities but with local partnerships among schools, shelters and community and faith agencies.

Today, the increasing number of children and youth identified as homeless or highly mobile challenges schools in unique ways. Issues of inconsistent attendance, missing academic records, and transportation to school are but a few. Youth living on their own have greater challenges when their lack of credits and legal guardianship bumps up against school systems traditionally not structured to address the complexity of their individual needs.

In 2003-04, the Daniels Fund, in partnership with the Colorado Department of Education and the Center for Research Strategies, sponsored a yearlong professional development opportunity for school teams to focus on homelessness and high mobility issues using participatory action research. A total of 17 teachers, principals, a school social worker and an education director at a youth shelter comprised this cohort for the school year. The expectations of the “Colorado Participatory Action Research”, or COPAR, project were demanding, as it required six full days of class work supplemented with individual research, planning and implementation in between class sessions. Self-reflection and dialogue among the group members and with the facilitator was integral to the flow of the project.

At year's end, each of the nine sites reported their processes, insights and conclusions. Their heartfelt stories of action and research comprise the following chapters. They detail their yearlong engagement, questions, struggles, ahas! and action steps. In varying degrees, the COPAR project brought about gained knowledge, changed attitudes and forward movement for the group members to be advocates for this specific population of students.

Each chapter tells a different story, written for other teachers, administrators and community-based leaders. The COPAR concerns, questions and problems are as varied and layered as each local setting. Hopefully, these examples may become an invitation or challenge to ask and study questions about student homelessness and mobility in your own schools and communities. Like ripples, when a rock is dropped into a pond, ideas stimulate ideas; optimism nurtures optimism; solutions foster solutions and change prompts change.

We thank the pioneering 17 COPAR participants. Each individual saw a need and took personal responsibility to respond with the intent to improve both the educational and social experience for homeless and highly mobile students. Special acknowledgement goes to Regis University for graciously providing a meeting space throughout the year. We also recognize and appreciate the multi-tasking skills of four conscientious AmeriCorps volunteers, Charlotte Nolan, Stephanie Smith, Tracesea Slater, and Nate West, who each assisted with various components of the COPAR Project over the past three years.

“One’s mind, once stretched by a new idea never regains its original dimensions.”

~ Oliver Wendell Holmes

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## INTRODUCTION

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Emily Alana James, Ed.D.

*Colorado Educators Study Homeless and Highly Mobile Students* captures the participation, action and research of an energetic group of Colorado educators studying educational practices for homeless and highly mobile students.<sup>1</sup> The Colorado Participatory Action Research (CO PAR) project spanned the 2003-2004 school year, and embarked on new territory in both action research and professional development for these 17 educators.

The following 11 chapters describe their varied and diverse action research projects. This book is neither an academic tome nor a prescriptive “how to” guide. It represents the unique perspectives of 17 educators who tell their stories in their own words, about their experiences and the ways the CO PAR group influenced each other. These examples are an indication of what is possible when school administrators work with teachers in their schools to investigate the complex social and educational issues with highly mobile and homeless students.

The COPAR teams represented both administrators and teachers, and the diversity of educational settings found across Colorado. One rural school district participated with three elementary schools from two “small towns” with populations ranging from 11,000 to 72,000. Four suburban schools participated in the study, including two elementary and two middle schools. Finally, one elementary, one charter high school, and a homeless shelter for unaccompanied youth represented urban communities. Immigration emerged as a common theme for all of the CO PAR schools.

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<sup>1</sup> Our definition of a highly mobile student was “a student that had experienced two or more enrollment changes in any given year that did not correlate to normal school change because of advancement”.

While every story is different, in general, participants engaged in two to four cycles of action research. They studied their school environments and then worked as a group to surface the assumptions that they held going into the project and to embrace larger perspectives on educational practices needed for these students. Then the educators planned their first cycle of action, measured the outcomes of that action and brought those results back to the group for further suggestions. The projects were varied, and while some were more obviously successful than others, they all displayed ingenuity and resourcefulness and were specifically geared to solve the issues presented in their schools.

I was fortunate to have the opportunity to facilitate this group. I was interested in using participatory action research to study educational practices for highly mobile and homeless students, as well as exploring the use of participatory action research as a professional development tool for educators. CO PAR intersected these two areas of investigation, both of which are not widely studied. Educational practice for homeless and highly mobile students is almost non-existent in educational literature. At the same time, school districts are encouraged to implement long-range professional development projects, yet the use of participatory action research (PAR) as data driven professional development is not common.

To begin using participatory action research to study educational practices, the CO PAR projects considered the current, available literature on educational practice that addressed the needs of homeless and highly mobile students. I summarized the literature review into three domains of practice. The “Three Domains Framework” address: 1) access to educational services, 2) welcoming school culture and 3) flexible instructional strategies. CO PAR participants validated the “Three Domains Framework” and in many ways improved upon the educational practice in their schools for this disadvantaged population of students.

Simultaneous to their work, I studied the use of PAR methodology as professional development. My research found that this project increased the professional accountability of the participants to their school districts and communities. It was also successful in increasing their knowledge about homelessness and high mobility, involving participants in advocating for these

students and engaging them in improving educational practice in their behalf (James 2005).

A table is provided to help the reader quickly reach the chapters of greatest interest, either because of their similar role of administrator or teacher, the similarity of the size of their community or the area within these domains that they studied. These categories overlapped throughout the projects and teachers worked with administrators on others. Not every educator studied all three domains.

**Table 1: Outline of CO PAR projects by demographics and Three Domain Framework educational practices**

Access to Educational Services	Welcoming School Culture	Flexible Instructional Strategies
<b>Rural Administrator and Teacher</b>		
<b>Chapter 1</b> Project focused on increasing student motivation.		
<b>Small Town Administrators and Teachers</b>		
<p><b>Chapter 2</b> Principal worked with teacher to uncover issues related to numbers and services for mobile children.</p> <p><b>Chapter 2</b> Bilingual education teacher worked with her principal to uncover issues related to numbers and services for mobile children.</p> <p><b>Chapter 3</b> Principal looked for significance between enrollment in services and attendance.</p>	<p><b>Chapter 5</b> Principals interviewed every parent who enrolled their children mid year.</p>	<p><b>Chapter 6</b> Teacher started an after-school tutoring program.</p> <p><b>Chapter 7</b> Teacher worked to increase academic achievement for homeless and highly mobile children.</p>
<b>Urban/Suburban Administrators</b>		
<p><b>Chapter 4</b> A middle school principal develops case studies of her most mobile students in order to understand the impact of her pyramid of services implemented to improve their education.</p>	<p><b>Chapter 5</b> Principal worked with homeless shelter and opened a welcoming center.</p>	

**Table 1: Outline of CO PAR projects by demographics and Three Domain Framework educational practices (Continued)**

<b>Access to Educational Services, Welcoming School Culture And Flexible Instructional Strategies</b>
<b>Suburban Teachers</b>
<b>Chapter 8</b> Teacher worked with literacy coach and started the “lunch bunch”.
<b>Chapter 9</b> Two teachers investigated the early experiences of students transferring into their schools and encouraged a more formal welcoming structure.
<b>Urban Administrator and Teacher</b>
<b>Chapter 10</b> Urban charter school investigates the backgrounds of their students to determine the role of high mobility of the population in their school.
<b>Urban Homeless Shelter Administrator</b>
<b>Chapter 11</b> Homeless shelter administrator surveys unaccompanied youth to determine the qualities they would look for in a future charter school.

Chapter 1 is written by two teachers (one wears an administrative hat as well) from Saguache, Colorado. Amy was teaching a split-level class during the 2003 – 2004 school year and Yvonne found herself as homeless liaison for her small school district as she taught in the high school. The largest grade in their school at the time had fifteen students. Their chapter shares their journey into the complexity of welcoming and motivating students in rural schools.

In Chapter 2, the principal/teacher team from Fort Morgan, Colorado investigated issues of mobility in small towns. Ron and Pam describe not only the many ways their data disabused them of their assumptions, but also the complexities schools may face with any single mobile child.

A small town principal writes Chapter 3 from a school that has been very successful in turning around academic issues faced within his community. Brett describes the difficulties of action research and the deep understanding that

developed from an otherwise difficult process. In Chapter 4, Vernita, a middle school principal, tells about how CO PAR changed her perspective on homeless and mobile students forever.

In Chapter 5, three elementary principals, Julie from the small town of Longmont, Lynn from the suburban area of Commerce City, and Dave from the urban city of Colorado Springs, share the outcomes of their investigations through interviews of the families that entered their schools midyear.

Two teachers tell their individual stories in Chapters 6 and 7. Jason describes the joys of “adding one more thing” to his already busy teaching schedule and how an after-school tutoring group added to his experience as a teacher. In Chapter 7, Tobey explores the complex issues involved in what originally seemed a straightforward investigation into academic efficacy for this population.

Chapters 8 and 9 show the perspective of educators in suburban settings. In Chapter 8, Rebecca and Dana tell about how their experiment with “the lunch bunch” made their school culture more welcoming and brought the issues of homelessness to their district as a whole. In Chapter 9, Jennifer S. and Jennifer R. investigate what is known about homelessness and high mobility in their school, welcome their own students more comprehensively, and ultimately suggest new procedures in their schools for tracking these students.

A principal and social worker team from a charter school in Denver, PS1 write Chapter 10. They describe the difficulties they faced getting a database in place to track their students’ home backgrounds and their resulting understanding of the diversity within their school.

Finally, in Chapter 11, Steve discusses unaccompanied youth and his survey process to understand the necessary qualities for a school engaged in reaching these students and being flexible enough to meet their needs until they complete their diploma.

This book recognizes the hard work and contributions of the first cohort that used PAR to study homeless and highly mobile students. This project will expand in

future years to reach educators in more states, participating in similar work on line. This book is published under a Creative Commons license (see <http://creativecommons.org>) to allow free use by all interested in the topics discussed within. The copyright is held in common between the Colorado Department of Education and the Center for Research Strategies (see the copyright page for details). This format for license was out of our belief in sharing information about the educational issues of disadvantaged students therefore allowing us to gift this initial growth and knowledge to others. This form of copyright also allows us to offer our new knowledge without creating the type of disturbance that may be brought about by commerce. We hope that this distribution will allow it to be widely read and disseminated to all.

I encourage readers that have questions about the chapters, the CO PAR project, or participatory action research as professional development, to contact me at [alanajames@earthlink.net](mailto:alanajames@earthlink.net). From all of us involved with CO PAR, we hope that you find this text useful, perhaps inspiring, in your own journey in working with or studying issues related to homeless and highly mobile students.

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