

## **PART 4**

# **Access to Educational Services, Welcoming School Culture and Flexible Instructional Strategies**



**An Action Research Study:**

**CHAPTER 8**

***Studying Homeless and Highly Mobile Students***

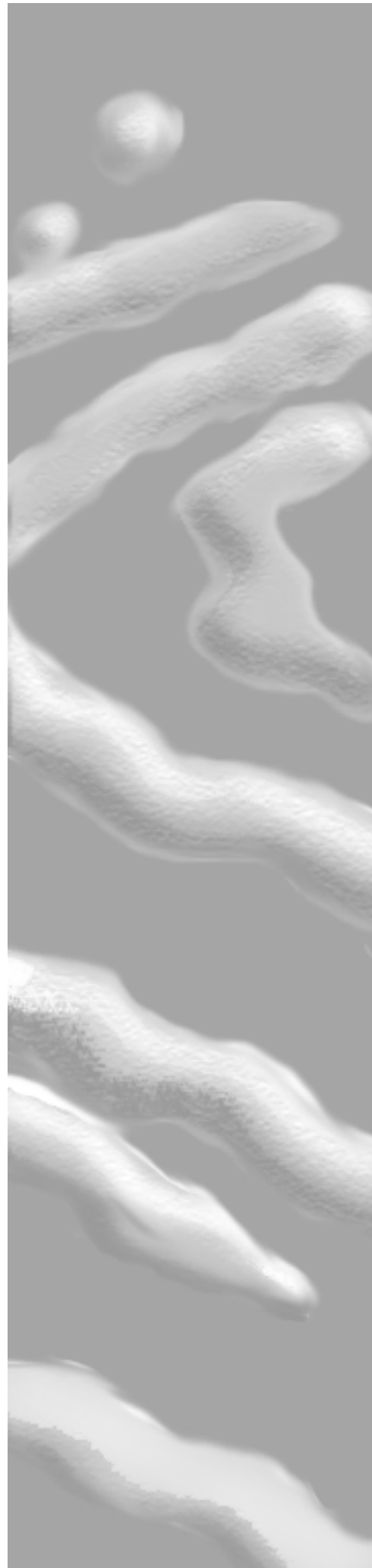
***At Westminster Elementary School:***

***Raising Awareness and Building Relationships***

**Rebecca Chao and Dana Clements**

**Westminster Elementary School**

**K-5 teachers**



*Our evidence shows that we have raised the awareness of our staff towards the struggles of our homeless and mobile students and the services available for these students. There is an increased sensitivity to the importance of school culture. Teachers understand that we need to look to the students for answers. The students are beginning to understand that there is value in their opinion and voice.*

## **Background**

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In an era of high stakes testing and an increasingly diverse population of learners in our classrooms, we often found ourselves questioning what control we really had on the learning in our classrooms. Can we truly make a difference in our student's educational lives? Budget cuts, No Child Left Behind and Adequate Yearly Progress were only a few of the challenges.

As teachers of an urban K-5 population, we had also become aware of the impact of our students' mobility on their academic success. Our school, Westminster Elementary, experienced a great change in population over the past five years, shifting from a Caucasian majority to a Hispanic majority primarily within the past three years. In addition, about 95 of our Hispanic students are ELL students, who received pullout services for English language instruction. With our school population hovering around 285 students, this was nearly one-third of our student body. Furthermore, with an increased understanding of the definition of "homelessness" under the Federal McKinney-Vento Homeless Act (2002), we were able to identify a group of twenty-five students who fit the criteria as a homeless or highly mobile student. Westminster Elementary School serves a population, which, for the most part, is in the lower strand of social-economic status. All of these characteristics created quite a challenge for our educators. How were we to meet each student's individual needs in the midst of these uncontrollable factors?

Even with a relatively stable staff of 19 educators, it had become increasingly more difficult to meet the needs of individual learners in the K-5 classroom setting. Current curriculum did not seem to be an appropriate fit for most of our highly mobile and homeless students. Without instructional modifications, it was unlikely that our homeless and mobile students would be successful at meeting grade level

district and state standards. We began to question what would need to be present in order for these particular students to learn at an acceptable rate.

### **What Research Told Us**

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What research told us was that these students needed someone who cared about their well-being and could provide a stable relationship within the school setting. Many experts in education had noticed that school climate and a student's sense of belonging in a school were key factors to being and feeling successful. "No significant learning occurs without a significant relationship", stated Comer (as cited in Payne, 1996). How could these relationships between students and adults be initiated and maintained in elementary schools? This large idea was the premise of our action research. Payne (1996) added that since 1980, Americans have concentrated school efforts on "achievement and effective teaching strategies" (p.143). While these efforts seemed quite valid and in students' best interest, we wondered how achievement could occur without the foundation of a relationship? Payne stated, "yet the most important part of learning seems to be related to relationship" (p. 143). Educators can create and build relationships through caring about students, by being role models, and by insisting upon successful behaviors for school.

This relationship could then become the foundation to build academic achievement and other indicators of success. Mark Bensinger, a fifth grade teacher, noted that a supportive classroom climate was essential. "If students don't feel that they're safe, respected, or wanted, they're never going to get to the point where real learning occurs." (O'Neil, 2004). Eric Schaps supported this idea as he pointed out the numerous benefits of building a sense of community in a school. Students in supportive environments such as these were more likely to be academically motivated, to act ethically and altruistically, and to develop social and emotional competencies. Additionally, these benefits were often enduring (2003).

When considering the specific social and emotional needs of homeless and highly mobile children, school climate was definitely a key factor. Schools should

be safe havens for these children. Often, their families and community life could be so unstable that the school was the place where they sought security and a sense of belonging. In the midst of a student's chaotic life, a teacher could be a source of hope, encouragement, and positive support. In relation to the challenges that a homeless student faced, it was not surprising to learn that one study found that these students had significantly more behavioral problems in school than did their housed peers (Halloway, 2003). Hence, it was suggested that the school be sensitive to the learning needs of homeless children and provide support outside of academia to address the physical and emotional issues these students faced. Doing so could increase the likelihood that some of our neediest students would be successful in the public school setting.

Ernest Mendes (2003) expressed the importance of empathy in the public school setting as a part of school climate. Empathy encompasses much more than mutual respect between adults and students in a school setting; it seeps to a much deeper level of understanding and caring. He stated, "Earning the respect of students is not enough. "Students must perceive that we care, and even that we like them deep down, as people" (p.57). Mendes reported that students would work harder for someone they liked than for one they simply respected. With this in mind, the impact of truly empathetic adults in a school building experiencing a great deal of mobility and homelessness could be astounding. Empathy could begin by teachers becoming more knowledgeable about their students' world and by demonstrating a genuine interest in them. The idea of empathy went back to our basic human need of love and acceptance. It is no wonder that its' presence could have such a great impact and its' absence could be hazardous.

## **Beginning the Action Research Project: The Reconnaissance**

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### **What Do We Know?**

While analyzing data concerning student achievement we immediately recognized the disparity of performance between our homeless and highly mobile students and our stable students. This led us to several questions. The answers

would ultimately direct us to our primary action research question. What was the basic understanding among our staff of empathy for our homeless and highly mobile students? What did our staff understand about the significance of their relationship with each student and the impact the relationship would have on the students' education?

To gather data for the “answers” to these questions, we relied on teacher discussions, both individual and small group, concerning specific homeless and highly mobile students, and the minutes from horizontal, vertical and whole staff meetings. In examining these data, we concluded that there were two general misconceptions. The first misconception was what defined a highly mobile student. Many of our school staff considered our Hispanic students that visited Mexico during January as highly mobile students. The second misconception identified a diminished sense of rapport. Blame often transferred to these students when a student was absent or discussed an upcoming move, as if the student had control over his or her attendance or mobility. These findings led us to the assumption that most of our staff would feel that their student's academic success would not be significantly impacted by a bond with a teacher but rather that the quality of the relationship depended on the motivation and academic success of the student.

Our discussions with staff appeared to be guiding us to examine our school climate, the importance of a student/teacher relationship and its' impact on achievement. In reviewing relevant articles and publications, we found several that supported our growing understandings.

First, Bronfenbrenner (1989) stated, “young people need to have adults who are ‘crazy’ about them. Instead, teachers may resent inadequate encouragement and assistance to do their job and students may feel that nobody cares about them”. Ernest Mendes (2003) provided his perspective for empathy and structure in a classroom. “Students do respond just because we care – and because they like us” (p. 56). However, he went on to say that developing caring relationships did not negate the need for limits and structure in the classroom. Students need both structure and nurture, and the ways in which the teacher responds to these need in the classroom are crucial (p.57).

Finally, there was the research and work from Dr. James Comer. Dr. Comer stated that, “a bond is established that enables the child to imitate, identify with, and internalize the attitudes and values of their caretakers and then those of other people around them. These people become important because they mediate a child’s experience and protect the child and help him or her grow along the important developmental pathways. Hard science – brain research, has confirmed the nature and critical importance of this interactive process. To be successful, schools must create the conditions that make good development and learning possible: positive and powerful social and academic interaction between students and staff. When this happens, students gain social and academic competence” (p. 3).

With Dr. Comer’s philosophy, that no significant learning occurs without a significant relationship, in mind, we considered meeting with our homeless and mobile students three times a week for lunch. Could a relationship with the students motivate their learning? Could we affect the attitudes and actions of our Lunch Bunch students to precipitate a change in our school climate and thus academic achievement? With these questions in mind, we began our action research.

### **The First Cycle of the Action Research: The Beginning of Lunch Bunch**

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#### **Planning and Action**

Our first step was to establish when and where to meet with students. We felt our school library offered a “homey” feeling. Our students thought of it as a special place to go, a community place within our school. We also decided that the best time to meet was on Monday, Wednesday and Friday during our lunchtime. We felt that this was a time least impacted by other activities in our building. This would be a long enough block of time so that we would be able to eat lunch and socialize. We also decided that attendance would be student choice. We felt that we would need to work hard to engage the students and provide interactive activities to keep our attendance strong. Our first challenge came in identifying our homeless and highly mobile students. We felt it would be important for us to identify them for our study

without publicly labeling them “homeless or highly mobile”. We enlisted the assistance of our district homeless liaison, Jamie Skaronea. She had lesson plans that helped classroom teachers to identify homeless students. The lesson plans fit in with our grade level social studies standards within the context of a typical classroom lesson. Each student in every class drew and labeled where they lived and whom they lived with. We kept the drawings together by grade level so we could cross-reference and confirm our findings with the classroom teachers and our school secretary. The drawings easily showed us who lived in temporary housing and lived in a multi-family dwelling. We were also able to determine who fit in our definition of a highly mobile student. For the purpose of our study, our definition of a highly mobile student was a student that had experienced two or more enrollment changes in any given year. We were able to use student registrations to identify these students. Once we examined the data, we eliminated three students who lived in multi-family dwellings by choice instead of economic need. After carefully examining our student population, we had a group of twenty-seven students we felt fit the criteria for our study. We were both surprised that the number of students was so high. We did not expect to find 10% of our population fit into our study. We then designed invitations identifying our group as “The Lunch Bunch”. We met with students on our list on a one-to-one basis to invite them to join us.

In anticipation of our first meeting with the students, we designed Lunch Bunch attendance records to show current daily attendance as well as a running record of individual student attendance. We gathered crayons, markers, art paper, writing materials and board games. We discussed possible daily agendas wondering if we should have a specific purpose for each day. After much discussion, we returned to Dr. Comer’s research, our lunch bunch time was a time to share a meal with friends and create new bonds within a safe, supportive environment. We modeled and expected respect, responsibility and cooperation from all who participated in Lunch Bunch.

For other data to support our study we looked to our district reading assessment, quarterly student admissions, withdrawals, and discipline reports. We

created a student survey to give us a baseline on the student's perspective concerning school climate and school relationships.

We were pleased and surprised to have 100% participation at our first meeting. The younger students were excited to eat lunch outside of the cafeteria, while the older students wanted to know more about the Lunch Bunch. We moved from table to table, talking with the students while they ate. We explained that this was a time for all of us as a group to meet, eat, and make new friends. We put signs in the hallway on Monday, Wednesday and Friday to remind the students to come to the library. During the second and third meetings, we asked the students to complete a twenty-five-question survey on the effectiveness of the Lunch Bunch. The intermediate students read the surveys and were quite serious about giving us honest answers. We worked with our primary students on an individual basis to insure that they understood our questions. We worked quickly and with the older students working independently, were able to finish all the surveys in two lunch meetings. The responses we acquired from our students supported our theories and encouraged the development of our initial research question.

### **Observation and Reflection**

In reviewing our data from the surveys, we noted that 40% of our intermediate students were not comfortable with the climate in the school. Several of the intermediate students noted that they were uncomfortable with peers. The majority of our primary students were happy with the school climate, the teachers and peers. We wondered if the student-to-student relationships or student to teacher relationships caused the discrepancies.

An immediate outcome that we noticed was an obvious connection made with intermediate students. Students that previously would not say hello or make eye contact were now going out of their way to greet us. It was an astonishing reaction considering that we had only met two or three times for lunch. We discovered that our commitment to lunch, time and attention opened the doors of communication between our Lunch Bunch kids and us, as well as between their classroom teachers and us. For example, within our first month, a homeless student

came to us for mediation assistance concerning teasing in his classroom. We were able to engage in a reflective conversation with him on how to empower himself to problem solve. He also gave us permission to talk with his classroom teacher. We quickly became allies and advocated on his behalf. His classroom teacher felt supported and was grateful for the assistance and information while we felt rewarded with the knowledge that our Lunch Bunch time was serving its purpose. We quickly became the “go to” resource for bus passes, qualifications for services and general information concerning our homeless and highly mobile students. We also encountered issues related to McKinney-Vento funding during this cycle. Finding the financial resources to supply a student with bus tokens to travel to and from school became an issue for the first time when a student in temporary housing moved beyond our school boundaries. The idea of keeping a homeless child in their “school or origin” became a reality right before our eyes. During the holidays, our connections with the students enabled us to have conversations with the classroom teachers to insure all of our students had a holiday meal and gifts.

We encountered a tough challenge, one that would continue to surface, after our winter break. Two of our intermediate students were restless and appeared to have difficulty engaging with the other students during lunch. They began to ask if they “had” to come to Lunch Bunch. During subsequent weeks, we made it a point to seek them out during the day and especially during our Lunch Bunch time. We discovered through talking with these students that most of the activities we had for the students focused on younger children. They gave us some ideas of activities they would enjoy, and how they wanted to spend their time. We hoped that more one-on-one interest and engaging them in more appropriate activities would ensure they continued to buy-in to our time together.

## **The Second Cycle of the Action Research: Becoming a Family**

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### **Planning and Action**

One concern at this point in our research was staying continuously aware of new students enrolling at our building so that we could add new members to our

group. Overlooking these children and not including them in our activities seemed counter-productive to our efforts, so we stayed in close touch with our administrator and our school secretary. As new students arrived, they received a personal invitation and a letter explaining our group, just as the other members had when we first began meeting. On the other hand, it was frustrating when a few of our members left our school, transferring to new schools for many different reasons. We had to reassure ourselves that at least we knew that we had identified the right students and served them to the best of our ability while they were with us.

We felt that we had come to such a greater understanding about our at-risk students that we shared our research and related information with our entire school staff. We discussed our study, the criteria of our two student categories, services that were available to some of our students, and general information concerning our homeless and highly mobile students. Our primary goal in doing so was to raise awareness and encourage empathy and compassion among the staff members. After our awareness heightened through our participation with the other action research teams, it was often difficult for us to slow down and take baby steps. During this cycle, because of our newfound information and understandings, we were also able to advocate for our homeless and highly mobile students as a special student category to be included in the district's long-term planning. We also continued to advocate for our most needy students in our building, serving as a communication link between the students and community services, social workers, teachers and administrators.

### **Observation and Reflection**

During this cycle, we began to congeal and trust as a group, and our three times per week remained consistent. The students' eager participation and interest in meeting soon relieved our apprehensions that they were missing lunch recess. Ironically, students who were not part of our group began asking if they could accompany a member to Lunch Bunch. We were a bit hesitant to let this happen, not wanting to interfere with our data collection and focus on the original group. We then considered the needs of this group, which included practicing appropriate social

interactions with peers. Knowing the enormous impact that peers can have on each other, we began to view a few “typical” kids joining us as quite an asset. These kids might be able to reinforce cooperation skills and table manners in a way that we could not, so we decided to allow the Lunch Bunch kids invite a friend to our sessions. The two or three weeks that followed brought interesting insights and observations. The guests that joined us indeed displayed leadership qualities and enjoyed the time spent with us in the school library. At one point, it became so popular to bring a guest to Lunch Bunch that just about every member did so and we were scrambling to find places to sit for lunch. We were in awe at the impact that Lunch Bunch seemed to be having on the student body as a whole. Wanting to continue to let the Lunch Bunch kids invite guests, yet keeping crowd control in mind, we decided to ask the kids for a solution. They found it feasible to be able to invite one guest per week and keep Friday as our “family day” for the original Lunch Bunch kids. As a result, it seemed that students throughout the building became aware of our presence, as well as teachers who were interested in the welfare of all the students at Westminster Elementary and not just the ones in their classrooms.

Another observation that we made at this point was the amount of trust that had built up and the sense of community that we felt as a group. The kids were coming to us for assistance with social issues occurring during the school day as well as issues dealing with peer mediation, laundering clothing, and personal hygiene. On average, we were assisting with these types of issues two to three times per week.

Viewed as informed staff members when it came to issues surrounding homeless and highly mobile students and as teachers who were willing to make extra efforts to empower students, we began to bear additional responsibilities with our school. We were pleased to discover that we had an increased awareness among staff members, as measured by conversations happening among adults in order to meet individual students’ needs. In addition, the number of students referred to the “Care and Concern Committee” in our building had increased. We wondered if we were beginning to experience a shift in school-wide awareness and understanding.

## **Third Cycle of Action Research: Examining Results and Outcomes**

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### **Planning and Action**

With the conclusion of our project in sight, we began to discover a wealth of data to examine. We again conducted the twenty-five question student survey with our Lunch Bunch kids to provide us with data that would inform us of the effectiveness of our lunch bunch meetings. Once again, each member of lunch bunch completed the survey and provided us with honest feedback. The older students worked independently, while the younger students relied on our help to read the questions. Our meetings at lunch had ended just after spring break, at the end of March. In all, we met 41 times over a 15-week period.

As our research question had evolved, we also conducted teacher interviews to examine the impact of our group on our school-wide culture. The seven interview questions reflected the three domains of educational practice: access to student services, flexible instructional strategies, and welcoming school culture. Fifteen educators, including our principal, provided input in a one-on-one setting with us.

In addition, our principal and building accountability committee approved and conducted a parent survey that our school is required to conduct every other year. Overall, this survey asks how satisfied parents are with their child's education at our school. With heightened awareness of student input, the committee decided to design a student survey that would mirror the information obtained on the parent survey. Each student in the building completed the ten-question survey in their classroom setting and was encouraged to add any comments that they deemed worthy.

Based on these four data sources we had several ways to measure the effectiveness of our Lunch Bunch group. From the analysis of the student survey given to the lunch bunch members, we discovered key questions and coded them as either indicating a shift in teacher behavior according to student perceptions or a shift in student beliefs. This provided a frame of reference for our successes this year and for future areas for improvement. We found that, in general, the first and second

grade students had positive attitudes about school, even on the first administration on the survey. The older students tended to agree less with statements such as, “I can talk to my teacher about my problems,” and “I feel like I fit in with students in my class.” In addition, we found a positive change in answers to statements such as “Adults in the building know my name,” and “I have friends at school.” Interestingly enough, several students from first through fifth grade indicated on both pre and post surveys that they did not trust other students in our school. This belief generalized among all students in our building. Our school-wide student survey indicated that only 43% of our students agreed with the statement, “I trust the other students at Westminster Elementary”. Thirty-six percent were not sure, while 21% disagreed with the statement.

Of the parent surveys completed at spring student-led conferences, the overwhelming feeling was that parents of our students were satisfied with the educational environment and instruction at Westminster Elementary. Each child who attended their conference and whose parent filled out a survey received a raffle ticket for prizes to encourage participation in the data-collection. Ninety-seven percent of our participating parents expressed that their child enjoyed going to school and felt safe at school. Overall, it seemed that parents were quite satisfied with the curriculum delivery and educational environment at Westminster Elementary School.

With the teacher interview process, we were able to delve a little deeper into the three domains of educational practice and its effect on our building. In analyzing this set of data, we highlighted key questions and tallied common responses. We found that thirteen of the sixteen respondents reported that their awareness or understanding of educational issues surrounding homeless or highly mobile students had indeed changed over the course of the year. Interestingly enough, thirteen people also responded that Lunch Bunch made an impact in our welcoming school culture. When asked how their awareness had changed, ten participants responded that an informal faculty presentation on issues of homeless and highly mobile students was a factor. Seven reported that having students participate in Lunch Bunch was a catalyst in this shift. Ten of the sixteen interviewees reported that because of their awareness, their educational practice had changed. The changes

appeared in a variety of ways: emotional assistance, accommodations for homework, instructional support, and providing physical resources. Our teacher interview, indeed, provided us with a wealth of information.

### **Observation and Reflection**

As we entered this final cycle of our research, we were amazed to observe and reflect on how much our question had evolved since the beginning of our inquiry. We began focused on a particular population within our student body that had begun to affect many other students in the building. This inquiry then led us to question the impact on teachers' perceptions of our school culture. As our question evolved, so did the data that supported it. Studying the cultural impact of homeless and mobile students on our school-wide culture was the beginning, we feel, of a shift towards becoming a collaborative community of learners.

### **Conclusion**

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Our evidence showed that we had raised the awareness of our staff towards the struggles of our homeless and mobile students and the services available for these students. There was an increased sensitivity to the importance of school culture. Teachers understood that we needed to look to the students for answers. The students were beginning to understand that there was value in their opinion and voice. Teachers were learning to explore new methods of instructional flexibility. In response to the heightened awareness, we have experienced a dramatic increase of the number of students referred to our "Care and Concern" process. Finally, with the assistance of our PTA, we purchased new furniture, an aquarium and plants to create a more welcoming environment for our parents in our school lobby.

Our expectation was that as an entire staff, we would continue to pursue the evolution of our school culture. We have discussed continuing "Lunch Bunch" as a school community study time. The creation of a new student-run "Welcoming Committee" now focuses on new students and their families. We also are pursuing funding for an "Enrollment Liaison" position. This person could coordinate all of

our school and community services for our mobile families within our own school. The liaison would have the opportunity to establish strong communication between our at-risk families and the school and administer any pertinent assessments to assure appropriate classroom placements.

As a final point, we have proved, as we hoped, that by establishing a relationship with a group of students that once provided a negative impact on student learning, our Lunch Bunch kids have instigated a positive change in the attitudes and actions of our school community.

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**An Action Research Study:**

**CHAPTER 9**

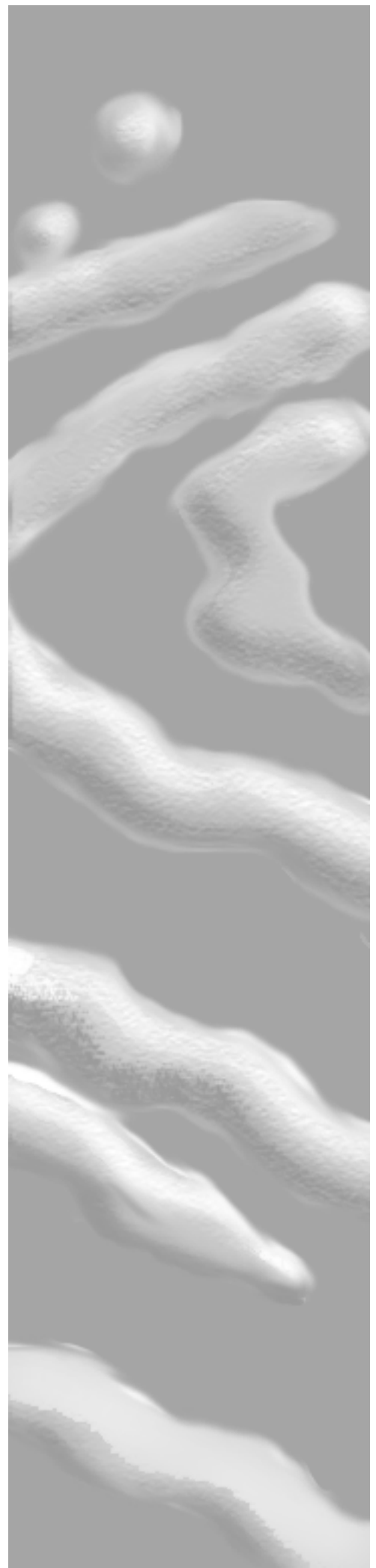
***To What Extent Are We Meeting The Needs  
Of Highly Mobile Students?***

**Jennifer Rahn**

6<sup>th</sup> Grade Teacher  
Sheridan Middle School

**Jennifer Skrobela**

6-8 Grade Teacher  
Adams City Middle School



*Discussing the issues that highly mobile students bring to schools with our colleagues seemed to open a floodgate. Each team engaged in a lively discussion and had many questions for us. One group decided to look online for curricula guides for surrounding districts and another teacher asked if she could use the information we provided and create a new student check list for teachers to use in their classrooms! What a great idea!*

## **Background**

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We are two middle school teachers from the Denver metro area. A short background on our experience follows:

### **Jennifer Rahn**

My part of the research was conducted at Sheridan Middle School (SMS), which is in southwest Denver, where I completed my third year of teaching. I taught three 6<sup>th</sup> grade Balanced Literacy and Social Studies classes and had a total of about 44 students. In my three years, I have been involved with many extracurricular activities that allowed me to build a great rapport with students. This project has allowed me to delve into my students' lives to help them feel safe, welcome, and successful.

### **Jennifer Skrobela**

I conducted my portion of our research at Adams City Middle School (ACMS), which is located in Commerce City, Colorado. As the name indicates, Commerce City is an industrial area with neighborhoods entwined within the commercial areas. In general, the students who attend ACMS tend to be from families with lower socioeconomic status, 74% of all students receive free and reduced lunch. Approximately 62% of the students are of Hispanic descent, 33% are Caucasian, and 5% are of other ethnic origin. ACMS consists of six teacher teams, two teams per grade level, which loop with their students during the middle school experience. Over the past five years I have taught predominantly general science

classes, a literacy block each year, and a few math homerooms. The majority of my classes are heterogeneously grouped, encompassing a wide spectrum of learners and abilities.

### **How we got started**

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We believe that one of the most important aspects of being an educator is to meet the needs of all of our students. When we thought about different groups of students and their potential needs, our initial thoughts were of second language learners. Next the focus went to below grade-level readers, followed by gifted students. We realized when we reached the end of our list that neither of us considered the needs of our highly mobile students. Why is this?

In our schools, an urban 6-8 middle school of 700 students and a 6-8 middle school of 400 students from predominately low socioeconomic homes, the student mobility rate is fairly high. We have always recognized that mobility was a definite issue in both our own classrooms as well as for our entire schools, but we never really stopped to think about what special needs these learners might have. More frightening was when we thought back to our teacher prep programs and Masters Degree programs; neither of us could remember ever learning any strategies or “best practices” for highly mobile students. In fact, was this group ever mentioned? Again, our minds asked “why?”

According to the state of Colorado, we both work at “low” performing schools, in other words, schools that do not perform well on the state’s standardized tests. One focus for our schools is to improve our scores on the state assessments. If one of the main objectives as an educator is to meet the needs of all learners in the classroom and consequently increase test scores for our schools, we realized that we had to learn more about highly mobile students. We felt that it was important to incorporate a wide variety of instructional techniques in all of our lessons to help meet the needs of different learners; however, the personal lack of knowledge regarding mobile students left us wondering to what extent we meet their needs.

## Our Research

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Most research indicates a correlation between student mobility and achievement. According to the Colorado Affordable Housing Partnership, stability may be most important in primary grades. Multiple moves can result in the cumulative effect of children missing critical learning opportunities and may cause these students to struggle in later years because they lack basic skills. Although moving once or twice during the public school year may not be harmful, most research shows that high mobility lowers student achievement, particularly when the students are from low-income, less-educated families (Sewell, 1982; Straits, 1987). One study that tracked children from early childhood to young adulthood found that residential mobility reduced the odds of high school graduation even after controlling for a variety of family background variables (Haveman & Wolfe, 1994). Finally, several studies based on the same national database of over 10,000 high school students found that school mobility between the first and eighth grades increased the odds of dropping out of school during high school (Rumberger & Larson, 1998; Swanson & Schneider, 1999; Teachman, Paasch, & Carver, 1996).

As we continued to read and learn more about mobility we noticed almost all of the research recommended the same practices. It seemed obvious that these were important to note and incorporate into our research. For example:

- to establish a buddy program so all new students have an immediate friend and mentor;
- to treat every day like it's the first day of school (take some time to talk to new students);
- to plan welcome and farewell rituals for students transitioning into or out of school;
- to identify any mobility patterns that exist; and
- to provide training for teachers in schools with highly mobile students.

While researching we also learned that homeless students are usually highly mobile as well. As we began to reflect upon the research pertaining to mobile

students, we started to think about engaging in action research to help us understand and meet the needs of this group of learners.

### **Beginning the Action Research Project: The Reconnaissance**

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Before either of us could plan our first cycle, we had to identify our highly mobile, including homeless, students. We decided to talk to our secretaries to learn any information they knew pertaining to mobility. We also wanted to inquire about our current intake processes for new students. Our secretaries informed us that new students do not start classes on their first day. First they complete the necessary forms and sometimes get a brief tour of the building. They do not actually start school until the following day.

Next, we asked them to retrieve last year's enrollment and withdrawal data. We inquired if they had noticed any trends or patterns in mobility for our schools. Based on their observations, they felt that January was the busiest month for students enrolling in our schools. They also felt that from Thanksgiving through winter break the number of students enrolling slowed down.

After analyzing the data, we confirmed that January did see the most growth, while February experienced the most withdrawals. For example, 135 students enrolled in ACMS during the last year and 102 withdrew. Of the 135 students that entered the school 27 withdrew before the end of the 2002/2003 school year. Removing these 27 students from the enrollment data so they were not counted twice, 210 students were in at least two schools during the 2002/2003 school year. This number accounted for one-third of the students at ACMS.

The final focus of our discussions surrounded the welcoming climate of our buildings. When we asked each secretary if she felt our school was welcoming for new students, the responses were quite similar. "Some clusters do a great job of making new students feel welcome, while other clusters don't do anything at all. It really just depends on which team the new student is placed."

We learned from our meetings with COPAR that every school district by law has to have a homeless liaison, and we found out who ours was and sent them an

email. We were curious to learn how our districts identified homeless students, what types of services our schools provided for homeless students and their families, how many homeless students we had in our schools, and who they were. The liaison for ACMS returned our email and informed us that we have fourteen homeless students in our district. We were also informed to direct any other inquiries to either the Child Advocate or the Attendance Liaison at ACMS. They informed us that we have no homeless students currently at ACMS and neither one could explain how the district identifies homeless students. I knew that we had a few students that were homeless based on the McKinney-Vento Act definition and I was certain other teams had these students as well. I discussed this information with a few of my colleagues; they were just as surprised and disappointed as I was. Through conversation, we identified eight seventh grade students that were currently or had been homeless during this school year.

My former Assistant Principal at ACMS and I set up a meeting with Jill Smith, the program supervisor for an emergency housing shelter located within our school district. Jill described the shelter for us; it contains eight two-bedroom apartments and occupants can stay for thirty days and then apply for an extension. Only families are admitted into the shelter. From January through September of 2003, 135 school aged children resided in the shelter and 75% were middle school aged or younger. According to Jill, the majority of these children were attending our schools. At the conclusion of this meeting, I asked our secretary if she could find out if any students were currently living in the shelter. She searched the records using the address and found three students that were currently living in the shelter. That was eleven newly identified homeless students; sure we don't have any homeless students in our school! Sharing this information with the appropriate people in the school could really help these students so why isn't there any communication?

At SMS, our homeless liaison was new to the district this school year. She didn't have a lot of numbers to back up historical figures; however, I was aware of her doing amazing things with our homeless and mobile populations, from translating to clothing drives. I knew those families were in real "helping hands."

Now that we had finished identifying the highly mobile learners in our schools and researching best practices relating to this group, we were ready to devise an action research plan.

## **The First Cycle: Welcoming Climate Baseline Data**

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### **Planning and Action**

Based on our reconnaissance, we decided that our first step was to understand new students' perceptions of the school's welcoming climate. To accumulate baseline data regarding the welcoming culture of our schools, we designed two surveys for all new students to complete. The initial survey asked questions about the student's former school and life. We administered this survey in a slightly different manner, at one school the survey was included in the registration materials by the secretary so new students could complete it while their parents were completing the registration materials, and at the other school the survey was administered by a teacher. The initial survey had a multi-fold purpose; first, it provided teachers with some personal information about new students and second, it provided information regarding homeless status. For research purposes we focused on three questions. The survey asked:

- Overall, how much did you like your last school?
- Where do you live? and
- Who lives with you?

A follow-up survey was given to new students four to six weeks after their arrival at ACMS or SMS. It focused on the welcoming climate of our schools. Again the administering of the survey was different at each school. The survey was given by a teacher at one school and by the media center specialist at the second school. Students had to indicate what they liked and didn't like about our schools so far, how they felt about their teachers, how welcome they felt so far, and who (if anyone) made them feel welcome at our schools. Although all of the questions related to the welcoming culture of our schools, we choose four questions for research purposes:

1. Overall, how much do you like ACMS/SMS so far?
2. Are there any teachers/adults at ACMS/SMS that you like so far?
3. Overall, how welcome has everyone at ACMS/SMS made you feel?
4. Who are some of the people that have made you feel welcome?

### **Observation and Reflection**

The baseline results were extremely consistent when comparing answers between questions and schools. Students that loved their old schools viewed ACMS/SMS poorly, while students that did not like their old schools had a positive view of ACMS/SMS. We were surprised that 42 – 43% of the students surveyed reported that they liked ACMS/SMS, while an additional 25% claimed to love ACMS and 14% loved SMS. Only 7 - 8% did not like our schools. Based on these numbers between 57 - 67% of new students have a positive view of our schools. Impressively, 100% of the students reported that there was at least one adult that they liked in our buildings. When asked how welcome everyone has made you feel, 0 - 8% reported that nobody wanted them in our schools, 14 - 25% believed that some people wanted them to be around, 50 - 72% claimed that most people made them feel welcome, and 14 -17% believed that everyone wanted them to be at our schools.

Immediately, we also noticed a discrepancy. How can every new student like at least one adult in the building but up to 8% of new students feel that no one wants them to attend our school? We talked to the individual who comprised this 8% and we learned that he had been thinking only about his peers while he was answering the question. Apparently he had an “issue” with some of his peers earlier in the day that influenced his response. When questioned again he changed his answer to “some people want me here.” Once again 67% of the students surveyed feel welcome at ACMS, while an astounding 86% feel welcome at SMS! When we analyzed the data relating to who made a student feel welcome the results were varied, the top two welcoming groups were other students and teachers. The media-center specialist and the two secretaries followed these groups closely. Numerous members of the administrative and student advocate teams also received votes.

Overall, this data suggests that over two-thirds of new students felt welcome at our schools. This also meant that almost one-third of new students did not feel welcome. What can we do to make these kids feel comfortable in our schools?

## **Second Cycle: Determining the Needs of Our Highly Mobile Learners**

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### **Planning and Action**

Following the completion of the identification process, it was now time to complete three sets of interviews to determine the needs of our highly mobile students. Although all new students completed the surveys, we decided to narrow our research focus to only our students. We interviewed 23 students between our two schools on two separate occasions. The first interview consisted of three basic questions to provide us with more specific baseline information, while the second interview focused on understanding the student's needs. Our second set of interview questions was geared towards our faculties. The purpose of these questions was to determine if our colleagues understood what mobility means, if they believed we had a mobile student population, and finally what types of strategies they used to welcome and assess new students in their respective classrooms. The final set of interview questions was designed for the parents of our previously identified highly mobile students. The purpose of these interviews was for us to achieve a better understanding in regards to what parents believed their children's needs to be upon entering a new school. We provided a take home questionnaire for each student to bring to his/her parents; unfortunately, the response to date has been extremely low.

### **Observation and Reflection**

From the first student interview, we were able to ascertain that 66% of our new students were unhappy about changing schools and 69% were in two or three different schools since entering middle school. In our opinion, the second interview really helped us to assess the needs of our highly mobile students. When we asked,

“What makes you feel welcome in a new classroom?”, the overwhelming response (94%) was the teacher introducing himself or herself and then introducing the new student to either the entire class or a portion of the class so they would have someone to talk to and get help from. In response to the question, “What can a teacher do to help you feel more welcome in school?” 88% of the students reported that making introductions and talking to a new student was the key to feeling welcome. At SMS, one student stated, “I really like it when my teachers talk to me and tell me about themselves. I can get to know them as people. They become people I can really like.” The majority of the students questioned indicated that they would rather “blend in” than “stick out” when they were new students. Finally, 60% reported that participation in an after school club or sport motivated them to do well in school. We then decided to ask the students one more question that was not included on the interview sheet. What is the one thing that either made the transition into our school easier or could have made the transition better? The students that were assigned a buddy for the day claimed this really helped them understand the rules and expectations in the different classes. They also informed us, “It was nice to have someone they could talk to.” The students that were not assigned a buddy believe that a buddy could have helped them during their first few days.

The staff interviews indicated that our staff understands the term mobility as it related to students and schools. The majority of the faculty recognized they were working with a mobile student population. Fifty eight percent believed they had encountered numerous instances of mobility and 29% reported having experienced some mobile students in their classes. When asked about welcoming strategies, 48% reported pairing a new student with a partner or buddy, 52% stressed the importance of introductions both of themselves and the new student, and 32% provided individual attention towards a new student on the first day. The question pertaining to initial assessment strategies was extremely intriguing. The majority of the staff reported performing either formal or informal reading assessments during our literacy block, but only two teachers reported assessing a new student’s content knowledge.

From the few responses we received, parents reported that a school's history and reputation played a role in both choosing a new school and feeling comfortable with that choice. When asked what types of factors motivated your child to succeed academically and socially, the parent response indicated inclusion by both teachers and peers into the school setting. Finally, when asked, "What can a teacher and/or school do to make you and your child feel more welcome?" the parent response was to increase communication. One parent stressed the importance of "teachers listening to a student's problems" while a second parent indicated, "talking to new students and their families will help make them feel at home."

All three surveys appeared to emphasize the same results; personal communication by a teacher towards a new student really helped a child feel welcome in school. The surveys also stressed the importance of introducing new students to at least a few of their peers so the student felt comfortable asking for help and had a few new friends to make them feel welcome.

### **Third Cycle: Increasing the School's Awareness About the Needs of Our Highly Mobile Students**

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#### **Planning and Action**

To help address the needs of our highly mobile learners, we decided to summarize and present our research findings to our colleagues during our team meetings. The presentation included the definition of a homeless student and some statistics about these students, the correlation between mobility and achievement, and the results of our various interviews with our students, parents, and staff. We concluded our presentation by asking for support surrounding our idea to create a "welcome team" for our schools. The "welcome team" would consist of student volunteers that received training in how to welcome new students to our buildings. Our colleagues agreed to discuss this idea with their students and to provide us with a list of possible volunteers as soon as possible.

## **Observation and Reflection**

Discussing the issues that highly mobile students bring to schools with our colleagues seemed to open a floodgate. Each team engaged in a lively discussion and had many questions for us. One group decided to look online for curricula guides for surrounding districts and another teacher asked if she could use the information we provided and create a new student checklist for teachers to use in their classrooms! What a great idea! We discussed the creation of a “welcome team” and everyone was supportive of the idea. The “welcome team” reminded many of my colleagues about the transition class our principal had talked about creating for new students. “What happened to that class?” Although none of us knew the answer, we agreed that creating a transition class for new students coupled with the “welcome team” and a list of practical strategies/ideas for new students in your classroom would really address the needs of these students and consequently improve the welcoming climate in our building.

## **Epilogue**

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As the school year ended, we realized we could continue to collect data during the next year. We are curious to learn if the teacher checklist and the “welcome team” positively affect the welcoming climate of our schools. We are also curious to look at the MAPS and CSAP scores of our highly mobile learners to see if there is a correlation between their scores and both the recognition of their individual needs and the school’s welcoming culture.

On a personal level, this research has made a great impact on our classrooms. Every time a new student is admitted to our class, we make sure to introduce ourselves and have a quiet, personal chat with the student. We ask every student if they would like us to introduce them to their classmates and we always assign a few buddies to explain the class procedures. Due to this research, we make a point of checking with each new student numerous times during the class and we make sure

to say goodbye to the student on their way out the door. We are both much more prepared for the mobile students entering our classrooms!

This research project also afforded us an opportunity to truly get to learn about our mobile students' lives. We often converse with our students outside of the classroom, but we noticed a difference when we asked to talk with the students in regards to this project. Our students seemed to feel empowered when we explained why we were interviewing them. They were extremely willing to participate and felt that our conversations and, more importantly, their answers were valuable. Consequently, these kids now feel able to talk to us about anything and we feel honored because of this! Due to this fact alone we feel that we currently do a much better job meeting the needs of our highly mobile learners!

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*APPENDIX: CHAPTER 9*

Appendix Chapter 9

**Mobility Questionnaire**

**Student Interview Questionnaire**

**Parent Interview Questionnaire**

**Teacher Interview Questionnaire**

**New Student Survey**

**Follow-up Survey**

*APPENDIX: CHAPTER 9*

**Mobility Questionnaire**

How many times have you moved in the past 3 years?

Were you happy about moving?

Did you change your mind when you started your new school? Why or why not?

## **Student Interview Questions**

1. What makes you feel welcome in a new classroom?
2. What things in school make you want to have good grades and get involved with clubs or sports?
3. Have you ever not liked going to one of your classes? Why?
4. What can a teacher do to help you feel more welcome in school?
5. When you're new in a class, would you rather blend in or stick out?

## **Parent Interview Questions**

1. What makes you feel comfortable about send your child to a new school?
2. What kind of things motivate your child to succeed academically and socially in school?
3. Has your child ever not liked going to a new class? Why?
4. What can a teacher and or the school do to make you and your child feel more welcome?
5. Are you involved with your child's school, i.e. field trips, PTO, sporting events?

## **Teacher Interview Questions**

1. Describe what you think mobility means.
2. What experience do you have with mobility in your own classroom?
3. What strategies do you have in place to welcome a new child to your classroom?
4. What strategies do you have in place to assess the child's ability in your subject area?
5. How would you describe the actions of a new student in your classroom?

*APPENDIX: CHAPTER 9*

Name:

**Welcome to SMS**

*We are very excited to have you as part of our school. To help us get to know you as a person and as a student please answer the questions below.*

What school did you used to go to? \_\_\_\_\_

*Overall how much did you like your last school? (Circle ONE answer)*

(hated it) 1                      2                      3                      4                      5 (loved it)

What are some of the things you liked about that school? (Check all that apply)

- friends                       lunch time                       health class                       after school
- some teachers                       gym class                       science class                      activities
- all teachers     art class                       math class                       sports teams
- music class                       social studies                       homework                       reading
- class assignments                       English (language arts) class
- other \_\_\_\_\_

What are some of the things you didn't like about that school? (Check all that apply)

- friends                       lunch time                       health class                       after school
- some teachers                       gym class                       science class                      activities
- all teachers     art class                       math class                       sports teams
- music class                       social studies                       homework                       reading
- class assignments                       English (language arts) class
- other \_\_\_\_\_

**APPENDIX: CHAPTER 9**

What kinds of things make learning new information easiest for you?

(Check all that apply)

- working in groups                       working on my own                       looking at something
- listening to someone talk about something                       doing activities about something

Think about a teacher you liked in the past. Why did you like that teacher? (Check all that apply)

- respected students     welcomed students     flexible about things
- variety in assignments                       gave us choices                       gave us chances  
(did different things in class)
- the teacher was fun/had a personality                       knew the teacher as  
 provided lots of examples to help us learn                      an actual person
- the teacher was fair     other \_\_\_\_\_

Think about a teacher you didn't like in the past. Why didn't you like that teacher? (Check all that apply)

- were rude and /or                       not welcoming                       not flexible about things  
disrespectful                       no choices                       no chances
- no variety in assignments (did the same thing everyday)
- the teacher was not fun/had no personality
- the teacher did not explain things well                       teacher embarrassed students
- the teacher was not fair     other \_\_\_\_\_

How much do you read? (Circle one answer)

Never                      A little Sometimes                      All the time

What is the title of the last book you read? \_\_\_\_\_

**APPENDIX: CHAPTER 9**

What kind of reader do you think you are? (Circle one answer)

Not very good      OK      Good      Awesome

What do you like to do, or have to do after school? (Check all that apply)

- play sports       watch TV       do homework       work at a job  
 play computer games/video games    read       draw  
 baby-sit brothers/sisters       talk on the phone    sleep  
 eat/cook       hang out with friends  
 other \_\_\_\_\_

Where do you live? (Circle one answer)

House      Apartment      Hotel/Motel      Trailer Condo/Townhouse  
Other \_\_\_\_\_

Who lives with you? (Check all that apply)

**Mom**       **Dad**       **Brother(s)**    **Sister(s)**    **Aunt(s)**  

**Uncle(s)**

- Step-mom    Step-dad    Mom's boyfriend       Dad's girlfriend  
 Grandmother(s)       Grandfather(s)       Cousin(s)  
 Other \_\_\_\_\_

Is there anything else you would like us to know about you?

*APPENDIX: CHAPTER 9*

Name:

**Welcome to SMS- Follow-up Survey**

*Now that you have been at SMS for a little while we want to know how things are going.*

**Overall how much do you like SMS so far? (Circle ONE answer)**

(hate it) 1                      2                      3                      4                      5 (love it)

What are some of the things you like about SMS so far? (Check all that apply)

- friends                       lunch time                       health class                       after school
- some teachers                       gym class                       science class                      activities
- all teachers                       art class                       math class                       sports teams
- music class                       social studies                       homework                       reading
- class assignments                       English (language arts) class
- other \_\_\_\_\_

What are some of the things you don't like about SMS so far? (Check all that apply)

- friends                       lunch time                       health class                       after school
- some teachers                       gym class                       science class                      activities
- all teachers                       art class                       math class                       sports teams
- music class                       social studies                       homework                       reading
- class assignments                       English (language arts) class
- other \_\_\_\_\_

Are there any teachers/adults at SMS that you like so far? (circle one answer)

Yes                      No

**APPENDIX: CHAPTER 9**

Think about a teacher you like so far at SMS. Why do you like this teacher? (Check all that apply)

- respected students     welcomed students     flexible about things
- variety in assignments     gave us choices     gave us chances  
(did different things in class)
- the teacher was fun/had a personality     knew the teacher as  
an actual person
- provided lots of examples to help us learn
- the teacher was fair     other \_\_\_\_\_

Think about a teacher you don't like so far at SMS. Why don't you like that teacher? (Check all that apply)

- were rude and /or     not welcoming     not flexible about things  
disrespectful     no choices     no chances
- no variety in assignments (did the same thing everyday)
- the teacher was not fun/had no personality
- the teacher did not explain things well     teacher embarrassed students
- the teacher was not fair     other \_\_\_\_\_

Overall, how welcome has everyone at SMS made you feel? (Circle one answer)

Nobody wants	Some people	Most people	Everyone
me to be here	want me to be here	want me to be here	wants me here

Who are some of the people that have made you feel welcome? (Check all that apply)

- Ms. Mickens     Ms. Willis     Mr. O'Connell     Mrs. Kofoed
- Mrs. Henehan     Mrs. McCarthy     other students     teachers
- other adults in the building
- Other \_\_\_\_\_

Is there anything else you would like us to know about your experience at SMS so far?

**An Action Research Study:**

**CHAPTER 10**

***In the Face of Standardization: The Challenges  
and Realities of Building a Program that  
Attracts and Stabilizes Highly Mobile Students***

**Sabrina Hodges**

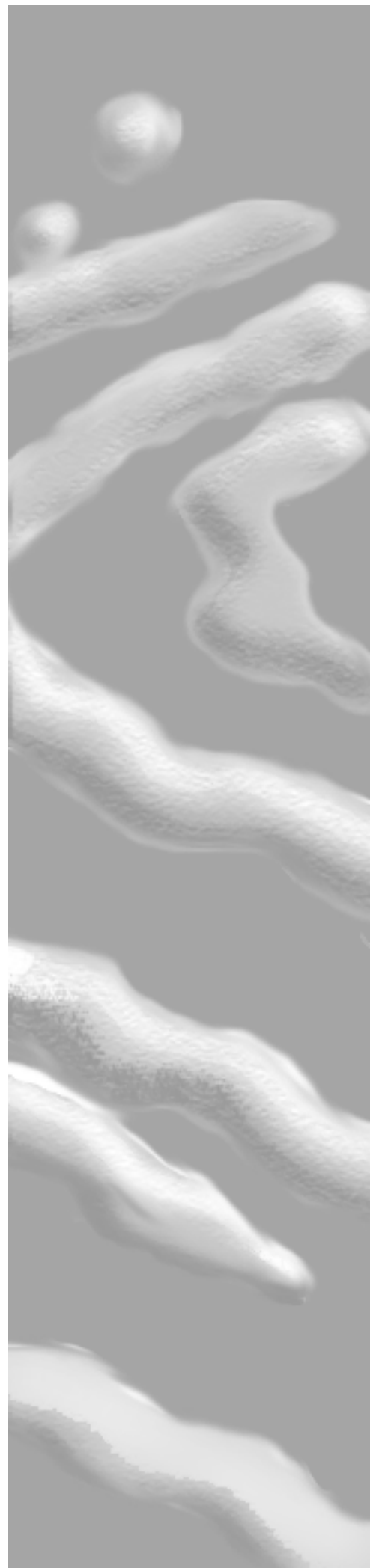
**Social Worker**

**PS1 Charter School**

**Karla Haas-Moskowitz**

**Principal**

**PS1 Charter School**



*P.S.1 witnesses cases where students, who live traumatized lives and frequently run from academic or social-emotional challenges, leave the school. This is particularly heartbreaking because some of these students are finding success for the first time in their lives at our school, but they leave despite this success (or because of it through habitual self-sabotage) because we surmise that it is more comfortable to leave than to confront the discomfort and work to remedy the situation.*

## **The Nature and Politics of Charter Schools**

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In Colorado, a legislative act authorizes public schools to respond to the concerns and educational needs of underserved populations through charter schools. However, individual charter schools hold different interpretations of the definition of underserved or at-risk populations. Some public charter schools define “underserved” as gifted and talented students, others focus on “at-risk” youth—those who struggle in school for a variety of reasons and are “at-risk” of dropping out of school, still others target students who are identified with special needs or have Individual Educational Programs or I.E.P.s. In addition, some charter schools express their responsiveness by developing curriculum and programming to address the unique needs of students based on race, culture, and socio-economics as Afro-centric and Latino schools, schools for the homeless, and schools for gay and lesbian youth.

The political underpinnings of the charter movement are an important consideration. The curriculum and assessment strategies that develop within any particular charter school can be representative of that charter school community’s expressed belief system and the related prescribed educational methodology. In other words, a charter school can be the manifestation of a specific ad hoc movement, where the school is a vehicle to express a particular educational agenda. The school can also hold a specific intention to align with the expressed, or potentially unexpressed, need or political agenda of a particular identified population that desires a unique educational intervention. Because of this dynamic, one can find everything from schools that identify with Core Knowledge and Back to Basics agendas, Experiential/Constructivist approaches, Montessori and Waldorf

philosophies, Expeditionary Learning, Science and Technology-Based curricula, and curricular designs that support the education of ADHD children. These schools are as diverse as the populations served, making the charter school world a controversial one as well as a dynamic and ever-evolving one.

### **Background: P.S.1 and its Evolution**

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P.S.1 is the oldest charter school in Denver. It is presently in its ninth year of operation. It began with a student population of 60 fifth through 12th grade students; it currently has an enrollment of over 350 students, ages 11-21. I believe that the school responded to the needs of students whose personal, social, and academic needs not met at their neighborhood schools as well as to serve as a model for school reform.

P.S.1 offers an alternative to students who desire a more active and engaging learning environment, where they can participate in learning outside the walls of a classroom to construct the knowledge that they would need to grow personally and intellectually as well as to be able to effectively serve their community. In its beginning stages of development, P.S.1 drew a predominantly white, middle class population. It also enrolled and served a disproportionate number of students with special needs including several who had the type of severe need that might place them in a special program or classroom in another school (autism, Down syndrome, cerebral palsy, traumatic brain injury).

P.S.1 still serves a diverse population with a 25% of the students identified with I.E.P.s, serving between 75-90 students on the school's caseload. The national average is 10%. Thirteen percent of these students have emotional disabilities; this is very high proportionately, as 8% of students with I.E.P.s nationally are emotionally disabled (E.D.) and 18% of the school's special education population have an E.D. designation. P.S.1's diversity, in terms of race, ethnicity, socio-economics, and other factors has substantially increased and the school has become a "minority-majority" school with no one race significantly more predominant. The school serves an average of 35% Anglos, 34% Latinos, 25% African Americans, 1%

Asian or Pacific Islander and 5% American Indians, as well as a critical number of students who identify themselves as gay, lesbian, and transgender students who are homeless, and those referred through social service agencies. In past years, free and reduced lunch statistics have ranged from 32%-45%. We find this statistic to be unreliable, as many families are reluctant to submit the qualifying paperwork. In addition, the numbers are misleading because we are not a neighborhood school and our demographics do not represent a specific residential area within Denver. We draw from all over the metro area from more affluent urban and suburban neighborhoods to areas that represent the working poor or impoverished citizens.

P.S.1's stated vision is to *be a community of compassionate and contributing members who are informed and aware, healthy and happy and have a passion for life-long learning*. The school's mission is to use our city as a classroom in order to reinforce qualities within the learner that will help them be more capable to thrive and to contribute within a diverse world. We hope to accomplish this simultaneously with our strengthening of the caliber of our urban core. In other words, we want our students to be good people, well-informed citizens, collaborative, cooperative, creative, and able to contribute to and improve their community, the City and County of Denver. The intent is to prepare students through literacy and character development, in and out of the classroom, locally and globally, collectively, and individually.

In has been a relatively rapid evolution at P.S.1 from a small school of primarily white middle class families seeking an experiential setting to a school community serving over 350 diverse students. Our population is getting older. The school used to serve 5th through 12th grade, primarily 9 to 10 year olds to 17 year olds. Now, we see a reduction of incoming middle school students, elimination of the fifth grade, and an actual decrease in the numbers of sixth and seventh graders. The majority of our incoming middle school students are now 8th grade students. Many of these children are lacking in literacy, credits, and social skills. A growing number of these students have been expelled, or at least been asked to leave their previous school. The vast majority of our students are now high school age, with an

increasing number being 16 years of age and older who are lacking in academic credit and need to “catch up” significantly to be able to graduate before they turn 21.

## Assumptions

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I entered as principal of P.S.1 Charter School in 1999, with almost a quarter of a century of experiences in classrooms serving preschool through university-aged students. I worked within and coordinated programs that served diverse populations including those identified with multiple handicaps or whose native language was not English. I also worked with students who were at-risk of dropping out of school or who removed from their previous educational programs through negotiation and/or formal suspension and expulsion. As teacher and administrator, I view the purpose of public schooling as a political one; it is a forum and process to create and nurture freedom through literacy development and dialogue. I saw the mission of public schools as the instrument of social change as well as the vehicle to *all* students.

As a witness to P.S.1’s significant demographic shift, I embraced it as an opportunity. I believed that it better serves our school to use our vision and mission to guide our instructional methodology, rather than influence our student selection. In the past, P.S.1 through a formal application process and intentional marketing campaign strove to represent itself as a place where experiential learners could show their self-direction through project-based learning. Instead, I hoped to represent our school to the community as a public educational organization that *uses* experiential learning and *teaches* self-direction to *all* students, no matter how diverse, unempowered, marginalized, or hard-to-serve. As a result, as a school of choice, it was not surprising that we attracted a growing number of families who are in search of an alternative. Sometimes they came to us through an empowered and informed choice; other times, more frequently, they came to us out of desperation, seeking any place that would give the student another chance at hope for an education that worked. These latter cases, by admission, were seeking a setting that was safe, flexible, individualized, and responsive to the needs of unique learners such as themselves. We, therefore, enrolled students who exhibited behaviors and expressed

needs that may make them “hard to serve” as well as “underserved”. Rather than discourage the enrollment of these populations of students, or “weed” out those who may not be able to make it in an experiential, self-directed, and project-based setting, I believed it was ethical, as well as reality-based, to embrace the opportunity to serve these students. This type of education is liberating to the students, as well as to the community where the student resides.

We stand by our unique school vision, mission, and educational practice as the best and most appropriate for *all* students primarily due to our interpretation of a public school mandate and commitment to what we believe is right. This also expresses our ethical stance as well as our accountability to the laws of our land that protect young people from educational discrimination. Our approach, however, also invites the challenging reality that we, by the nature of our unique existence, attract, perhaps with intention, extremely hard-to-serve students due to their distinctive qualities and circumstances that drew them to the school in the first place. These qualities include lack of academic credit (some come with no credit at all, even though they approach adulthood), documentation of turbulent histories of struggle with adults and peers, records that reflect poor school attendance (i.e. significant gaps in attendance, truancy, evidence of social promotion rather than movement based on skill development). In addition, other factors include police records (misdemeanor to felony), drug and alcohol involvement, evidence of unique learning style, lack of literacy development, low-self esteem, clinical depression, trauma, mental illness, identifiable disabilities (learning, cognitive, emotional, physical), low socio-economic status, and homelessness. All of these factors contribute to another characteristic of our population: high mobility or transience.

P.S.1 is a school of choice. We are, therefore, not surprised when we are “chosen” for a variety of reasons. Through Open House enrollment sessions and other means (pamphlets, mailings, web site development), the school hopes to educate and support the community of interested families to make a well-informed choice. Because we already have the propensity to enroll highly mobile students, we do not want to increase the chances of families enrolling and then leaving dissatisfied because P.S.1 did not turn out to be the school they imagined.

It is important to note, that P.S.1 has grown in popularity, especially over the last four years, as a school of choice and a school of referral. Students and their families choose P.S.1 because they are looking for qualities more representative of their preference for an educational setting. These include a smaller school, a more dynamic school, and a more individualized and compassionate setting. Also, they seek a safer school, a more challenging and academically rigorous school, a more individualized and supportive school, a school closer to their home, a school where the student will be happier, a school that will be more inclusive of parents, a more flexible and forgiving setting, and overall a fresh start for the students. Students receive referrals to P.S.1 from counselors, therapists, community advocates, school administrators, probation officers, mentors, and advocacy agencies for specific populations (i.e. American Indian Agencies, Urban League, I Have a Dream Foundation, churches). Some students come to the school because their friends come to the school. Some come to the school because they have faced expulsion; the district refers some students to P.S.1 as an alternative to the district's expulsion school.

### **Observations of Mobility at P.S.1**

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As we examined the population dynamics and demographics of P.S.1, mobility became a critical issue to study and understand. Students with a history of high mobility were choosing P.S.1, and these students, at times, inevitably chose to leave P.S.1. Our school, therefore, was facing the challenge of enrolling and serving students who were highly mobile and behaved as such. We could assume that the presence of high mobility in some students' lives is a contributing factor and/or a product of their struggle in school. In addition, despite P.S.1's extensive interventions and comprehensive services, some students exit P.S.1 in the middle or at the end of the school year in search for something better. Anecdotally, we observed that some families had a history of short stays at the schools that their child attended, including ours. We labeled these families as "school shoppers", people who found comfort, safety, and accountability by frequently moving to new school

sites, in search of the perfect fit, or simply in response to a situation that arose where it felt better to leave the school than to try to change or mediate the situation. P.S.1 also witnessed cases where students, who live traumatized lives and frequently run from academic or social-emotional challenges, left the school. This was particularly heartbreaking because some of these students were finding success for the first time in their lives at our school, but they left despite this success (or because of it through habitual self-sabotage) because, we surmised, it was more comfortable to leave than to confront the discomfort and work to remedy the situation.

Within our community, family dynamics affected mobility in an increasing rate. In many cases, families' highly mobile lives as citizens translated to high mobility for their children at school. Students whose parents divorced during their tenure at the school sometimes moved to a new location and transferred to a school closer to the custodial parent. Some students' parents were incarcerated or deceased and extended family members were now the primary caregivers, including grandparents, aunts or uncles, and older siblings. A number of students lived temporarily in alternative housing such as crisis centers, detention facilities, foster care, residential childcare facilities, or emergency shelters. These situations significantly affected whether the student remained at P.S.1.

Socio-economics played a role in the mobility rate of our school. As the effects of the recent recession became more widespread, some families chose to relocate to find work and pulled their child from the school. There were times when they returned to the school the following year, usually after school began, to reenroll when the job search did not result in permanent satisfactory employment and the family returned "home". Students and their families who were or had become homeless often ended up leading transient lives. They moved from motel to motel or in and out of different homes belonging to a variety of relatives and friends. Some lived in cars or shelters. Some older students lived with the families of boy and girlfriends. These circumstances created disruption to the schooling of the children involved. We also recognized that increased trauma and transience in the students' personal lives encouraged stability in their education, as the families saw school as the only safe and consistent influence in the children's lives. In some cases, as the

student's life outside of school filled with inconsistencies and disruptions, his or her life at school was routine and predictable.

### **P.S.1 and COPAR**

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It was advantageous timing that P.S.1 was included in a statewide study to consider mobility on a quantitative and qualitative level. In order to continue to develop responsive programming and effective interventions for students, as well as to address accountability issues around academic achievement, attendance, and continuation/graduation, it became critical that we evaluate our community with greater depth and breadth. The current mandated measurement of student and school progress centers on the doctrines of No Child Left Behind, including the Colorado Student Assessment Program (CSAP) and Annual Yearly Progress (AYP). This standardized approach uses a criteria and methodology that does not consider the unique demographics and educational philosophy of our school (or any school, for that matter). Historically, the P.S.1 staff has been able to describe the nature of our community intuitively, viscerally, and anecdotally with some reliance on a growing database of quantifiable statistics. With standardized assessment becoming the government's primary approach to evaluate and communicate about schools, we needed to be able to consider alternative indicators that better describe our school's population and evaluate progress in a way to measure our success proactively and authentically. NCLB legislation leaves little room for the qualitative, the narrative, or the "out of the box" thinking needed for school reform. NCLB's limited and narrow-minded quantitative analysis has the great potential to misrepresent and miscommunicate about a student and a specific school, especially one as unique and diverse as P.S.1. It would be to our advantage to develop a program of assessment that will better represent the nature and progress of our community and of our programming. It would also be interesting to see if the correlations we identify and assumptions we develop intuitively, philosophically, and experientially survive the scrutiny of more data-driven processes.

## Data Collection: the Challenge and Process

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Since its inception, P.S.1 has recognized that its unique scheduling, assessment, and communication needs fall outside the parameters of SASI, the networked database for student information in the district. A teacher at the school, Eric Messerli, who is now the assistant principal, developed and maintained a unique database using FileMaker Pro that is flexible enough to manage and communicate information on each student in a very individualized manner as well as to support systems and schedules very unique to our project-based school. Eventually, we saw the need to fit ourselves into SASI for most data management, but our FileMaker database works the best, with SASI support, to begin compiling, analyzing, sorting, and communicating our data about our students.

We used the strength and core of our school, relationships and advisement, as the vehicle to gather the data. We created a section on our database with different “buttons” that identified areas of information we were hoping to gather. We asked that advisors conduct personal interviews with their 16-18 advisees and their families using a written guide to assist them in asking the questions and utilizing buttons with drop down menus for data entry. For example, we asked for the number of schools that the student attended in the last three years prior to enrolling in P.S.1, the relationship to the primary caregiver, the status of housing (mobile, foster, detention, live with person who is not a relative), attitude about school, and the reason for choosing P.S.1. In addition we collected the following data: behavioral history (i.e. suspensions, expulsions, court involvement), attendance history, special education data, whether or not the student attended preschool, mental or physical health issues, history of abuse (physical, sexual, and emotional), social service involvement, drug or alcohol use in self or family, and if the student is a parent him or herself. We also compiled some basic updated demographic information around age, sex, grade, number of siblings, current address (number of times moved in the last three years), phone, and address.

We provided ongoing support and training for the advisors to use the questionnaire guide and database to collect information. The advisor asked clarifying

questions and relied on their relationships with their advisees and families to make sure to collect reliable information. The interview process itself allowed for increased relationship building between advisors and students as well as introduced the possibility of creating class-wide curriculum around this data collection project. For example, the advisor may choose to discuss with the entire class some of the interesting dynamics around changing schools, housing situations, or life with grandmother, etc. Of course, the advisor would have to maintain an adequate level of safety, appropriateness, and confidentiality around discussing these issues, but bringing up commonalities and differences that exist with different students' situations can be part of a strong community-building approach to education.

### **Stability and Achievement: Portraits of Success through the Lens of a Social Worker**

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The mission of school social work in Denver Public Schools is “providing diverse, culturally competent support services to schools, students, parents and communities. These services seek to assure all students are emotionally and mentally fit, safe, secure, drug free in their educational settings, and attending regularly.” At P.S.1, we manifest this mission with as much authenticity and grace as our limited resources allow us to muster. Student advisors, special education teachers, and even administrative assistants employ pseudo social work approaches to meet the needs of our increasingly challenging population. We have a district social worker one and a half days a week to gate keep social/emotional assessments for special education. This worker does not engage in clinical settings with students, threat assessments, family referrals, or crisis interventions. P.S.1’s social work services exist via a teacher turned MSW graduate intern. Through this position, I have developed an intimate knowledge of our community. Although we continuously grapple with limited resources, we magically serve the bewildered students that find their way through our doors. Often, it is through our thoughtful programming and services that we witness students’ success unfurl.

Denisha (not her real name) was an African-American student who attended our satellite program for transient students, P.S.1 @ The Spot. Upon beginning the 2003/2004 school year it was obvious that her often-unpleasant attitude reflected her painful experiences in traditional schools. Her mobility was high due mostly to transitional housing and guardianship. Struggling with stability, she was unable to build relationships in traditional schools, and due to her “attitude”, she often found herself in trouble. Actually, by the end of her junior year in high school, Denisha had found herself in four different high schools. Expelled from a public alternative school, she had mixed feelings about her lack of academic success. This, coupled with her transient lifestyle and being responsible for getting her five nieces and nephews to elementary school each morning, finally led her to drop out of high school. After abandoning public education for over six months, a friend recommended our school, and after enrolling in P.S.1, Denisha had minimal problems recommitting herself to her education. Aside from the occasional tardy and smacking on the teeth, Denisha built relationships nicely. She has been the recipient of several P.S.1 Vision Awards, a participant in Denver’s Career Education Center (CEC) Child Care course, and engaged in a semester long internship at a local day care center. She found joy in caring for developing children, and will be graduating next winter. Her resiliency has truly been remarkable. When reflecting on her recent success, Denisha attributes it to the relationships she has built at P.S.1. She has benefited from the individualization of our program and ample support. She believes that the one-on-one help and career guidance she has received is her most noteworthy experience at P.S.1.

The P.S.1 career of Juan (not his real name) was another example of our stabilizing force. Juan came to P.S.1 in the fall of 2003. He has ADHD, a severe emotional disability, and is a survivor of childhood sexual abuse. His high rate of school mobility was due to his behavioral problems and family homelessness. At the beginning of the school year, he was a regular “visitor” to our assistant principal’s office. Witnessing Juan’s uncontrollable and often frightening behavior from the second floor balcony of our school’s atrium was a daily treat for the social worker. The scenario goes like this: Juan busts open the door to his classroom. Juan looks

back into the class and exclaims multiple profanities. Juan slams the classroom door. Juan runs across the school's commons. Math teacher removes herself from the classroom and runs after Juan. Math teacher chases Juan all the way to assistant principal Eric Messerli's office. To say the least, the seventh grader's classroom behaviors have been extremely challenging for teachers at our school. In a traditional school, these behaviors may result in confinement in a self-contained classroom or a more restrictive environment. For a student with an acute emotional disability such as Juan, one year in a residential treatment facility may cost anywhere from \$8,760 to \$17,560 and for one year in a day treatment center, the Department of Human Services may bill up to \$14,000. Juan's infractions included provoking peers, exclaiming sexually inappropriate statements and throwing projectiles across the room. It was ugly. As frustrating as it was for professionals, it was triple that for him. Friendships were nonexistent. Through the P.S.1 network approach, including the IEP team, Juan's family and community clinician, his treatment plan changed dramatically. His medication changed, a strict behavior plan began at school, and he received ongoing counseling in house. Juan set goals regarding his impulsivity and social skills. It has been rewarding to watch this young man tackle his disabilities and employ techniques to have more success in the classroom. Within four months, there was a dramatic shift in his behaviors; his behavior plan having become his closest, most intimate friend. The consequence he loathed the most? Being sent home. Simply, Juan now felt safe and nurtured in our community, and had taken on his issues in order to stay. Project and expeditionary learning fit him well. Of course, he had his struggles. However, his recent success has been breathtaking for his family and our community. At a recent staff gathering, a social studies teacher made the following comment regarding Juan: "He is not the same creature that came to us in September!" On the last day of the 2003/2004 school year, at our annual appreciation celebration, Juan will receive the "Renewed Spirit," award for his academic and personal growth.

Because of an augmentation in district referrals, our openness to affording expelled students a second chance, and our blossoming programs (Late Shift and P.S.1 @ The Spot) that serve highly mobile students, we are serving more and

younger people with significant needs. Reflecting on these two success stories allows me to communicate the true beauty of P.S.1. Perhaps Denisha and Juan were just simply ready. Perhaps they would have changed their lives around at any school. However, the voices of our students and their families propel me to deduce that the awesome success students experience in our care is very much indicative of the materials crafted into our fabric. This includes our school vision, inclusive programmatic opportunities, impeccable leadership and an admirable staff, individualizing experiences and fostering the importance of human relationship with truth, courage, and trust. However, for every student who has success, I fear there is one who flies below the radar. I grieve for the missed students, due to collective exhaustion not intention. This is the reality of our school, with a restricted budget, and serving marginalized students, including severe mental pathologies, generational poverty, familial gang-involvement, ongoing trauma, learning disabilities and discrimination. However, coupled with the smorgasbord of “issues” professionals at P.S.1 are faced with, a plethora of attributes sustain our student population: culture, critical thinking, a willingness to be venerable and open-minded, the beauty of friendships between Eastside Crips and Cheesman Park “gay” boys that make P.S.1 an enchanting school for a social worker!

## **Conclusions and Proposed Action: Overall Demographic Analysis**

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It took approximately half a year to develop the “buttons” and collect the data. Out of our 350 enrolled students, were we able to interview and log data for 205 students. In mid-May of the 2003-04 school year, the school was able to determine that four percent of our population are unaccompanied youth; 7% students live with caregivers other than biological parents (i.e. grandparents, aunts, uncles, siblings, or foster parents); three are living in shelters or crisis centers; and 49% live in single-parent homes. Thirty-three percent of our students experienced two or more homes in the last two years; 22% reported historical attendance issues; 10% are on behavior plans; 13% experienced expulsion from other schools; 6% were

involved in child protection services; 11% faced misdemeanor charges; 4% faced felony charges; and 13% faced juvenile diversion.

Eighteen percent of our students attended three or more schools in the last 2 years (not including natural transitions from feeder schools). We identified them as *highly mobile*. Of our highly mobile population, 20% came to P.S.1 because they were dissatisfied with their last school, 29% came due to disciplinary action. Twenty two percent sought an alternative school setting and moved by choice. Of these, 20% experienced homelessness in the last two years. Twenty three percent lived in three or more homes in the last two years. Twenty percent identified with special needs, 77% reported struggling academically at previous schools and found support at P.S.1, 71% experienced court involvement, 26% lived below the poverty line, and 26% had irregular attendance with 14% facing truancy hearings. Twenty-three percent of the highly mobile population experience mental health and/or emotional issues and 11% were currently on a behavior plan. Thirty-four percent of these students experienced suspension from the school because of misconduct. Only 29% were involved in any extracurricular activity.

Of the highly mobile population, P.S.1 has stabilized 63% of these students as evidenced by their consistent yearlong attendance at the school. These students received a variety of interventions including special education services, opportunities to enroll in the school's special safety net programs, flexible scheduling, and accommodation.

In addition, our school registrar ran monthly reports analyzing how many students entered and exited the school on a monthly basis; this data compared to the previous year.

When students were interviewed about what they valued at P.S.1 that did not exist in their previous schools, students overwhelmingly reported that P.S.1 offered opportunities to develop strong relationships with teachers, an advisement program, support to work at their own pace, and hands-on learning experiences. In addition, they could participate in internships, work-study, travel and community projects, and, perhaps most importantly, students found at least one caring adult in the community. Overall, teachers cared about them at P.S.1 and that is why they stayed.

Students identified outside needs that they wished the school would address as employment opportunities and transportation. Our report showed that students identified a variety of factors as obstacles to learning including personal life challenges and adversity, job demands, drug use, influence of peer groups, family and life instability, and struggles to attend regularly. When asked what services families were accessing in the community, families identified few. Those mentioned included were Urban Peak (support services for unaccompanied youth), Youth Opportunities (city-sponsored agency that offers coaching and mentorship), Steps Ahead (program through Colorado Youth at Risk that offers mentorship and training), Rainbow Alley (local non-profit supporting Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgendered, and Questioning Youth), and The Spot (a local drop-in center).

Our demographic research revealed what we already suspected. P.S.1 is not a poor school. Twenty percent of our overall population self-disclosed an income of below \$15,000 per year. Twenty-three percent made between \$16,000 and \$30,000; 39% recorded incomes of \$31,000 and \$85,000. The most influential factors in our school community related more to historic academic struggle, irregular attendance and/or truancy, mental health and emotional disabilities, the staggering number of students identified with special needs, and history of mobility. When we considered our population, several cases came to mind where a student came to P.S.1 with challenging behavioral issues, a history of high mobility with regards to school and/or home, and an income of well above poverty. Therefore, in other words, some students come to P.S.1 with many challenges that impede academic, personal, and social success at the school, but with a family that may be stable and affluent on paper. Although poverty clearly influences the student's potential for success at P.S.1, it is clearly not the determining factor to influence individual and community wide achievement and culture.

### **Proposed Action Based on Demographic Analysis**

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P.S.1's statistical analysis offered little new information to our community. Rather, it affirmed many of the dynamics that we suspected:

- P.S.1 has a significant number of students identified with special needs, of these a disproportionate amount face emotional and behavior challenges
- As a small school, our highly mobile numbers have a significant impact on our school's culture. Students with highly mobile histories show great struggle in a variety of areas from academic achievement, attendance, mental health, and ability to access services and become involved in extracurricular activities.
- Our students desire more assistance with job development and transportation.

There was some surprising information. We did not predict that the number of students who lived in homes with guardians other than biological parents was much less than we anticipated, but school staff agreed that these families, although statistically low in number, consume a disproportionate amount of the school's time and resources.

Regarding the future, P.S.1 will use these findings to create and maintain programming. We will continue to build capacity regarding special education, including staff development and training. We will work to expand our inclusion staff by one to two in the coming years. We are in the planning process of creating a special self-contained classroom to serve our students with severe emotional disabilities. This program will also interface with other transition and more vocationally oriented programs in the building that support students who struggle emotionally. In addition, we are connecting with some local and national university programs that may help us create an onsite and ongoing cohort that will train and certify our staff in special education.

We will increase programming and encouragement around after school and summer programs to increase support and intervention for the populations in our school who would benefit, but are currently not accessing, these "extracurricular" programs.

Our school's young adult population is growing significantly and so is the need for P.S.1 to increase transitional services, vocational preparation, employment coaching and job development, in addition to all post-secondary programming. We

are currently increasing our college counselor position from half time to full time to assist our upper-class men and women in their preparation for college and work. We are collaborating with the Mayor's Office of Workforce Development to create an onsite computer lab and employment counseling services to support our youth 14 and older.

P.S.1 is fulfilling its charter's commitment by reaching out and serving the hardest to serve youth in the district and beyond. In doing so, ironically it is attracting and providing outreach services to students who bring the kind of issues to the school site that will challenge its very existence and bring gloom and doom statistical scores. In an effort to understand better our school community and its challenges, we need to examine carefully and authentically the individuals who comprise our community and evaluate them in alternative ways.

This project is just the beginning of an annual evaluation that will help the school better understand itself and its place in local and national educational efforts. Ultimately, the hope is that through this community wide self-reflection and analysis, the school will better serve the young people and their families who come to P.S.1 looking for answers and looking for hope.

**An Action Research Study:**

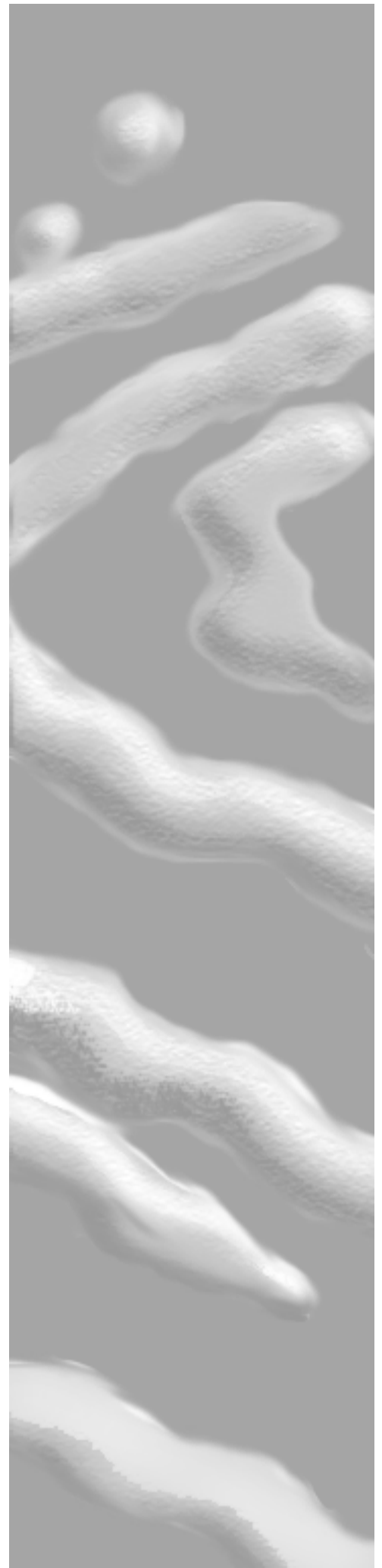
**CHAPTER 11**

***No Teen Left Behind?***

**Steve Dobo**

**Education and Employment Coordinator**

**Urban Peak**



*With such great potential inherent in these students, the need is great to create more and more effective programs to help them realize their potential.*

## **Background**

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When I started working at Urban Peak, a runaway and homeless youth shelter in Denver Colorado, two observations surprised me. One was the extraordinary academic potential of the homeless youth residing in the shelter, and the other was their lack of substantial progress in finishing their high school education. Our on-site GED lab was serving a modest number of youth, having graduated between 19-33 students annually over the past three years. Since Urban Peak serves approximately 800 homeless youth per year, this figure represented a modest 2-4 % of the population obtaining their GEDs. I also noticed youth arriving at the shelter that attended neighborhood high schools and were intent on staying in school, but within three weeks had completely dropped out of school. In addition, I met some who had attempted to enroll in high schools, but found themselves denied because they were older than the traditional high school population and would probably not be able to obtain their diplomas before age 21. Others were discouraged from enrolling having arrived at their new school mid-semester, and the school had no process for granting them credit for partial semester work. I also heard “war stories” of attempts that my predecessors had made to work with neighborhood high schools over the last couple of years to enroll our youth in their schools, but had run into walls of disinterest. It was clear that traditional neighborhood high schools were not very effective in serving the needs of homeless youth within our city.

## **How I got started**

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As I continued to meet individual homeless teenagers in these situations and heard their incredible stories, the tragedy of their situations struck me more and more. Here was a group of young people, many with the potential and the desire to succeed educationally, but with no viable avenue to complete their high school

education. As I began to comprehend the extent of the situation, and the huge loss of human potential, it became my personal passion and mission to do all I could to create opportunities for their educational success. What I envisioned was the creation of a menu of educational services designed for the unique needs of homeless youth.

As I pursued this mission, I started to meet other professionals within the community working on similar issues. I started working on a project with Alana James at the Center for Research Strategies, who was conducting research on the effect of student mobility on the educational success of homeless youth. The study would result in a position paper commissioned by Margie Milenkiewicz, the State Coordinator for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth of the Colorado Department of Education. I worked with Alana to organize focus groups of twelve homeless youth in the Urban Peak homeless shelter and twelve youth receiving services at our urban drop-in center, the Spot, that wanted to give input concerning their past school mobility and their experiences with school. From a review of literature and the results of these focus groups, Alana gathered evidence to suggest that successful educational strategies for highly mobile homeless teenagers share three key attributes: ease of access to educational services, flexible instructional strategies and an inclusive and welcoming school culture. As it turned out, these findings represented an ideal conceptual framework for me to judge the effectiveness of any program claiming to serve homeless youth, and a framework to use in creating new, more effective, educational strategies.

In working with Alana and Margie, I became aware of a similar project that they were planning to study the effects of mobility on the educational success of students. With the Colorado Participatory Action Research Project (CO PAR), they were in the process of recruiting an administrator and a teacher from ten different schools across the state of Colorado to participate in a yearlong research study on this issue. As I joined this project, the initial meetings in August and October were very informative, and I started to recognize the connection between the problems that traditional schools were having in educating highly mobile youth and the problems that the schools are having in educating homeless teens. Within these first few

sessions, the class began to conceptualize and frame its research in terms of the previously discussed three domains defining successful educational practices for highly mobile students. As participants in the project, we were all learning about the process of action research and our responsibility was to apply these principles to a salient problem in our workplace. It was at this time that I decided to write the current paper focusing on my efforts to understand the educational needs of highly mobile homeless teenagers, along with my attempts at creating a viable educational continuum for this population.

### **Beginning the Action Research: My data**

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To gain a greater understanding of the educational status of the clients that Urban Peak was serving, I instituted a new education intake form that gathered data on the last grade completed by all youth accessing services. From this data collected over the last twelve months, 277 youth received education and employment services at Urban Peak. Of these 277 youth, 18% arrived at Urban Peak already having received their high school diploma, 19% arrived having completed their GED, 29% finished 11<sup>th</sup> grade, 18% finished 10<sup>th</sup> grade, 10% finished 9<sup>th</sup> grade, 5% finished 8<sup>th</sup> grade, and 1% finished 7<sup>th</sup> grade or below. This data indicates that 82% of the youth dropped out of traditional school environments, and that 63% of the youth entering the shelter had a need to access educational services to complete their high school education.

### **First Steps**

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My first step in creating a continuum of educational services was to beef up our current educational program involving GED preparation services. After having limited initial success, I hired an experienced GED teacher, and within the first year, we had increased our number of graduates from between 19-35 to over 80 students. Given the phenomenal success of this GED program, I decided to evaluate it as a model in terms of the above-mentioned CO PAR framework of successful

educational practices. Located within the shelter only a few feet from the residential dormitories, all youth have easy physical access to the classroom. The instructional program is completely flexible, so that students can stay thirty minutes per day or eight hours per day working on their GED depending on their motivation and attention span. They can come to class every day or once a week, or they can even disappear for six months and then return to work more consistently on their GED. The teacher operates the classroom based on respect, so that each youth is welcome and included in the room, regardless of age, gender, sexual orientation, race or educational level. Some enter the program reading at elementary grade levels, while others are ready to pass the GED immediately with a limited amount of refreshing. Teaching emphasizes a personalized approach and relationship with each youth. The success of this program is demonstrated by the large number of GEDs received within a year, and also the evidence that over 73% of the youth that pass one of the five subtests of the GED go on to complete their entire GED successfully. Within our CO PAR framework, the GED program certainly excels in all three key categories of easy access, flexible instruction and welcoming culture.

### **Unmet Needs**

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The GED program has clearly been successful, but over this last year it has become more and more apparent to me that there are youth that were not being adequately served by this sole educational option. In fact, in focus groups, when asked whether they would rather get their GED or high school diplomas, the vast majority of students indicate that they would rather obtain their diplomas. As it turns out, the majority of these youth enrolled in our on-site GED program by default for reasons of convenience, and more importantly because of the inability of the youth to be successful in accessing high school diploma programs.

As I continued to explore the educational needs of youth served by the agency, I began to focus my attention on teens that arrived at the shelter with only a few credits remaining to obtain their diploma. I have found success over the years working with at-risk youth by starting with small projects, creating a greater chance

of success. My thought was that if I could make public high school work for homeless youth with five or less credits remaining to graduate, then I could learn and build on this success and tackle tougher issues. Over a six-month period, I worked with a handful of youth in this situation, trying to help them finish up at their previous high school. What I soon discovered was that even this small task was a difficult one. With the time it took to obtain school transcripts, contact school personnel, obtain Individual Education Plans, and coordinate the help of district homeless liaisons, the youth in all of the situations had moved out of the shelter before the educational process resolved. I found it frustrating to do that much coordination work, along with getting a number of district personnel involved, only to have the youth disappear before I could devise a solution. In addition, each of these youth happened to be enrolled in different schools within different school districts and counties, with each process involving the coordination of a completely different set of school staff. I soon realized the complexity of this issue, given that there are six counties serving Metro Denver, and another handful of counties surrounding the metro area. Youth could arrive a few credits short of graduating from any of these schools within these county school districts, and I would be in the position of coordinating the solution to the problem with a different group of school personnel. In other words, it was going to be very difficult to build on any success I might find with one particular youth at one particular school.

## **Transitions**

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At the same time that I was working with youth short a few credits from graduating, the agency started discussing collaborating with an innovative charter school in Denver called PS1. The principal of PS1, Karla Haas-Moskowitz, was interested in serving Urban Peak youth, and boosting the enrollment of the school up to its cap. Urban Peak had recently merged with a nighttime urban drop-in center for youth called The Spot. The facility remained unused during the day, and seemed ideal for a satellite location for PS1. Since opening in 1996, PS1 has been very effective at serving at-risk youth, and we felt that an educational program created

under PS1's direction and philosophy would be a nice fit for both Spot youth and Urban Peak homeless youth. Because the satellite school was located within a few miles of the shelter and accessible by bus lines and light rail, we thought that the school would draw a good mix from both facilities. Although proving a wonderful success, and enrolling double the number of the youth that we initially projected, there were surprisingly few Urban Peak homeless youth that ended up enrolling. Although we continued with this collaboration with PS1 at the Spot, we realized that we needed to continue to look for other avenues for Urban Peak youth to obtain their high school diplomas.

Given our lack of success in helping youth finish their diplomas at their neighborhood high schools, and our relative success with the satellite school with PS1 Charter School, we decided to approach PS1 with our initial issue of helping homeless teenagers that are short a few credits finish their diplomas and continue on to post-secondary programs. When approached again, Karla was willing to take on the challenge, so we created the High School Transitions Program. The program planned to utilize the existing PS1 resources, including the regular day program, late shift program, post-secondary options program, special education resources and the PS1 satellite school at the Spot, in order to create individualized educational transition plans for homeless teenagers. Currently, one youth is an apprentice with the PS1 shop teacher, and attends construction classes at Red Rocks Community College in order to finish two credits. Another is in a work-study experience and transcribing his experience working at the Hyatt, along with meeting with the late shift advisor to finish one-half credit. A third started night shift classes each evening in order to finish 9.5 credits for graduation. Additionally, a handful of students with few or no high school credits that have a desire to complete their diploma instead of GED are now enrolling at the regular PS1 day program and the PS1 at the Spot satellite school. These students previously had settled for getting their GED. These students go to class during the day, and receive additional support services of case management and employment counseling from Urban Peak staff during the off school hours. The success of High School Transitions speaks strongly to the need for educational programs, which combine once again the three documented aspects

of successful education programs: easy access, program flexibility and a welcoming culture. The program can be immediately accessed by any homeless youth who is short high school credits, has flexible program elements, which are customized for each student's needs, and is housed in a school environment totally accepting of homeless teenagers.

### **Action Research with Youth**

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Since Urban Peak operates within a youth leadership framework, I viewed it as critical to augment my research with the opinions of the homeless youth that we were attempting to serve. Through a review of the literature on homeless youth, along with readings about innovative school programs and an understanding of the CO PAR framework, I was beginning to conceptualize program elements that I thought would be successful with homeless teens. To test the desirability of these educational program elements, in the winter of 2004 we administered an online survey to over fifty homeless teens that were clients of Urban Peak educational services. Along with demographic questions, I asked the youth to rate 64 potential characteristics of high school programs in order to get an indication of a school design that they felt would be beneficial to their success. In reviewing these elements, the vast majority fit the categories within the CO PAR educational practice model. Over 50% of youth confirmed that these three types of program elements are either extremely important or somewhat important to include in a high school program designed to meet the needs of unaccompanied homeless teenagers.

### **Conclusion**

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In summary, my journey to create new programs to fit within an expanded educational continuum for unaccompanied homeless youth has produced a number of options for youth across the three domains of educational practice. The PS1 at the Spot program has been successful for some students, but has lacked the extreme ease of access needed by homeless teenagers residing at the Urban Peak shelter.

Traditional high schools have proven lacking in all three categories, and have been unable to meet the educational needs of homeless teens short credits of graduating. The High School Transitions Program continues to expand and work effectively for homeless teens, because of the customization of individual learning plans, which fulfill all three aspects necessary for a successful program. The GED program works well for a number of youth, but should not be the only option for homeless youth wanting to complete their high school education, especially those only lacking a handful of credits to graduate. Finally, unaccompanied homeless teenagers are reporting that they would rather be able to obtain their diplomas, and indicate that they want programs based on the three key elements identified within the CO PAR framework.

### **Future Directions**

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Given this evidence, in pursuit of my mission, I am embarking on several new educational projects that will ideally adhere more closely to the CO PAR model of easy access, flexible programming and welcoming culture. In the first project, Urban Peak recently received a grant from the Colorado Department of Education to research the successful practices of traditional high schools to engage homeless teenagers in educational programs. Initial research has identified two promising approaches: welcoming centers that transition youth slowly into the culture and academics of high school, and case managers to follow highly mobile youth from school to school to lessen the effects of school moves. Educators from across the state of Colorado and the nation are sending in information on innovative programs and practices, and we plan a pilot project this fall within a local traditional high school to test some of these practices.

The other project that shows promise involves the development of a charter high school specifically designed to meet the needs of highly mobile and homeless youth. Using the class model and the results of the high school design survey, we will incorporate elements deemed important by the youth. We will also build upon the success of the fore-mentioned educational endeavors in order to create a high

school diploma program with ease of access, flexible instructional strategy, and an inclusive and welcoming school culture. An educational project administrator has been hired, and the charter application will be written this summer, with a projected school opening of summer 2005. I anticipate that we will learn much from this new project, and plan to share these lessons with the local high schools to improve their educational outcomes with homeless youth. With such great potential inherent in these students, the need is great to create more and more effective programs to help them realize their potential.

Urban Peak is a homeless and runaway youth shelter serving 800 youth annually between the ages of fifteen and twenty-one. The agency provides a continuum of comprehensive services to this population, including street outreach, shelter services, educational counseling, employment counseling, case management, mental health services, and housing. For additional information contact: [stevedobo@hotmail.com](mailto:stevedobo@hotmail.com)

APPENDIX: CHAPTER 11

School Design Survey- Combined Positives

	Categ	Comb Pos	Ext Imp	Some Imp	No Ver Imp	Not Imp	Comb Neg
Internships at local businesses	F	100	93	7	0	0	0
Test out of certain classes to get credit	F	100	79	21	0	0	0
Work-study to earn money while learning	F	100	79	21	0	0	0
College Prep activities (college tours, scholarship info, etc.)	F	100	79	21	0	0	0
Flexible schedule	F	96	67	29	2	2	4
Teachers that really know the subject areas	C	96	73	23	2	2	4
Learning while doing	F	94	63	31	4	2	6
Welcoming environment for all no matter what race, gender, or sexual orientation	C	92	74	18	4	4	8
Access to computers and internet	F	92	77	15	2	6	8
Extra in-depth help in reading and/or math	F	92	59	33	6	2	8
Caring teachers that you can relate to	C	91	60	31	6	4	10
Vocational classes (Carpentry, electrical, plumbing, etc.)	F	91	60	31	8	0	8
Open enrollment so that you can start school at any time	A	90	65	25	6	2	8
Finishing diploma quickly (3 months- 1 year)	F	90	63	27	4	4	8
Chance to choose classes to take	F	90	59	31	4	6	10
Evening classes available	F	90	55	35	8	2	10
Testing out of certain classes to get credit	F	90	43	47	2	8	10
Music	C	89	71	18	10	2	12
Option to get a GED on-site	F	88	59	29	4	8	12
High school and college credit at the same time	F	88	61	27	8	4	12
Online classes to obtain credit	F	87	54	33	6	8	14
Art	C	86	71	15	10	4	14
Help with getting jobs	F	85	71	14	14	0	14
Help with making career decisions	F	85	64	21	14	0	14
Tutoring	F	85	58	27	4	10	14
Outdoor education activities (hiking, rock climbing, camping, etc.)	C	83	60	23	13	4	17
After-school activities	C	83	48	35	6	12	18
Start of classes later in the morning	F	83	46	37	12	4	16
One on one teaching	C	82	65	17	12	6	18
Rewards for educational achievements	C	82	51	31	6	12	18
Small class size (15 students or less per class)	C	82	49	33	10	6	16
On-site childcare for the children of students	F	82	47	35	8	10	18
Weekend classes available	F	81	48	33	10	10	20
Chance to have a mentor	C	80	53	27	14	6	20
Small group teaching	C	80	49	31	14	6	20
On-site housing at the school or students to live in while they attend school	A	80	41	39	18	2	20
Graduation ceremony	C	79	58	21	8	13	21
School lunches	C	79	50	29	21	0	21
Credit for volunteering	F	78	57	21	7	14	21
On-site health clinic	F	78	44	34	16	6	22
Study groups of students	C	78	37	41	14	8	22
Field trips to other states or countries	C	77	56	21	15	8	23
Shortened school day	F	77	50	27	12	12	24
Credit for writing about life experiences	F	77	42	35	12	10	22
Welcoming center to help students transition back to school	C	77	44	33	19	4	23
School located at or close to Urban Peak shelter	A	77	37	40	8	15	23
On-site mental health counseling	F	76	45	31	8	16	24
Partial credit for class work	F	76	35	41	12	12	24

*APPENDIX: CHAPTER 11*

**School Design Survey- Combined Positives Cont...**

	<b>Categ</b>	<b>Comb Pos</b>	<b>Ext Imp</b>	<b>Some Imp</b>	<b>No Ver Imp</b>	<b>Not Imp</b>	<b>Comb Neg</b>
Changing classes to learn subjects from different teachers	C	74	35	39	14	12	26
School located at or close to an Urban Peak housing program	A	73	35	38	13	13	26
Interactive classroom discussions	C	72	35	37	16	10	26
Student council	C	71	64	7	14	14	28
Small school size (less than 300 students)	C	70	36	34	18	12	30
Opportunity to have parents / family involved	C	66	35	31	15	19	34
Peer counseling	C	66	35	31	18	16	34
On-site drug and alcohol counseling	F	64	33	31	14	20	34
Full year schedule with school also over the summer	F	53	29	24	24	24	48
Learning all subjects from one teacher in one classroom	C	50	23	27	35	15	50
Teacher lectures	xc	46	22	24	32	22	54