

**Learning by Choice and Leading by Example:  
Teachers understanding homelessness and high mobility within their schools**

**Forest Park, Georgia**

**By**

**N. Lee Daily, PhD, Professor**

**Lori Elliot, PhD, Professor**

**Kristen Hall, Teacher**

**Rebecca Harrison, Principal**

**Jenna Lockhart, Teacher**

**Jessica Pennington, Community Consultant**

**Abstract:** This report tracks efforts to implement positive, lasting change in instructional practices at the elementary school level and college level. It documents the development of graduate courses for teachers, which cover issues such as, poverty, high mobility, truancy and students who drop out of school. Chronicled are actions taken to create a welcoming school atmosphere for new children and their families and to increase awareness of issues that impact student success.

**Key Words:** Access to Resources; After School Program; Attendance/Enrollment; Community (Awareness of Homelessness/High Mobility); Elementary School; Flexible Instruction; Poverty; Professional Development for Teachers; Surveys; Transitional Housing/Shelters; and Welcoming School Climate

**School and WBPB Profile**

School: Edmonds Elementary School

Grade levels: Pre-K – 5

College involved: Georgia State University

School District: Clayton County Schools

City/Town: Forest Park State: GA

Website address for the school: <http://www.clayton.k12.ga.us/schools/107/>

School enrollment size for 2006-07: approximately 476

Number of students experiencing homelessness/high mobility at your school in 2006-07: over 200

Number of educators/teachers involved in 2006-07 WBPB projects/actions: 3

Number of administrators involved in 2006-07 WBPB projects/actions: 1

Number of parents/families involved in 2006-07 WBPB projects/actions: 60

Percent of students eligible for free/reduced lunch: 77.7%

Title I School: yes

Annual Yearly Progress Rating: Met

Number of public agencies involved in 2006-07 WBPB projects/actions: 3 (Edmonds Elementary School, Georgia State University)

Number of community members involved in 2006-07 WBPB projects/actions: over 40 (primarily public school teachers and non-profit administrators)

Number of non-profits involved in 2006-07 WBPB projects/actions: 2 (Truancy Intervention Project)

High school graduation rate: 76%

Population size of area based on current census data: Metro-Atlanta area (includes Clayton County)

over 500,000  
NCSE = [www.schoolengagement.org](http://www.schoolengagement.org)

### **Our Interest in the WBPD Program**

Lee and I (Lori Elliot) are teachers of teachers. That is, we teach graduate level courses to prepare teachers to work in multicultural and economically diverse urban and suburban classrooms. Our current teaching and research is focused on helping teachers understand the concepts of critical pedagogy. Beyond skills and subjects, we are concerned that they use the power of their teaching to teach for positive change in their communities, state, nation, and world. We believe strongly that in order for them to understand this concept, we must lead by example. To do this, we have established a partnership with a non-profit, after-school program within an Atlanta community close to the university in which our teachers tutor children in the program. As part of their coursework, the teachers tutor children in reading who are at high risk of dropping out of school, learning how to teach reading while simultaneously contributing to the academic needs of the children in the program. Through our community based involvement we are able to make a positive difference for children while teaching teachers about literacy and the complexity of the children's lives.

Our research led us to the website and offices of the National Center for School Engagement (NCSE) in Colorado. During a visit to Denver, we asked to meet with Judith Martinez to learn more about NCSE's work and she described the Web-Based Professional Development (WBPD) program led by Dr. Alana James. We knew we wanted to become involved in some way, along with two of our graduate teachers who were also passionate about this topic. This led us to submit a team proposal to participate in the Web-Based Professional Development online community for the 2006-2007 academic year.

### **Description of Our WBPD Team**

Georgia State University is an urban, public university located in downtown Atlanta. Our program is focused on preparing graduate level teachers to teach in multi-cultural settings. Lee primarily teaches courses for people who are changing careers into teaching and becoming certified in Middle Grades Language Arts and Social Studies Education. Lori teaches experienced teachers who are returning to the university for a master's degree in language and literacy and preparing to be literacy leaders in their schools. Before teaching at the university, we both taught in the public school system. Lee as a high school history

teacher for 30 years and Lori as a special education teacher for 9 years. We have always been most concerned for those public school students at the margins of school and society.

Jenna Lockhart and Kristen Hall are teachers in Forest Park, Georgia, a close-in community within the shadows of the city of Atlanta. Jenna teaches 2<sup>nd</sup> grade and Kristen teaches Pre-Kindergarten in a Title 1 school in which more than 90% of the students qualify for the free or reduced lunch program and whose families are highly mobile. During the first three months of the academic year, over 60 families moved into or out of Edmonds Elementary School. Both Jenna and Kristen chose to teach at Edmonds because of their passion to understand and contribute to the lives of children and families in poverty. They are both also enrolled in the graduate literacy program at Georgia State University and have participated in a course in which they tutored at-risk children in the after-school program.

Jenna and Kristen were enrolled in the literacy course the same semester that we learned about the National Center for School Engagement and the Web-Based Professional Development Program. We asked if they, with their principal, would like to form a team to learn more about issues of homelessness and high mobility. They immediately said yes. We also asked one of our partners with the literacy program, Ms. Jessica Pennington, if she would also like to join us, given her extensive knowledge and work with the Truancy Intervention Project in Atlanta, which she directs. Within a week, we had a team of 6 people assembled to learn as much as we could about the intersecting issues of homelessness, low school participation, poverty, and high mobility.

### **Our Roles and Goals within the Project**

The six of us met at the beginning of the project to decide which roles we would take within the overall project. Given that the typical WBPD team consists of three members (a teacher, administrator and community member), we decided that Kristen, Jenna, and Rebecca would participate in the online portion of the project, while Lee and Lori focused on developing and teaching courses for teachers designed to incorporate the concepts and issues learned during the project. Jessica would remain on the team as a community consultant, advising team members about issues related to truancy and high mobility in the Atlanta area and connecting us to the homeless liaison in the Atlanta Public Schools. Once we decided upon our roles, we outlined our goals for the project:

- 1) We each wanted to learn more about homeless and highly mobile children and families in the United State and at Edmonds Elementary School in particular
- 2) Within the national context, we wanted to learn more about issues of poverty and students who drop out of school
- 3) We wanted to connect information about these issues to our role as educators and to the role of schools and communities
- 4) We wanted to raise the level of awareness and action for the teachers in our programs
- 5) We wanted to implement positive, lasting changes within Edmonds Elementary School based on what we were learning. Our goal was not to try to change Edmonds Elementary School but rather to inspire positive change for the families who interact with the school and the teachers who teach there

To achieve our goals, we decided that we would design the following:

- 1) Surveys for teachers to gather information (by all six team members)
- 2) Two courses for graduate teachers – one focused on poverty, high mobility, and homelessness and the other course focused on truancy, high mobility, and students who drop out of school (by Lee and Lori)
- 3) Create a welcoming atmosphere for new children and families at Edmonds Elementary (by Rebecca, Kristen, and Jenna)
- 4) Present our project at a local conference for teachers

Because four of us (Lee, Lori, Kristen, and Jenna) were involved in courses at the university, we were able to communicate face-to-face on a regular basis. Meeting as a full group (Lee, Lori, Kristen, Jenna, and Rebecca) proved more challenging than we had anticipated. Because of our schedules (Kristen and Jenna teaching during the day and taking courses at night, Lee and Lori teaching courses at night, and Rebecca working in an administrative position in the school during the day), we were unable to meet as a whole team more than three times across the project. Because of our conflicting schedules, Kristen and Jenna took on an additional role as “liaisons” of the project – often communicating with Lori and Lee and then with Rebecca.

Though our team was large and our schedules complex, our strengths were evident. One of the strengths of our team was the diversity of our expertise with children and families. Kristen, Jenna, and Rebecca were directly involved in working with children and families

within their school, while Lee and Lori were focused on improving the knowledge of teachers about these issues. Because of our various roles in schools, we were able to touch the lives of many more people. For example, Kristen, Jenna, and Rebecca had a direct impact on the teachers and families in their school while Lori and Lee had an important impact on teachers in the Metro-Atlanta area, who then have an impact on families within their schools. This diversity of perspectives as educators allowed us to have a broader effect than we would have if we had we focused our project only within Edmonds Elementary School.

### **Edmonds Elementary School**

Clayton County has experienced significant turmoil during the past 5 years as the population changed rapidly from majority white to majority black. Issues of infighting and micromanagement by the school board led the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools to impose a loss of accreditation on the district in 2003 for attempting “in secret to try to fire the white superintendent, though they never publicly disclosed his shortcomings.... He left after they agreed to buy out his contract, costing taxpayers hundreds of thousands of dollars” (Tucker (2003), *The Atlanta Journal & Constitution*, August 17, <http://www.racematters.org/blacksinpowertoofthenmisuseithm>, accessed: 6-10-2007). As a result, many teachers left the system. Although accreditation has been restored, turnover among the county’s teaching and administrative staff has remained high and heavy media coverage of new controversies within the sheriff’s department has kept a negative spotlight on the county. Many middle class residents have moved away and attracting new employees into the public service sector has become more difficult.

Edmonds Elementary School is a school-wide Title I school of 476 students in grades Pre-K through 5. This enrollment is significantly smaller than average in both the school district and the state (the district average is 972; the state average is 746). The teacher-student ratio, however, at 19:1 is on par with the district (19.5:1) and higher than the state (17:1). Most significantly, while fewer than half (45%) of the students in elementary schools across the state and 60% in the district qualify for free or reduced lunch, at Edmonds Elementary that percentage is 77.7%. Ethnically, 45% are black, (compared to 71% in the district as a whole and 38% in the state); one-third are Hispanic, a much larger percentage than the district or state averages (8% and 6% respectively), 17% are white (one percentage

point higher than the district but much lower than the 53% majority in Georgia as a whole). The smallest group at all three levels is Asian Pacific Islanders at less than 0.5%. Male and female students are essentially equal in number at the school, differentiated by only 0.2% fewer females. The largest enrollments are in kindergarten, 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> grade; the smallest is in pre-kindergarten, with less than half the number in any of those three.

The 2006 Criterion Reference Competency Test (CRCT) scores for students in grade 3 matched the state average in Reading with 70% meeting or exceeding standards, but only 5 of the 17 public elementary schools in a 0 to 4.3 mile radius of Edmonds Elementary School scored lower. In Math, 79% of Edmonds' 3<sup>rd</sup> grade students met or exceeded standards, compared to the state average of 81%, with only 3 nearby schools scoring lower. In English Language Arts, 72% met or exceeded standards at Edmonds, versus a state average of 81%, with 6 lower-scoring schools in the area.

### **What We Accomplished as a Team**

Our project combined two elements. At the school level, Kristen and Jenna created and distributed welcoming packets at their own financial expense to new students arriving in their classrooms. These packets contained a pencil box with pencils and erasers, paper, a notebook, a “classroom guide book.” New students were also paired immediately with a class “buddy” – an arrangement enthusiastically enjoyed by all concerned. Jenna and Kristen shared what they were learning at a faculty meeting to raise colleagues’ awareness of the issues and of the resources available to schools and initiated numerous informal conversations with other teachers to disseminate what they were learning. Results included a gradual shift in attitude across the school from resentment at the frequent disruptions of classroom routines caused by the high mobility to a greater awareness of the circumstances faced by the families. Teachers asked about the welcoming packets and several had adopted the “buddy system” by year’s end.

Motivated by what they were learning in the WBPD course, Kristen and Jenna also chose to take Lori’s Poverty course, inspired by our association with the National Center for School Engagement and the Web Based Professional Development course, as an elective in their master’s degree program. (Class texts included Diane Barone’s *Narrowing the literacy gap: What works in high-poverty schools*, Sue Books’ *Poverty and Schooling in the U.S.: Contexts and consequence*, Jeffrey Sachs’ *The end of poverty: Economic possibilities for our*

*time*, and Patrick Shannon’s *Reading Poverty*. Group choice books were Dozier, Johnston, & Rogers’ *Critical Literacy*, *Critical Teaching: Tools for preparing responsive teachers*, Jonathan Kozol’s *The Shame of the nation: The restoration of apartheid schooling in America*, Mark Rank’s *One nation, underprivileged: Why American poverty affects us all*, and David Shipler’s *The working poor: Invisible in America*.)

Lee also created a new elective course on school dropouts that attracted doctoral students interested in African American students and poverty as a potential dissertation topic as well as administrators and teachers in elementary, middle, and high schools from numerous school districts in the Metro-Atlanta area. The students, another professor who sat in on the class out of interest, and Lee worked as a research team to learn as much as possible about the topic. Class texts were Jean Anyon’s *Radical Possibilities*, Sue Books’ *Invisible Children*, and Gary Orfield’s *Dropouts in America*; group texts were Jonathan Kozol’s *Rachel and Her Children*, Adrian LeBlanc’s *Random Family*, bell hooks’ *We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity*, Susan Eaton’s *The Children in Room E4*, & Pauline Lipman’s *High Stakes Education: Inequality, Globalization, and Urban School Reform*. Each student also interviewed a school administrator, teacher, counselor or school social worker, their district’s homeless liaison, and a student attending an alternative high school or a school dropout. We conducted a preliminary analysis of this interview data as a model of qualitative research analysis and each student chose one interview category to analyze and discuss in a culminating course paper. Students in both courses reported experiencing them as “eye-opening,” “heart-grabbing,” and “perspective-changing” experiences that left them with “a powerful need to *act*, not just read and talk” about these issues

Kristen’s and Jenna’s learning and sharing with colleagues at their school became an ongoing, expanding process. Beyond the school level, they discussed the McKinney-Vento Act, the Homeless Liaison’s role, and the innovations they had begun at their elementary school as presenters at a session of the 2007 Georgia Read-Write Now Conference with Lori and Lee in January. This session drew one of the largest audiences of the conference, illustrating the significance of the topic to Atlanta area teachers. Only two audience members knew that each school district has a homeless liaison. None knew who that person was in their school system or what the job description entailed.

Lori and Lee also surveyed teachers in other classes during spring semester 2007 seeking to discover their level of awareness regarding homeless and highly mobile families

in their schools, the McKinney-Vento Act, and the existence and role of the homeless liaison in their districts. Thirty-two teachers responded to a simple online SurveyMonkey questionnaire. Most had fewer than 9 years teaching experience (88%). Those with 1 to 3 and 6 to 8 years of experience numbered exactly the same (22%) and each group equaled half of those who have been teaching 3 to 5 years (44%). Only 4 students had more than 9 years teaching experience. Essentially half taught in urban areas, half in the suburbs, two in rural areas; the majority taught in the elementary grades; all taught in regular public schools (no charter schools or private schools). An equal number identified their school's students as primarily white, black, or multicultural, while the number working in primarily Hispanic schools was 10% fewer than those.

Only three were “familiar” with McKinney-Vento, while 75% had “never heard of it.” One teacher “consults with the homeless liaison regularly as needed” and three had met with their homeless liaison “at least once,” but two-thirds of the respondents were “not aware we had a homeless liaison.” One-third worked in schools where “most students and families are poor,” 25% reported their school populations as “primarily lower-middle class,” and almost 20% reported a “highly mobile student population.” One teacher reported that “most of my students are homeless or highly mobile” and one reported “none.” Thirteen percent “do not know.” One commented that “a few years ago at a different school, we received students from a homeless shelter. They would come in randomly and usually stay for a few months. We were not prepared or supported in any way.” Another said, “I have tutored students in a homeless center. They were better students than I thought they would be.” Interestingly, while two-thirds of these teachers said they “have a plan in place to welcome new students” and almost half feel “excited” when a new student enters their classroom, 16% feel “anxious,” and a third feel “overwhelmed.” Almost 70% considered “student academic preparedness” the major challenge in meeting their goals for transitioning new students, and 42% chose “behavior issues,” “parental support,” and “student files not available.” In other conversations, many teachers remarked on the pressure they are under from all of the standardized testing and how great a challenge it is to be expected to prepare “all children.” Another comment on the survey is one Lori and Lee often hear from teachers, that a homeless student “was referred to the school social worker, and the social worker investigated the issue but we never heard anything else about it.”

## **Future Goals**

Our experiences with the WBPD course and the National Center for School Engagement strengthened the general interest we all have in the education and life success of low income and minority students by adding immensely to our knowledge base. Each of us plans to continue the work we have begun as participants in this program. Lori and Lee's primary goal is to raise teacher awareness by weaving the topic of homeless and highly mobile families into all of the education courses we teach, a total between us of 16-20 courses each calendar year. We also expect to offer professional development workshops for teachers in the schools.

As Director of the Georgia State University Urban Literacy Clinic, Lori will continue to recruit clinic participants from two groups: faculty members to offer more teacher education courses through the clinic that include a tutoring component, and families to keep adding children and adolescents seeking learning support. She will also continue to “seed” her graduate students' education through teaching and tutoring children at the community nonprofit agency. Lee teaches the broadest variety of courses in the department, reaching undergraduates, master's degree, educational specialist, and Ph.D. students. Consciousness-raising readings, activity assignments, and discussions related to poverty, homelessness, and high mobility as they relate to citizenship and education will be a central theme in all of her courses. Both Kristen and Jenna have moved to different schools for 2007-2008 out of frustration with their district's purchase of rigid, scripted teaching materials aimed at raising test scores in high-poverty schools through rote learning. Both specifically chose schools with high levels of poverty and mobility. They will continue to incorporate the changes they made in their own teaching as a result of the WBPD experience and will raise the level of teachers' and school administrators' awareness throughout their careers wherever they teach, through personal modeling, teacher workshops, and ubiquitous conversations.

### **Suggestions for Web-Based Professional Development Participants:**

- If you have access to a teacher training program at a university, involve that faculty and students in your WBPD project – this will be a valuable resource for the school and for the teachers
- Begin a book club with the faculty at one of your local schools (this can be instituted as a portion of the professional development schools are required to

provide). Books can be used to introduce discussion on topics of homelessness, high mobility, poverty, and family dynamics in far more beneficial ways than a ‘workshop’ approach. Book discussions can help foster a learning climate between teachers, administrators, and social service personnel that can influence change throughout the school and open lines of communication among all of the social service agencies in a community.

- All WPBD participants read a book in common. We recommend:
  - Eaton, S. (2006). *The children in room E4: American education on trial*. Chapel Hill, NC: Algonquin Books. (A journalist’s investigation of a 1989-2003 court case challenging unequal education that dramatically portrays the interplay of government and Supreme Court decisions in the lives of families and children in Hartford, CT and across the U.S.)
  - Goode, J. and Maskovsky, J. (Eds.) (2001). *The new poverty studies: The ethnography of power, politics, and impoverished people in the United States*. New York University Press. (A series of 20-30 page essays)