

**Examining Homelessness and Highly Mobile Students
at Hodge Road Elementary School: Breaking Barriers by Raising Awareness**

Knightdale, North Carolina

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Abstract: This participatory action research involved gathering information to gauge the school staff's level of knowledge on homelessness and high mobility and determine the types of interventions in place to welcome students. Included is a literature review and an overview of McKinney-Vento legislation.

Key Words: Academic Achievement; After School Program; Attendance/Enrollment; Community (Awareness of Homelessness/High Mobility); Literature Review; Parent and Family Involvement; Poverty; and Surveys

School and WBPD Profile

School: Hodge Road Elementary

Grade levels: K-5th

School District: Wake County

City/Town: Knightdale State: NC

School enrollment size for 2006-07: 756

Number of students experiencing homelessness/high mobility at your school in 2006-07: 35

Number of students experiencing homelessness/high mobility involved in 2006-07 WBPD projects/actions: 35

Number of educators/teachers involved in 2006-07 WBPD projects/actions: 1

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

Number of parents/families involved in 2006-07 WBPD projects/actions: 9

Percent of students eligible for free/reduced lunch: 63%

Title I School: yes

Annual Yearly Progress Rating: 89.9 %

Number of public agencies involved in 2006-07 WBPD projects/actions: 4

Number of community members involved in 2006-07 WBPD projects/actions: 2

Number of businesses involved in 2006-07 WBPD projects/actions: 3

Introduction

It is truly rewarding to be a part of accommodations that does not interrupt a child educational process. The ability to see a child attain academic success despite living obstacles is indeed priceless. J. Jones-Hall, HRES Team

The Hodge Road Elementary School (HRES) team, with our interest in learning more about our educational environment and means of assisting students experiencing homelessness and high mobility, is interested in additional ways of helping our students succeed. As such, we have engaged in an action research, which can provide further information and other means of assisting students at our school experiencing these living conditions.

The HRES team recognizes that our goal as educators cannot be attained unless we are able to capture the entire population of which we are educating. As such, we are charged with the responsibility of breaking ALL possible barriers that exist and furthermore obstruct our children's educational freedom. We are aware that we serve a population of diverse students in which specific social and emotional needs must be met. In order for significant learning and positive behavioral outcomes to be successfully attained, we have to examine ways to truly educate all children regardless of conditions beyond their control.

We can agree, in conjunction with government reports, that the success of a student's educational achievement has a significant relationship to the quality of education a student receives. Education plays a vital role in the lives of all children, and this role is deemed equally important to children who are experiencing homelessness and high mobility. These children are thus considered "at-risk" due to behavioral and academic challenges they encounter resulting from unstable living conditions. In recognition of children and youth experiencing such living conditions, the McKinney-Vento Act is a critical legislation striving to eliminate barriers that hamper the educational success of homeless students. Children and youth are broadly characterized as homeless according to this Act by means of their inability to have "fixed, regular and adequate residence" (USDOE, 2002). Therefore, at any given school it is everyone's (secretary, social worker, teacher, principal, and other administrators) responsibility to help families, children and youth in homeless situations.

The ability to accommodate students experiencing homelessness and high mobility will continue to be a challenge for educators. This is due to many reasons that stem from a

educator's lack of awareness and lack of knowledge of strategic accommodations for these students. Taunting questions linger:

- (a) Do educators establish connections and learn new strategies for providing educational stability?
- (b) Are supplemental services needed to help students that are homeless and highly mobile?
- (c) Can schools realistically become high reliability organizations for these students?

It is educators' responsibility to stimulate and promote understanding of children experiencing these types of economic hardship. Therefore, we feel the necessary steps must be put in place in every school to assure that students experiencing homelessness and high mobility are strategically recognized and accommodated. As such, this participatory action research conducted by the Hodge Road Elementary Team was geared towards collecting critical information about the staff's knowledge on homelessness and highly mobile students and further evaluating means of implementing practices to help these students maximize their academic success.

Background

Hodge Road Elementary School (HRES) is located in Knightdale, North Carolina, serving as part of the Wake County Public School System. More than 128,000 students were enrolled as of the 2006-2007 school year. Presently it is the second largest public school district in North Carolina, and could possibly become the largest by 2007-2008 school year. Nationally the school district is ranked as the 21st largest school district and due to its growing population has plans in place to convert 19 elementary schools to a year round calendar. Currently, there are 150 public schools in the system of which 93 are elementary schools.

Hodge Road Elementary Schools ethnic breakdown is 38.4% African American, 35.9% Hispanic, 20.4% Caucasian, 4.7% Multiracial, 2.3% Asian, and less than 1% Indian. Fifty seven percent of these students are on free or reduced lunch. Existing knowledge, procedures and record keeping limits the ability to report accurately and further recognize students that are experiencing homelessness and high mobility. The schools' Title I School Improvement Plan covering the periods 2004-2005 through 2006-2007 recognizes that systematic changes are necessary in order to increase (1) student achievement, particularly in

math, reading and writing; (2) parental involvement, and (3) teachers knowledge and implementation of best practices; through staff development that are grounded in scientifically based research, too name a few.

Underlying Problem

With the increasing demands that are placed on schools, we must begin then to question whether or not schools are safe havens for our children undergoing unstable life situations. And if so, how do schools determine the needs of their students? Any type of unstable living conditions that students are experiencing tends to affect their academics. Therefore, educators are faced with the task of removing barriers and supporting ongoing needs of homeless and highly mobile students. It is imperative for all educators to be familiar with the warning signs and identification of homeless and highly mobile students (Popp, 2003). After this has been determined, only then can teachers and other staff members effectively offer supplemental programs for these students and respond to their needs (Sandhu, 2001).

At Hodge Road Elementary School, our team decided to first examine our staff's knowledge, determine the impact and further explore strategies to help students who are experiencing homelessness and high mobility. To gain more information about the environment in which we practice, our research started with the examination of our own educational arena. To aid in this quest we generated a few questions that guided our inquiry.

Research Questions:

- (1) What does the staff already know about homeless and highly mobile students?
- (2) How are homeless and highly mobile students affected by the staff's lack of knowledge?
- (3) What strategies or accommodations would improve the academic success of homeless and highly mobile students?

Literature Review

Research reveals that the homeless population is estimated to be 49% African-American, 35% Caucasian, 13% Hispanic, 2% Native American and 1% Asian (Cincinnati Coalition, 2007). The fastest growing groups of homeless people are families with children. They make up about 40% of people without homes, and for every four homeless persons, one

of them is a child (Urban Institute, 2001). In the area of education, homeless children are less likely to succeed in school. It is alarming to consider that one-half of homeless children attend three different schools in one year and 75% of homeless children perform below grade level in reading (Family Housing Fund, 2005). This is indeed a growing and catastrophic domestic and economic problem crippling our ability to educate these children. In accordance to this research, the term homeless refers to and includes the following:

(1) An individual who lacks a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence; and
 (2) an individual who has a primary nighttime residence that is

(A) a subsidized publicly or privately operated shelter designed to provide temporary living accommodations (including welfare hotels, congregate shelters, and transitional housing for the mentally ill);

(B) an institution that provides temporary residence for individuals intended to be institutionalized; or

(C) a public or private place not designated for, or ordinarily used as a regular sleeping accommodation for human beings. (USDOE, 2002)

Within the homeless population children and youth experiencing homelessness is by far the fastest growing segment; thus resulting in an increase influx of students experiencing homelessness (“Education of Homeless”, 2006). Students undergoing homeless conditions are faced with greater challenges resulting from their (1) failure to attend school; (2) frequent absences from school; (3) attending multiple schools within a school year; and (4) lack of adequate school supplies, too name a few (Homeless Education, 2006). According to the U. S. Department of Education, 87% of students experiencing homelessness are enrolled in school, however, only 77% regularly attend school. Also, in recent years, 42% of homeless students have undergone school transfers, while 51% have transferred twice or more (Education of Homeless, 2006).

In order for these students to be given a fair and equal opportunity for academic success, they require support and guidance of caring educators. Furthermore, recognizing the potential risk of these students and a means of removing foreseen barriers, the federal homeless education legislation, McKinney-Vento Act, guarantees specified rights for these students which includes rights to (a) immediate enrollment in school, (b) attend school in their school or origin, (c) receive transportation to their school of origin, (d) services

comparable to those received by the housed classmates, (e) attend school with other students not experiencing homelessness, and (f) the posting of homeless students (Homeless Education, 2006).

Homelessness and high mobility is typified as having devastating impact on student's educational opportunities. It is very unfortunate that although progress has been made (in terms of revising laws/policies) to improve access to educational opportunities to ensure that homeless and highly mobile student have access to education, there are still barriers that remain. According to a survey conducted by the National Law Center of Homelessness and Poverty, service providers reported that homeless families experienced difficulties in evaluating, participating and obtaining the available supplemental services (Education of Homeless, 2006). The McKinney-Vento Homeless Education Assistance Act has made changes to the responsibilities of school districts and states, and requires that a homeless liaison be designated in efforts of building awareness in the school and community. This Act stresses the importance of building awareness among service providers, wherein educators are a critical part of the puzzle.

Educator's awareness and knowledge is very important to students that are homeless and highly mobile. It is alarming to know that teachers serving in Title I schools indicated that they did not receive training and instructional strategies to meet the needs of student's experiencing homelessness and high mobility. It is further reported that many of these teachers were interested in receiving training.

A study, relating to teacher experience and highly mobile students, reveals that a relationship exists between teacher experience and student achievement of migrant students (Stronge, Popp, & Grant, 2007). Although this particular study does not make mention students that are homeless, it can be concluded that many students experiencing these types of economic hardship are impacted by the teachers in their lives. Meyers and Popp (2003) report the importance of educators' familiarity with identifying and supporting with students experiencing such crisis in their lives.

Educators have unique opportunities and legal responsibility to assist homeless and highly mobile students while protecting their rights in school. Provisional accommodations and specific rights of students that are homeless and highly mobile are specifically outlined in the McKinney-Vento Act. While schools can not immediately change the living conditions of students and their families they can utilize strategic interventions at school as a

means of guiding and stabilizing these students' lives. National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) recommends the following school interventions ("Helping Homeless", 2004):

1. Provide workshops for teachers and staff members to inform and address the needs of homeless and highly mobile students.
2. Develop a clear attendance policy that does not penalize student for simply being late.
3. Bridge gaps as students transfer from one school to another by providing pertinent information.
4. Availability of a full range of supplemental services.
5. Maintain contact with parents or guardian of students for they are sources of critical information.
6. Maintain contact with district's liaison.

Research Methods

The purpose of this study was to examine teachers' awareness and knowledge about students experiencing homelessness and high mobility at Hodge Road Elementary School (HRES) and further determining means to aid in their academic success. The study used participatory action research to allow the research team to reflect and further search for solutions to problems regarding a specific population of our students. This type of research also gave us the opportunity to simultaneously seek ways to improve instruction and increase student achievement. Teachers and other resource personnel at HRES were the target population.

The instruments used were self-report data derived from various questions regarding general knowledge about homelessness and high mobility. Data were generated from teachers at HRES. The school has 33 classroom teachers and 24 resource teachers, Fifty-seven questionnaires were disseminated at a staff meeting in which 100% of teachers were in attendance and 100% of the questionnaires were returned and usable. Teachers were assured of confidentiality and encouraged to be forthright in their responses. The instruments used did not identify the teachers. These data were collected during the months of November and December 2006.

Demographic surveys were also used as a means of collecting pertinent information regarding the teachers' gender, age, ethnicity, level of education, years of teaching

experience and years at present school. The majority of the participants were female (89%), while 11% were male. All applicants earned a 4-year or a Masters Degree, and most were between 26-30 years of age. Table 1 (next page) presents further information regarding teacher's demographic, while Table 2 provides a summary of our study.

Research Results

Our research revealed that only 10% of the teachers and other resource personnel had prior knowledge of the McKinney-Vento Act. We saw this as significant because if these students were not properly identified then they would not be included in the different supplemental programs offered. In addition, the questions about strategies and accommodations to improve the academic success of students experiencing homelessness and high mobility indicated that several programs were either in progress or were being implemented during the timeline of our research. These Hodge Road Elementary School programs were:

- After school program
- Back pack program
- Book bag and supplies
- Church/adoptions – Christmas organizations

While participating in this research, we were able to help family members of a student at our school that was experiencing homelessness. Our awareness along with the parent's acceptance of our help made a great difference. The parents reported to us that they had moved and were living in a temporary facility, a hotel, because they had become suddenly unemployed. HRES provided the necessary transportation, which allowed the children's education experience at our school to be uninterrupted. We were also able to provide the family with information of agencies that were able to aid in their situation. The parents, due to our help of connecting them with the appropriate agencies, were able to become gainfully employed again. The children did not demonstrate any academic decline and were happy to continue going to school with their friends. This was indeed a success story, wherein we learned the true power of awareness and supplemental accommodations.

Table 1: Demographics of Teachers

VARIABLES	Percentage
GENDER	
Male	11%
Female	89%
AGE	
18-21 yrs	0%
22-25 yrs	22%
26-30 yrs	38%
31-40 yrs	22%
41-50 yrs	11%
51-60 yrs	8%
60+	0%
ETHNICITY	
Caucasian	78%
African-American	19%
Hispanic	0%
Asian	0%
Native American	0%
Other	3%
TEACHING EXERIENCE	
1 year	8%
2-3 years	24%
4-5 years	11%
6-9 years	22%
over 10 years	35%
YEARS AT PRESENT SCHOOL	
1 year	27%
2-3 years	32%
4-5 years	16%
6-9 years	14%
over 10 years	11%
LEVEL OF EDUCATION	
2-year Degree	0%
4-year Degree	57%
Masters	43%
Doctorate	0%
Specialist	0%

Table 2

NCSE: Raleigh, NC Team
 Hodge Road Elementary School – Study Summary
 2006-2007

Questions	Previous Studies	Variables	Local Measurements	Form of Analysis
What does the staff already know about H/HM students?	<p>Education of Homeless Children and Youth. NCH Fact Sheet #10, Published by the National Coalition for the Homeless, June 2006 http://www.nationalhomeless.org</p> <p>Homeless Education: An Introduction. National Center for Homeless Education http://www.will.k12.il.us/homeless.htm</p> <p>The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act. Reauthorized January, 2002 http://www.serv.org/nche/downloads/mv_full_text.pdf</p>	Staffs prior knowledge of the McKinney Vento Act	Staff survey (questionnaire)	Quantitative analysis of years of teacher experience, % of licensed staff
How are H/HM students affected by the lack of knowledge?	Stronge, J., Popp, P., & Grant, L. (2007). Effective teacher at risk and highly mobile students: A review of the Literature.	Hidden Rules Formal instrument used for registering	Observations Student Journal writings & perception Parent Survey & Satisfaction	Assessment Data Attendance Rate

Summary, Conclusion, Implications & Recommendations

Research results and related literature confirms the importance of raising awareness among our staff in order to minimize the struggles that homeless and mobile students experience. Furthermore, in determining the best means of helping these students, we must first turn to them for answers, and use information collected to help them achieve academic success. As educators increase their awareness and understand different issues and legislation concerning such social and economic dilemma, this may enable us to better identify homeless and highly mobile students.

Our evidence shows that we must raise the awareness of our staff members toward homelessness and high mobility and the services available to these students. This has great implications for the student's present success in school and in their future lives.

Research tells us that student experiencing homelessness and high mobility are attending school in growing numbers. Furthermore, legislations such as the McKinney-

Vento program was reauthorized under the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 to address problems that homeless children encounter in school, particularly low enrollment, poor attendance and lack of academic success. Therefore, it is important that we are prepared to accommodate, educate, and support their needs. We must aggressively stimulate awareness and break down barriers, which prevents student from accomplishing their educational goals.

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