



# *What Educators Can Do: Children and Youth Experiencing Homelessness*

by Barbara L. Driver, Ph.D., Henrico County Public Schools  
Paula M. Spady, Ph.D., Newport News City Public Schools

In collaboration with the Virginia Department of Education

Information Brief No. 2 Revised Winter 2004

The stereotypical picture of a homeless person is the “bag lady” or single man living on the street. In fact, children make up a majority of the homeless population. When we think of this population, we most often envision children living in shelters in large cities; but even if you teach in a suburban or rural community, you may have children who are experiencing homelessness in your school. Students living in doubled-up accommodations, campgrounds, motels, and in shelters may be considered homeless as well.

During the past two decades, large numbers of children have experienced homelessness. Despite media coverage, advocacy efforts, and the passage of federal legislation to protect the educational rights of children and youth who are homeless, what happens at the school-house door and beyond is often subject to chance rather than to consistent application of policies and procedures.

Recognizing who is homeless remains a challenge. Some families may not choose to describe themselves as homeless. Families may be reluctant to share their homeless condition due to their discomfort with their current living situation. They also may fear that their children will be moved to another school or stigmatized by thoughtless remarks. In addition, parents may not attempt to enroll their children, assuming they would not have the necessary documents. It is likely that parents do not realize that they have protections under federal legislation: the McKinney-Vento Homeless Education Assistance Improvements Act of 2001, Title X, Part C, of the *No Child Left Behind Act*.

## **Education Plays a Critical Role in the Lives of Students Experiencing Homelessness**

Education continues to be viewed as a vital element in breaking the cycle of poverty and homelessness. Schools can provide a safe haven of consistency and caring for children whose lives are marked by instability and uncertainty. Educators can open doors to possibilities and



Joseph, age 9. Wellsboro, PA  
HUD Poster Contest 1999

futures — to dreams and accomplishments for children whose lives have been restricted and confined.

## **Possible Signs of Homelessness**

- History of attending many schools
- Erratic attendance and tardiness
- Consistent lack of preparation for class
- Sleeping in class
- Hostility and anger or extremes in behavior (e.g., shyness, withdrawal, nervousness, depression)
- Needy behavior (seeking attention) or withdrawn behavior
- Poor hygiene and grooming
- Inadequate or inappropriate clothing for the weather
- Hunger and hoarding food
- Resistance to parting with personal possessions (e.g., not wanting to leave a favorite toy unattended or put a coat in a locker)

While these signs could indicate many other problems, they provide a basis for further exploration and discussion.

The child's classroom may be the only place where the child can experience quiet, interact with children his/her age, and experience success...School is the most *normal* activity that most children experience collectively...For homeless children it is much more than a learning environment. It is a place of safety, personal space, friendships, and support. (Oakley & King, in Stronge & Reed-Victor, 2000)

## What Teachers Can Do to Help Homeless Students Succeed in School

Students experiencing homelessness may:	You can help by:	Strategies you can use include:
<p><b>Need positive peer relationships</b></p>	<p><b>Facilitating a sense of belonging</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Tips for Supporting Highly Mobile Children</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Providing cooperative learning activities.</li> <li>• Assigning a welcome buddy to support transition to a new environment.</li> <li>• Providing activities that promote acceptance of diversity.</li> <li>• Maintaining a relationship when the student leaves by providing self-addressed stamped envelopes and stationary.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Move frequently and lack educational program continuity</b></p>	<p><b>Addressing special learning needs</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Unlocking Potential: What Educators Need to Know about Homelessness and Special Education</i></li> <li>• <i>Unlocking Potential: What Families and Shelters Need to Know about Homelessness and Special Education</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Immediately beginning to plan for the next transition.</li> <li>• Assessing present academic levels quickly.</li> <li>• Providing necessary remediation/tutoring.</li> <li>• Upholding challenging academic expectations.</li> <li>• Contacting the school previously attended to help with placement decisions.</li> <li>• Expediently following up on any special education referrals or services.</li> <li>• Reminding parents to keep copies of educational records and IEPs to share with a new school upon arrival.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Often come to class unprepared</b></p>	<p><b>Meeting basic needs in classroom</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Tips for Supporting Highly Mobile Children</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Providing school supplies if necessary (pencil, paper, etc.) that can be shared with the student privately.</li> <li>• Making sure the student has a chance to have a class job/role.</li> <li>• Avoiding the removal of student possessions as a disciplinary measure.</li> <li>• Sharing a set of texts for each grade level with the local shelter.</li> </ul>

<b>Students experiencing homelessness may:</b>	<b>You can help by:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>See additional Information Briefs developed by Project HOPE-Virginia</i></li> </ul>	<b>Strategies you can use include:</b>
<b>Often have high levels of depression, anxiety, and low self-esteem due to the stress of homelessness</b>	<b>Addressing these needs and related behavioral considerations</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reinforcing positive behaviors.</li> <li>• Teaching and modeling skills such as problem solving, critical thinking, and cooperative learning.</li> <li>• Supporting and recognizing individual accomplishments.</li> <li>• Increasing the frequency distribution of earned reinforcers.</li> <li>• Maintaining the privacy of the child.</li> <li>• Letting the student know you are glad he/she is in school.</li> <li>• Helping the student identify selected work samples and assemble a portfolio.</li> <li>• Enlisting support of community organizations and health and social services agencies.</li> <li>• Enlisting services of school personnel (e.g., school counselor, school psychologist).</li> </ul>
<b>Live in shelters and homes that house more than one family and are often noisy</b>	<b>Compensating in the classroom</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Tips for Supporting Highly Mobile Children</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Providing quiet time during school hours.</li> <li>• Having a “New Student Packet,” containing a few school supplies and a welcome card from the class, for all new students.</li> <li>• Allowing the child to do homework at school.</li> <li>• Assigning the student a personal space.</li> <li>• Having a “safe place” for student belongings.</li> </ul>
<b>Have parents who may be embarrassed by their homelessness</b>	<b>Respecting and supporting parents</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Questions and Answers for Supporting the Academic Success of Children and Youth Experiencing Homelessness</i> (written for administrators)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Making parents feel valued as partners in their child’s education.</li> <li>• Providing parents with assessment results and related goals and objectives prior to their next move.</li> <li>• Providing an informal support system in which they feel it is safe to discuss parenting issues or concerns.</li> <li>• Allowing parents extra time to pay for trips or assisting in accessing resources to help pay for special events.</li> <li>• Helping parents become familiar with services available for homeless students, including outside agencies.</li> </ul>

## Suggested Resources

Better Homes Fund. (1999). *America's homeless children: New outcasts*. Newton Centre, MA: Author.

Homes for the Homeless. (1999). *Homeless in America: A children's story, part one*. New York: Institute for Children and Poverty.

National Center for Homeless Education. (1999). *The education of homeless children and youth: A compendium of research and information*. Greensboro, NC: SERVE. (available at NCHE website)

Project HOPE-Virginia. (2003). *Bibliography of resources*. Williamsburg, VA: Author. (includes children's books; available at HOPE website)

Stronge, J. & Reed-Victor, E. (2000). *Promising practices for educating homeless students*. Larchmont, NY: Eye on Education.

## Books and Videos for Children

Nunez, R. & Schrage, W. (2000). *Cooper's tale*. New York, NY: The Institute for Children and Poverty.

Nunez, R. & Mandel, J. (1998). *Our wish*. New York, NY: The Institute for Children and Poverty.

Nunez, R. & Kwok, K. (2002). *Saily's journey*. New York, NY: White Tiger Press.

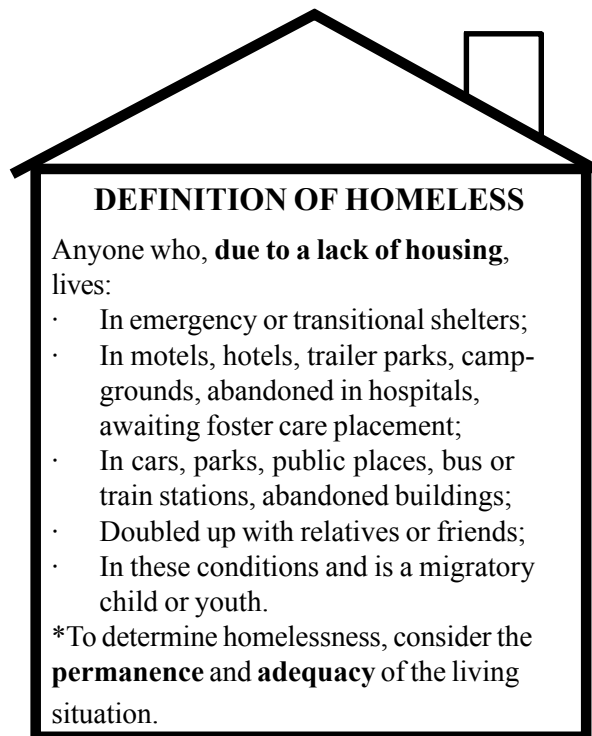
Fox Broadcasting Company. *Shelter boy*. New York, NY: Producer.

Bunting, E. (1991). *Fly away home*. New York, NY: Houghton Mifflin Company

Bunting E. (2000). *December*. New York, NY: Harcourt.

## Internet Resources

- **National Association for the Education of Homeless Children & Youth** – <http://naehcy.org>
- **National Center for Homeless Education** – <http://www.serve.org/nche>
- **One Childhood Lasts a Lifetime**– <http://www.onechildhood.org/>
- **Project HOPE – Virginia** – <http://www.wm.edu/hope>



**Project HOPE-Virginia**  
Virginia Department of Education  
The College of William and Mary – SOE  
P.O. Box 8795  
Williamsburg, VA 23187-8795  
(757) 221-4002 Toll Free (877) 455-3412  
Email: [homlss@wm.edu](mailto:homlss@wm.edu)

**This and other information briefs are available on the Project HOPE-Virginia website:**  
<http://www.wm.edu/hope>

**Project HOPE-Virginia is Virginia's Program for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth. The College of William and Mary administers the program for the Virginia Department of Education. Funding is authorized under the McKinney-Vento Homeless Education Act, Title X, Part C of the No Child Left Behind Act (P.L. 107-110). The purpose of Project HOPE is to ensure the enrollment, attendance, and success of homeless children and youth in school.**

*This information brief was originally published in 2000.*