

Pupil Personnel Services
Report to the Board of Education
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The Face of Homelessness

March 2015

Earlier in the academic school year, the November 2014 Pupil Personnel Services Report to the Board of Education deviated from its typical outline format of programmatic updates and focused on two specific areas within the department in order to bring clarity and awareness to PARCC Testing and the RCGC Pilot Program. The focus of this report, following some of the most frigid weather we have experienced in years, falls on an issue that has not received a lot of attention yet demands valuable district resources -- homelessness.

Regretfully, our Woodbury family has recently added a new member to the homeless roster. A young man lost his housing when his guardian decided that their home in Woodbury could no longer afford to care for him. Just a few weeks ago, on a bitter cold night in February, the young man sought shelter under the overhang of one of our elementary schools. He came to school the next day as if everything was normal. The following night he spent at the Boy's and Girl's Club in Sewell, again coming to school the next day as if everything was fine. It was not until Friday night that we become aware of how dire his circumstances had become. When the young man finally reached out to his school counselor, our Woodbury family did what it does so well; school employees gave their very best -- the very best of their time, talent, money and resources. The school counselor met the boy on our campus that evening and went to work contacting social service agencies and other local organizations. Finally, that Friday night at 8:30 pm, the Woodbury school counselor paid for two nights at a hotel (out of his own pocket) on the outskirts of town. The next day (Saturday) an impromptu crisis team mobilized and continued efforts to care for the young man. The team included his English teacher, the school counselor, the Student Assistance Counselor and the social worker from Evergreen Avenue School. Throughout the weekend, our staff members took the student to the mall for new clothing, supplied home cooked meals, washed his clothes and developed an immediate short-term plan. Through this coordination of efforts, the young man learned that he was surrounded by the loving Woodbury staff that deeply cared about him. The ending has not been written for this student, and there are still challenges and obstacles to overcome. Because of his age, he is not eligible to be placed in a youth shelter. There is a long waiting list for independent housing. The only option open immediately is an adult male shelter in Camden, a less than ideal scenario.

In response to a growing number of homeless children and youth who enroll in schools, the McKinney-Vento Act of 1987 was implemented to give specific language and terminology regarding responsibilities of school districts and states, including the requirement for each school district to have a designated homeless liaison to build awareness in the school and community. A youth is homeless if (s)he does not have an adequate, regular place to spend the night. “Homeless” includes living in a public shelter, a private shelter, or other kinds of transitional, temporary housing. It also includes sharing housing with other persons “due to loss of housing, economic hardship or a similar reason.” A youth living in a car, a park, an abandoned building, or any other type of substandard housing is “homeless.” And although progress has been made in ensuring homeless children's access to education, many barriers remain. While our state and district have made great strides in implementing the McKinney-Vento Act, homeless students face significant issues with enrollment and attendance, guardianship and immunization requirements, transportation problems and school fees. In Woodbury, the Homeless Liaison is charged with the responsibility of assisting homeless students and their families – and to serve as a person of support and resource. In reality, much time is spent investigating and researching the details of each case because of the large monetary responsibility associated with ‘district of origin’ (who is ultimately financially responsible). The fiscal reality is such that it is imperative to clarify the last permanent address of the family as it can pose enormous economic ramifications within our district. Recent modifications to the homeless N.J.A.C. 6A transfer fiscal responsibility from the ‘district of origin’ to the ‘district of domicile’ allowing a family to retain their homeless identification status until a permanent address is documented. During this time, district tuition and transportation fees can continue to mount depending on where the family chooses to send the child. In addition, tuition costs associated with trying to maintain educational stability is exorbitant. Knowing that the school setting often represents the only stable force in the life of a child experiencing homelessness; a child has the right to stay in his/her “school of origin” (where he/she attended before becoming homeless) or any public school that students living in the same attendance area are eligible to attend. The decision should be based on that child’s “best interest,” and as a result, districts are required to allow parents to decide where they would prefer their child(ren) to attend school. As a ‘district of origin or domicile,’ Woodbury is responsible for providing transportation for each homeless student – and the projected cost to the district is **\$175,103.29** for the 2014-2015 academic school year (this figure includes children placed in foster homes outside of the district by DCP&P who return for stability purposes in the Woodbury City Schools).

So, who are the faces of the homeless in our district? The current count is a **staggering 56 students**. Why so high? Because Woodbury is centrally located within southern New Jersey and is accessible via public transportation; Woodbury is the County Seat and offers a multitude of public and social service organizations to assist families who have been temporarily displaced or who are economically depleted. Woodbury is also home to two shelters that provide housing to woman displaced due to domestic violence. Finally, some within our Woodbury community have availed themselves to sponsor unaccompanied minors fleeing political and economic unrest from their home countries. These youngsters' difficulties are complicated and magnified due to educational, cultural and language barriers.

There is no question that the social ills that plague society place a tremendous toll on the educational system. Children do not exist in a vacuum; when they pass through the school doors, the emotional issues that accompany them do not magically go away upon arrival. The schools are charged to educate the "whole child" and be cognizant of all the child's needs. Every time a child has to change schools, his or her education is disrupted. Homeless children are nine times more likely to repeat a grade, four times more likely to drop out of school, and three times more likely to be placed in special education programs than their peers. The staff at Woodbury takes that responsibility to heart and willingly reach out to meet the needs of children in and out of the school setting. In reality, the emotional, social and fiscal consequences of one homeless child create a ripple effect within our community and our district; and the homeless faces within the Woodbury family are many. It is evident from the number of families who request to attend school within our district when they are displaced that our schools are made of caring staff who treat all children with inherent worth. The idea of "Personalizing" education was never more evident than in the overwhelming support with our most recent case.