

Supporting Homeless Families

July 2016

As we wrap up the school year, we are involved extensively with reviewing all kinds of data. There are teacher and staff evaluation ratings, student test scores, student attendance, budget planning, and other data that deals with ending the school year and preparing for the next. One of the data points I always review is the number of homeless students enrolled in our system because the impact of homelessness on a child's education is tremendous. Education for homeless children is often interrupted and delayed by frequent moves, inconsistent relationships, and lack of places and opportunities to play and just be a child. Homeless children are more likely to have a learning disability, repeat a grade, and lack access to educational resources, such as books and internet. These children often have witnessed domestic violence and substance abuse. The lack of proper food and shelter in their childhood can have negative effects on their physical, social, emotional, and cognitive development. These factors can impact them not only in school, but throughout their adult life. This stress and trauma is emotionally and cognitively damaging to them. Often, the one thing about school that appeals most to a homeless child is having access to the food, heat, and security that school provides.

Homelessness is one of those things we tend to think happens in other places, not in Dalton, Georgia. However, this past school year, there were 154 students enrolled in Whitfield County Schools (WCS) who met the federal definition of "homeless". The largest number for Whitfield County Schools was 364 in 2011. Thankfully, the numbers have decreased in recent years.

Homeless families come from all geographic areas, ages, occupations, and ethnicities. The federal McKinney-Vento definition of a homeless child would be one who is living in motels, campgrounds, emergency shelters, cars, public spaces, abandoned buildings, substandard housing, or similar settings. These children lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence. Children who are sharing the housing of other persons due to loss of housing because of the parent's economic hardship are also classified by the law as "homeless". The majority of WCS displaced children are either living with other families or in shelters.

While poverty is the leading cause of homelessness, we must be careful not to jump to judgment and assume that a family is homeless because of unwillingness to work. Sometimes the child's parents are working, but they do not make a sufficient wage to cover housing costs. An estimated 12 million households in America pay more than 50% of their income for housing. Even with two parents working and earning minimum wage, they cannot afford rent in addition to food, clothing, transportation, and medical care.

The school system and our local community have many resources available to help these children and families. In order to reduce the number of school moves that can accompany homelessness, children are allowed to stay in their school of origin, if it is deemed best for their welfare. There are funds available to help provide transportation, if needed. A homeless child automatically qualifies for free or reduced breakfast and lunch. Other assistance, such as school supplies, clothes, and shoes are available. Seniors are given help in applying for financial aid for college. Many of our schools have benevolent funds, which are used to help needs, such as medicine and glasses.

To properly support homeless students, schools must first identify them and become aware of the obstacles they face. School counselors and social workers can then connect families with school and community resources for housing, food, clothing, and counseling. We must all work together to keep these at-risk kids from falling through the cracks.