

Best Practices for School District (LEA) Liaisons and Others Assisting Students in Homeless Situations

As school district liaisons, you have many duties to ensure that homeless students are identified and helped to enroll and succeed in school. So much to do and so little time! Since you cannot add hours to the day, you need to make tough choices about how to spend that time wisely for the greatest impact. A part of that lies in knowing who to call for help. The ideas contained here come from many sources, and it is hoped that these excellent resources will be utilized in achieving your goals!

Awareness

Raising awareness about homelessness is complex. Not only do you need to help people understand that it really exists in their community, you need to make them aware of federal and state laws governing it and of services available to students. Educators, parents, and the community all need to be made aware. Here are a number of tips for school personnel:

- Always get on the agenda for the ROE's principals' meetings.
- ROE Advisory Committee: provide information and attend.
- Order and disseminate *Opening Doors* materials throughout the district.
- Sponsor art and essay contests, e.g., posters about homeless education.
- Get the word out with different tools/giveaways: brochures, key chains, bookmarks (give them out in quantity to school libraries).
- Create a school district calendar with pictures of children and selected facts on homelessness and educational rights for each month.
- Arrange for staff to have an eye-opening visit to a local shelter.
- Observe National Hunger and Homelessness Awareness Week (the week before Thanksgiving) with suggested activities (see website listings at end.).
 - "One Night Without a Home" Awareness Sleep Out
 - Hunger Banquet

When you have the opportunity to present to groups such as school secretaries, heighten the impact with awareness activities that ask them to walk in another's shoes briefly. Here are two excellent examples from *A Homeless Educator's Sourcebook*, published by THEO: Texas Homeless Education Office (see website listings at end).

Feast or Famine

In this workshop, each participant is given one of 30 or so different scenarios as he or she walks in, to be acted out for the rest of the workshop. Some are homeless; some are middle-class; others are rich. Three restaurants are set up. The rich ones go to a fancy restaurant and are waited on. The middle-class people have a pizza place. The homeless go to a soup kitchen but are told it's closed; there's no food. Some are supposed to ask: "Can't you give me anything? We have hungry, crying kids." They are told to walk down to the next soup kitchen, where they're told they can stand in line three hours and wait for supper.

Death by Chocolate

Again people are randomly assigned to be rich, middle class or homeless poor. The rich get fancy chocolates on silver tray. The middle-class people get Snickers bars at a

convenience-store set-up. The poor people, once again, go to a soup kitchen, where they may get stale, leftover candy or nothing if the kitchen has run out. One of the rules is that the rich and middle-class people cannot give food away. People actually cry. This is very powerful, especially for those unfamiliar with the plight of homeless families.

The wider **community** is often unaware of the extent of the problem of homelessness and of the needs of these families. Outreach within the community should take advantage of whatever media are available.

- PSAs can be aired on local radio and TV stations periodically throughout the year. Be sure to repeat any phone numbers.
- Newspaper articles that highlight the obstacles faced and overcome by one child or family usually have greater impact than a facts-and-figures article.
- Seek out opportunities to speak to service clubs, religious service organizations, and business associations. Enlist their help for tangible resources such as school supplies.
 - In one Illinois city, a retail outlet provided hundreds of backpacks.
 - In another, a group of churches raised money throughout the year for the basic uniforms a school had chosen.
 - In another, the homeless liaison arranged a Giving Tree for several families at the holidays.
- Consider National Hunger and Homelessness Awareness Week activities that can take place within the community

Parents in homeless situations need to be informed of their children's educational rights, but they can often be hard to reach. It is important to post this information in locations where families and youth may receive services. This would, of course, include shelters, but also soup kitchens, food pantries, public health offices, low-cost motels, libraries.

- Back-to-school fairs provide a good opportunity to share this information in a low-key, sensitive manner.
- A listing of educational rights can be included in registration packets.
- Some version of Illinois' "Common Form" should be a part of registration, so that families can indicate any living situation, including being doubled-up, that meets the homeless definition. The form can be downloaded from the *Opening Doors* website and customized for use in a district.
- Distribute Parent Packs, available through Area Lead Liaison offices, at shelters and other points of service.

Training

Staff development of school personnel is daunting: think numbers and turnover. The ideal would be training dedicated to homeless issues, but many liaisons do not have that luxury within a school district's tight schedule.

- Think of training as ongoing, constant—keeping turnover in mind
- Make use of the many resources of the Local Homeless Education Liaison Toolkit
- "Piggyback" onto other staff development sessions: get on that agenda!
- Especially when time is short, show the *Opening Doors* 12-minute video
- Visit your district's schools often—face-to-face contact with key people
- Attend in-services at individual schools

- Target all staff at some point of the year
 - Secretaries/enrollment clerks – especially before start of year
 - Principals/administrators
 - Counselors/social workers
 - Nurses
 - Paraprofessionals: food service, janitorial, transportation...

Enrollment and Attendance

This is at the core of your responsibilities as liaison. If students are not immediately enrolling in school and then able to attend, awareness and training efforts are futile. It is crucial to know the schools of your district well. As you become a familiar face, it should be possible to find a contact person at each school, so that you have a sort of first-alert system and ready-made network. This can greatly help with the quick identification and enrollment of students. Also consider the following:

- Keep in close touch with your Area’s Lead Liaison: have that cell phone number handy at all times.
- Get to know your fellow liaisons in all neighboring districts. This will give you a head start on arranging for transportation between districts.
- Build a good relationship with your own transportation department. Small things like end-of-year recognition (such as a cake in the shape of a yellow school bus) can help.
- If appropriate, request that bus stops be added near shelters.

A liaison and shelter staff member arranged routes with the bus scheduler so that children staying at the shelter are picked up first in the morning and dropped off “home” last in the afternoon. That way, no other students need to know their current living situation. This kind of sensitivity is a great example of “going above and beyond.”

- Know the community, especially the location of shelters and low-cost motels.
- Create working relationships with shelter staff. In one large district, the liaison was able to arrange for school enrollment *at* the local shelter.
- Set up after-school tutoring—a “safe haven” for homework
- Make sure that school and district administrators are aware of the precarious situation of doubled-up families, so that they do not contact landlords.
- Work with managers of low-cost motels to encourage and facilitate school attendance.
- Do your utmost to ensure that students who are staying in a dangerous neighborhood do not have to walk to school.

Collaboration

Chapter Five of the *Local Homeless Education Liaison Toolkit* is titled “Developing Collaborative Efforts.” It offers an excellent description of various levels of collaborative effort. Using this as a starting point, you should give some thought to the individuals, departments within your district, and agencies with whom you need to work. Here are some ideas that should apply to any community:

- Become active with your area's Continuum of Care.
- Attend agency meetings such as LANS and Interagency Councils.
- Join—or start!—a homeless coalition.
- Ask schools to mail local shelters a school calendar and notes about special events (picture days, sports tryouts...)
- Become familiar with all community resources available.
- If no directory of services is available, help create one.
- Use your best friend, the telephone, and keep asking until someone says yes!

A case in point to show how key collaboration is: A homeless student attending an alternative high school, on his own with no living parents or relatives willing to help, received help from many quarters. The Child and Adolescent Local Area Network (LAN) and its "Wrap" program, facilitated by his school counselor, pulled in services. Prairie State Legal Services helped emancipate him at age sixteen. Housing and other needs were met as well so that he could continue in school. People who knew other people came through for him.

Finally, the best practice that is at the heart of all of those listed above: working for the best interest of each child you encounter and serve. That will be your surest guide as you strive to fulfill your role as a liaison.

Resources

National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth (NAEHCY). Training materials/100 FAQs available at www.naehcy.org/training.html

National Center for Homeless Education (NCHE). *Local Homeless Education Liaison Toolkit (revised 2004)*. www.serve.org/nche/downloads/toolkit/toolkit.pdf

National Coalition for the Homeless. *National Hunger and Homelessness Awareness Week Manual*. www.nationalhomeless.org/awareness/

THEO: Texas Homeless Education Office. *A Homeless Educator's Sourcebook (2003)*. (www.utdanacenter.org/theo/pdf/THEO_Sourcebook_final.pdf).

Opening Doors materials are available at <http://homelessed.net/resource/publications.htm>

