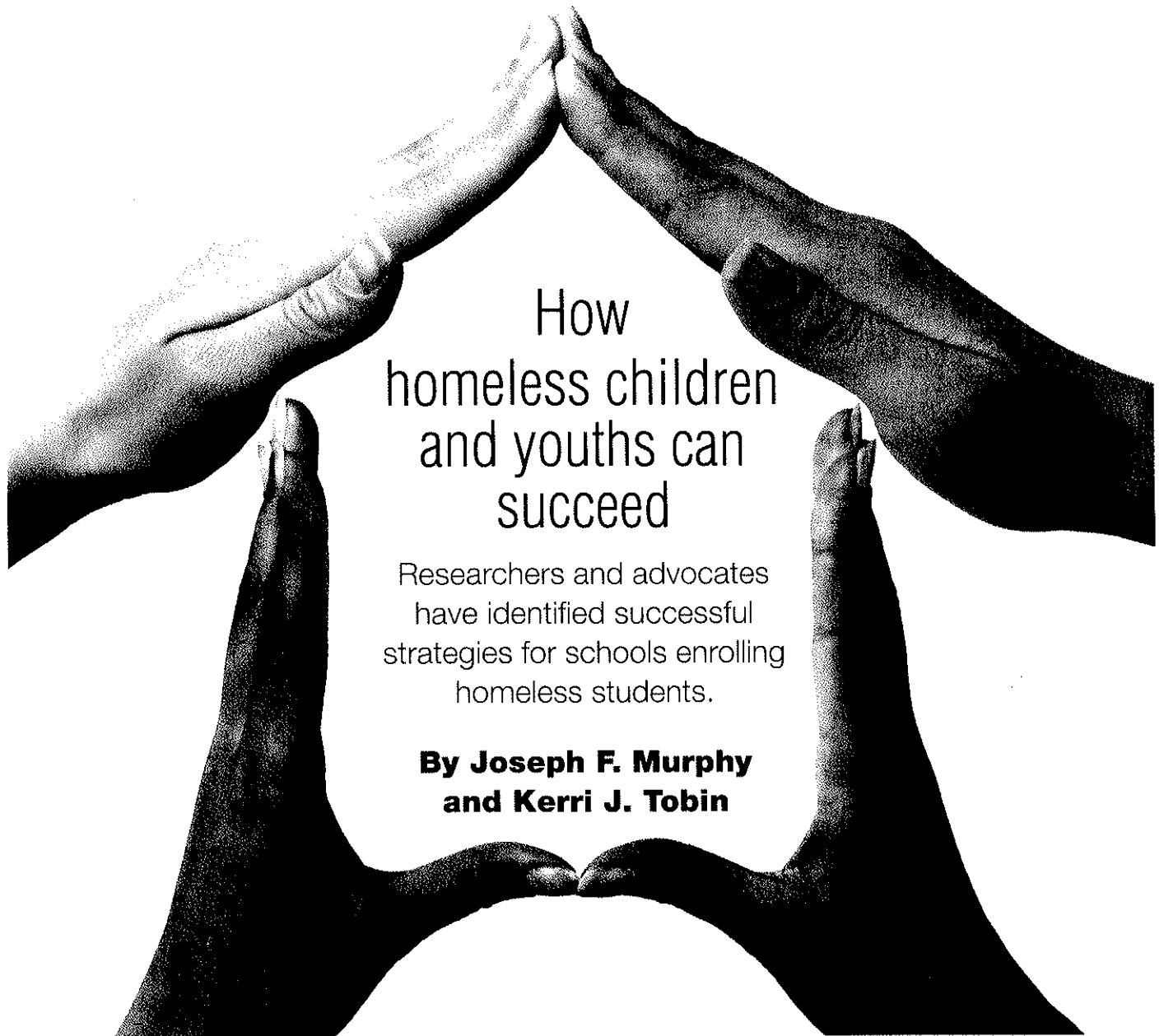


# Homelessness comes to school



## How homeless children and youths can succeed

Researchers and advocates have identified successful strategies for schools enrolling homeless students.

**By Joseph F. Murphy and Kerri J. Tobin**

**A**NALYSTS WHO INVESTIGATE HOMELESSNESS CONCLUDE THAT IT'S A NATIONAL SCANDAL, one that is pulling increasing numbers of children and unaccompanied youth into its gravitational force. Only half of the story of homelessness highlights what its victims are missing — a normal domicile. The other half of the narrative attends to where the homeless stay, defining the homeless by where they sleep at night. The “literal homeless” find themselves in shelters or on the streets. The others (the majority) are involuntarily “doubled up” with relatives or friends — or for some unaccompanied youths, it means staying in temporary homes sponsored by the state.

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## Fewer than a quarter of the homeless children in the U.S. complete high school.

Researchers and advocates cut homelessness in a variety of ways — by the reasons people find themselves homeless, by how long they've been homeless, by the severity of the displacement, by the damage it does to them, and so forth. One well-established taxonomy divides the homeless into two groups based on age: adults and young persons. The “young persons” category is also divided into two groups: accompanied “children” (from birth to age 18) with their family, or part thereof, and unaccompanied “youth” out on their own. Unaccompanied youth includes three types of homeless minors: “runaway” homeless, “throwaway” homeless, and “system” homeless. Those in the first group leave home of their own volition; those in the middle group have been asked to leave and are actively prevented from returning; the final group includes youngsters who have been in and out of government programs such as foster care.

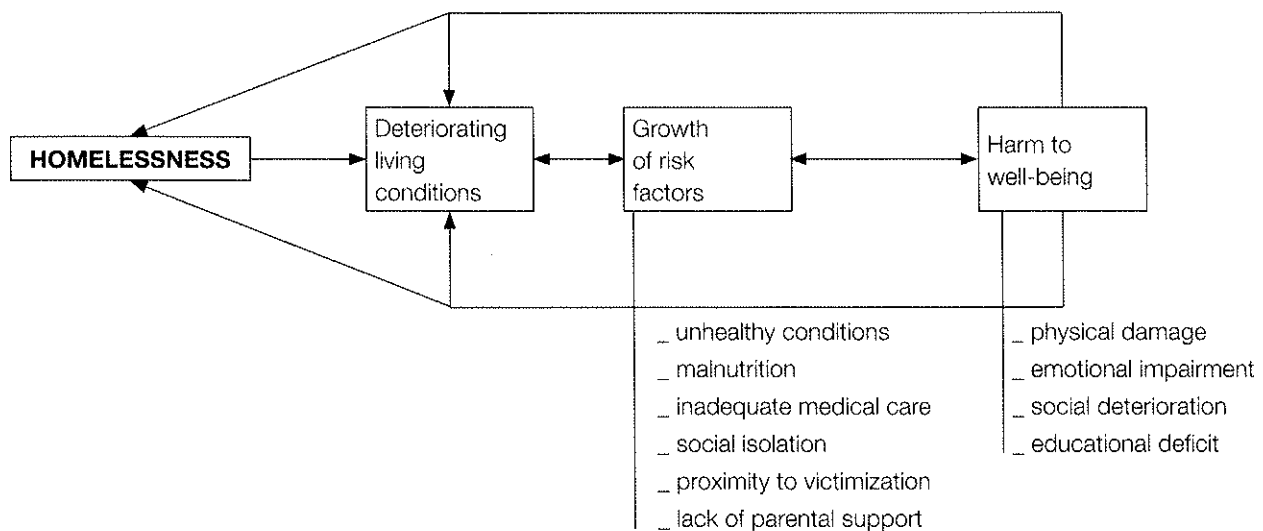
### THE DAMAGE TO CHILDREN

Few events have the power to affect life in negative directions more than homelessness. And home-

lessness is especially damaging for children, their mothers, and unaccompanied youths: “Of all homeless people, homeless children are most vulnerable” (Burt et al., 2001). Figure 1 demonstrates the deleterious effects of homelessness. Of particular importance are the educational consequences of homelessness for America’s youngsters. According to scholars who examine the issue, homelessness almost always translates into less opportunity to learn — time loss associated with “residency” transitions and with trying to connect to learning in the new school. That is, homeless children are disproportionately absent from school compared to housed peers (Rouse & Fantuzzo, 2009). This group of America’s most deeply at-risk youngsters are also suspended and expelled from school at higher rates than domiciled counterparts (Better Homes, 1999).

Studies confirm that homeless children and youths perform worse than housed students on the full array of important measures of academic performance. To begin with, studies that contrast homeless children and youth with housed peers reveal that they’re below grade level at much higher rates (Duffield & Lovell,

**FIG. 1.**  
**The Homelessness Impact Model**



Homelessness (point 1) opens the door to conditions that often amplify problems already at play in the lives of children and youth (e.g., abuse at the hands of parents/guardians, struggles in school). More expansively, homelessness leads to living conditions (point 2) that fuel existing problems and power up new ones. Homeless minors generally enter a world of enhanced risks (point 3) (e.g., social isolation). At the same time, they often find themselves enveloped in environments marked by violence that encourages the formation of dysfunctional social relationships. The result is often severe physical, social, emotional, and educational damage (point 4).

## **Schools can work proactively to ensure that all students have the basics of food, clothing, school supplies, hygiene items, and health services.**

2008). These youngsters also have, in general, poor to average grades, scores categorized by Dworsky (2008, p. 43) as "alarming." Homelessness is also correlated with being left behind in grade (Masten et al., 1997). In addition, data from a series of investigations over the last quarter century document the persistent underachievement of homeless youngsters (Biggar, 2001), compared to housed youngsters in general

and housed poor youngsters specifically (Dworsky, 2008). Finally, perhaps nowhere is the connection between homelessness and education bleaker than in high school graduation. The National Center on Family Homelessness (2009) reports that fewer than a quarter of the homeless children in the U.S. complete high school.

There is also consensus that these education deficits create serious handicaps for reintegrating homeless youngsters into society as they grow into adulthood. These poor education outcomes also have discernable consequences for the economic well-being of these youngsters. For example, they're much more likely than students who never experienced homelessness to be chronically unemployed as adults (Shane, 1996).

### **How many youths are homeless?**

Counting the number of homeless people is difficult. But we know that there are more homeless persons today than at any time since the Great Depression. Homeless families with children and unaccompanied youth represent the fastest growing category of homeless (National Center on Family Homelessness, 2009). While families with children were only a small percentage of the homeless population during the last homeless era (1950-1979), they're a major storyline in the modern (1980-2010) narrative. Estimates fluctuate, but an aggregation of results yields the following trend line: Homeless families grew from almost nothing in the 1950s and 1960s to about 25% of the total homeless population by the 1980s, to about 33% in the 1990s, and to about 40% in the 2000s, with perhaps as much as 50% in the nation's major urban centers (Burt et al., 2001; Better Homes Fund, 1999; National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2007).

According to various studies, children and youth comprise about a quarter of the total homeless population in the U.S. (Markward & Biros, 2001). Employing a different metric, analysts claim that about 2% to 3% of American children and youth are homeless in a given year. Alternatively, every year about one in every 50 children experiences homelessness (NCFH, 2009). Across a full year, estimates say that more than one million children and more than one million unaccompanied youth are homeless (Moore, 2007; NCFH, 2009).

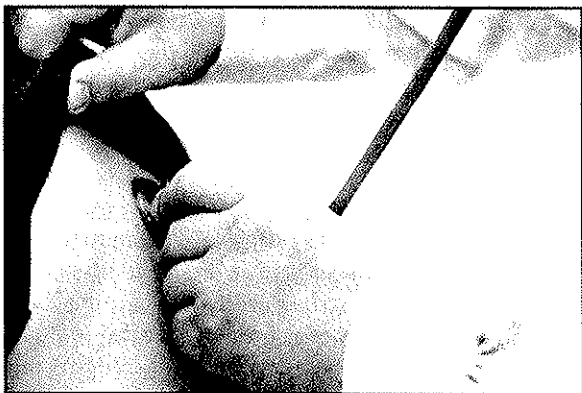
### **AN EDUCATION FRAMEWORK**

While acknowledging that homelessness is a complex and layered phenomenon, schools must be a hallmark element in any attack on the homeless problem. Taking care of homeless children in school involves seven provisos: Developing awareness about homelessness and homeless children and youth; attending to basic needs; creating an effective instruction program; developing a stable and supportive environment; providing additional supports; collaborating with other agencies and organizations; and promoting parental involvement.

#### **1. Develop awareness.**

Assistance for homeless children and youth should start by educating professional staff about how to work effectively with these highly vulnerable students. Educators need to learn more about the condition of homelessness and the problems displacement causes families and young persons. Training needs to center on sensitizing educators to the needs of homeless families and youngsters. Educators also need to learn about the McKinney-Vento Act and its legal protections for children and unaccompanied youth.

Teachers and administrators also must learn what they can do to help homeless students. Teachers, in particular, need to understand the impact of homelessness on the learning process. They need to know about resources and services that can help homeless students. Relatedly, they need to become knowledgeable about how they can advocate for homeless students in their community. They also have a special obligation to help their housed students understand what homelessness means for their displaced peers.



## 2. Attend to basic needs.

Homelessness deprives youngsters of many of the necessities of life that most students take for granted — sufficient food, basic school supplies, health services, clean clothes, and routine items for personal hygiene. Because basic needs must be met before children can learn successfully, schools can work proactively to ensure that all students have the basics of food, clothing, school supplies, hygiene items, and health services.

## 3. Provide effective instruction.

On the pedagogical side of the instruction ledger, research suggests that homeless children and youth may be advantaged by two instructional approaches. First, individualized instruction appears to help these highly vulnerable students. Second, cooperative learning platforms allow homeless students to master important academic content while developing much-needed social skills as they interact with peers from a range of economic and social backgrounds.

Evidence suggests that breaking assignments for homeless children and youth into discrete pieces of work is a good instruction strategy. Such an approach recognizes the likely transience of homeless youngsters and helps ensure completion before departure. Lessons should open and close on the same day, and individualized contracts should be established for short durations and renewed frequently.

Researchers and advocates alike routinely argue for a strength-based approach when planning instruction, as opposed to an overreliance on a problem-oriented perspective. Homeless adolescents need practical life skills and extra help to deepen often-underdeveloped interpersonal skills.

On the curricular side of the instruction ledger, scholars conclude that homeless youngsters don't need a different or separate curriculum. They need access to the same high-quality curriculum available to their peers. Because homeless students are almost always at a disadvantage in doing required schoolwork, schools should be willing to restructure schedules, social organization, and functions in order to best meet the needs of students who have no idea of place (Quint, 1994, p. 15). One important action is to accelerate students along with their peers while simultaneously addressing remedial needs. That is, homeless students should not be put into closed remediation loops in which they never catch up with peers. Schools that work well for homeless children and youth accelerate and address deficiencies at the same time.

Homeless students will also benefit from more flexible ways to traverse the curriculum. Partial credit programs and credit recovery programs seem to be especially helpful. Credit recovery allows homeless students to fill in gaps in coursework. Partial credit programs allow them to gain credit for part of a course. Policies that provide flexibility for homeless youngsters to complete schoolwork and school projects at school are also

**“What are we going to do about homework?”  
“Is homework an effective instructional tool?”  
“Do you have students who are failing because they do not complete their homework?”**

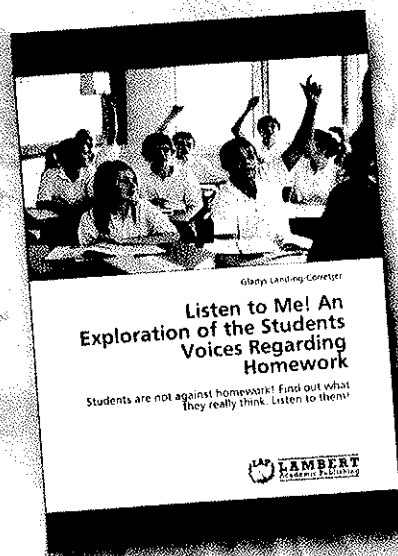
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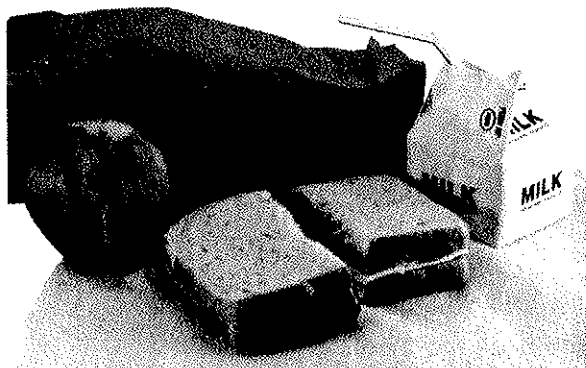
## Make school an oasis of stability and caring in what can often seem like a random, chaotic, and inhumane world to homeless children.

helpful for ensuring the academic success of homeless adolescents.

### 4. Create a supportive environment.

Ensuring “success” for homeless children and youth will require a robust instruction program. Success also depends on the staff’s ability to create a caring and stable culture in classrooms and in the school as a whole. The aim, researchers assert, is to make school an oasis of stability and caring in what can often seem like a random, chaotic, and inhumane world to homeless children. To do so, staff must set objectives for the student and the school. On the student front, the primary goal is to offset stress and feelings of inadequacy by nurturing a sense of acceptance and belonging, and a sense of hope. Make sure the youngsters become part of the school community, thus replacing social isolation with social connections and support. On the school front, the goal is creating a climate in which homeless students feel welcomed.

For schools to work well for homeless children and youth, they’ll need to extend their reach to address the full array of needs displaced minors bring with them to the schoolhouse — safety, health, education, nutrition, and so forth. At the same time, for homeless children and adolescents to flourish, schools must develop environments that are less institutional and less bureaucratic. As Quint (1994) argues, the school must “attempt to act more like a family than an institution” (p. 90) if education success for homeless children and adolescents is to become the norm.



### 5. Provide additional supports.

Schools must provide more than basic services. Ensuring that homeless minors have a secure and safe place to be is essential. But supplemental services

also are important for keeping children in school. If crafted well, these programs can enhance the social skills needed to survive in and out of school, build self-esteem, lengthen academic learning time, and deepen achievement. In short, crafting a system of additional supports will embed students in a safe environment with a dense web of interpersonal relationships and provide additional academic scaffolding. Together, these supports help offset the cognitive and social-emotional problems accompanying homelessness. They help keep these young people in school while ensuring maximum academic and social development. Advocates typically categorize additional services as basic needs supports (e.g., clothing, health services), special academic services (e.g., tutoring), and nonacademic activities (e.g., clubs and recreational activities).

### 6. Collaborate with other organizations.

The staggering complexity of problems associated with homelessness precludes any single agency from resolving matters. No single agency has the comprehensive authority, nor does any single agency have all the appropriate information and resources to meet the multiple needs of homeless children and youth.

The proposed solution will surprise no one: greater collaboration among agencies that work with homeless families and unaccompanied children and/or homeless adolescents. What’s needed is an integrated system or a network of service providers to replace the current fragmented system of assistance (Tucker, 1999, p. 92).

Analysts and advocates regularly suggest that schools are critical to the success of interagency collaboration. Others go even further, holding that schools should be the hub of social service delivery for homeless children and youth. For a variety of reasons, educators may be best positioned to spearhead collaborative efforts. Scholars note, for example, that schools have a legal mandate to collaborate and coordinate with local service agencies or programs providing services to homeless children and youth and their families.

### 7. Promote parental involvement

Research on school improvement over the last 30 years has consistently documented that parent involvement is a critical variable in the school effects formula. More specifically, studies confirm the

significant role that parents of at-risk students play in helping their children succeed in school and that parent involvement is linked to the academic advancement of homeless children. Advocates for children argue that schools must be more aggressive in enlisting parents as partners. Overall, the parent involvement narrative features three themes: the difficulty of creating meaningful parent involvement in the homeless community, the heightened importance of such connections for the well-being of homeless children, and an acknowledgement that schools can do more than they often have done to remove barriers to engagement and to garner the rewards of involvement.



Zeroing in on the third theme, educators must attend to both parent education and parent involvement. Few homeless parents know their rights and therefore don't know how to advocate for their children. Schools must be more proactive in educating parents about these rights. Schools can train homeless parents to be advocates for themselves and champions for their children, both in schools and in the larger service community. Schools should offer education that teaches homeless parents how they can connect to needed services. Many homeless parents also don't have a well-stocked toolbox of parenting skills. However, because improved parenting skills can help students learn, educators can and should do more to assist parents in deepening general skills. Through adult education programs, schools can help parents acquire the academic content they often missed when they were younger, such as basic language and literacy skills and high school completion.

Schools that work well for homeless children and their families also are places where parents have the opportunity to become partners in the education of their children and where they're included in meaningful ways in the life of the school. Such

involvement has been linked to keeping children enrolled and attending school and to student academic achievement. **K**

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