School-Community Partnerships and the Homeless

Working together, school and community can become the extended family of homeless students, fulfilling many of the needs their own families are unable to meet.

MARIA LUISA GONZÁLEZ

City Park is proof that a school can successfully serve diverse populations, including the homeless. Two years ago, I was principal of this inner-city Dallas, Texas, school, then an early childhood center for children from pre-kindergarten through 3rd grade. More than half the population were Hispanic, one-third were black, and the remaining were mainly Anglo children residing at one of the three nearby downtown shelters for the homeless. The unifying characteristic of the majority of these children was poverty.

However, it was our homeless students who became the catalyst in bringing together resources from all sectors of the community to help the children. Through the dedication of our teaching and support staff, the community had become aware that these children were willingly accepted and made part of a strong academic program (with 100 percent mastery on the state's criterion-referenced test). Then, when community members learned about the tremendous needs of these children, they responded—and a partnership was created.

The Saturday School volunteers worked closely with the City Park staff, immediately notifying us if they detected any problems. For example, when a volunteer discovered that a little girl had trouble sitting because her mother had spanked her, we were able to enroll the mother in a parenting program at our school.

The First Presbyterian Church went beyond offering Saturday classes for students. They also provided computer equipment, with hardware and software that were compatible with the school's computer lab. In addition, they were instrumental in writing a grant for $40,000 to buy much needed new playground equipment for our school. In addition, the generous scholarship fund they helped establish—for students who had attended City Park and wished to attend a college or university upon graduation from high school—helped raise the career aspirations of our boys and girls.

Another organization, the Dallas Jewish Coalition for the Homeless, also provided many resources, including volunteers who tutored in the classroom on a daily basis. Every week many of these women also ate lunch with the children to help us provide the nurturing children need. In memory of a couple who had been strong supporters of the school, the Jewish Coalition set up a library fund to provide money to replace books inadvertently lost due to the high mobility of the population. Through this fund, we were able to strengthen our commitment to make the homeless feel “at home” while at school. And, finally, the Jewish Coalition contracted with the YWCA to arrange day-care activities after school for all our students for a year. They later set up a permanent activity center for all homeless children to attend either after school or during the weekend.

Business and Service Groups Do Their Part

Business and service organizations also enhanced our efforts to serve our needy students. During the Christmas holidays, for example, a local talk-radio station adopted City Park. For a month, the station collected toys and clothing and then organized a special program to distribute the items to our students: Appreciative parents often remarked that these were the only gifts their children would be receiving that winter.

A private law firm established a fund to provide instructional materials not available through the district. From our teachers' “wish lists,” the firm would then estimate the budget and issue a check for the amount requested. We spent a large percentage of the money on manipulatives, as children learn better through concrete, hands-on
Personal attention from a concerned adult enhances the child's experiential background and self-esteem and, in turn, facilitates the teaching-learning process.

Assisting Migrant Students in Your Area

The children of migrant workers are one segment of the student population whose home status is precarious. Readers who would like to learn how to help migrant students in their locales can contact:

Francis Corrigan
Director of Migrant Education
400 Maryland Ave., SW
Washington, DC 20202
202-401-0740
He will be able to direct readers to local Migrant Education offices around the country.

An Extended Family

Coordinating a variety of programs for homeless children is not an easy task. Every school may not have access to the wealth of volunteer services available in the City Park community, and educators may have to expend great effort to recruit such resources. Another obstacle is that all people working with children traumatized by homelessness and/or poverty need training in advance. Such a time-consuming task may be exacting. Nevertheless, the additional time and effort schools spend in gaining support from their communities is returned manyfold. Community groups furnish "extras" that go far beyond the tangible. For example, the impact that a concerned adult can have on a homeless child—through tutoring, playing after-school games, or stopping by for lunch—is immeasurable. Such personal attention enhances the child's experiential background and self-esteem and, in turn, facilitates the teaching-learning process. In this way, community support benefits not only the child but the entire school as well. Working closely with the school, the community, thus, becomes part of an extended family for the poor and the homeless.

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