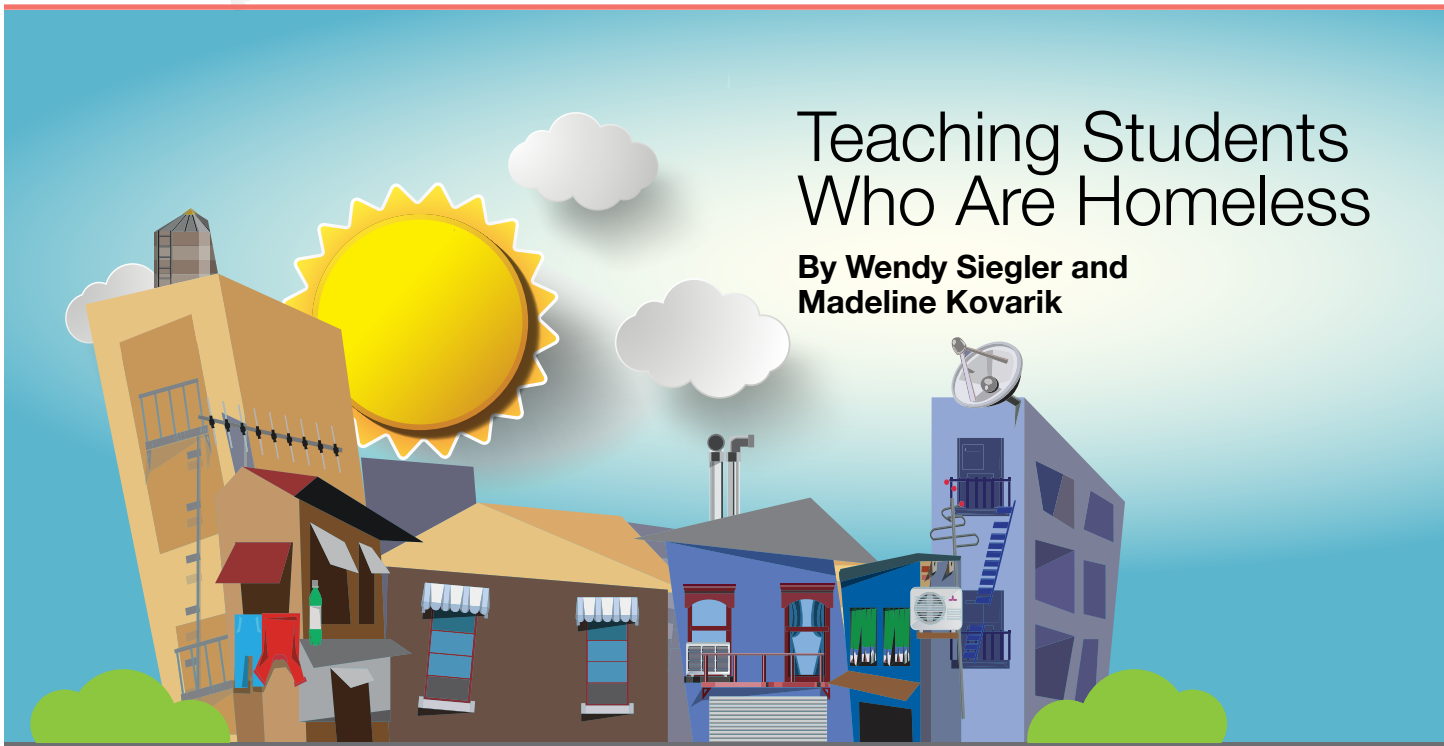


Teaching Students Who Are Homeless

By Wendy Siegler and Madeline Kovarik



ONLINE RESOURCES

Kids Without Homes Toolkit

bit.ly/hmlsstoolkit

Homeless Education Curricula and Lesson Plans

bit.ly/endhmless

National Coalition for the Homeless

bit.ly/factsmckin

National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth

<http://www.naehcy.org>

Approximately 1.6 million children in the United States are homeless in any given year (National Center on Family Homelessness, 2015). You may have one of these children in your classroom, which may be one of the few consistent and safe places for him or her.

Being homeless directly influences and disrupts a child's education, causing academic setbacks with every move to a new location or shelter, causing a loss of up to 6 months of educational progress each time he or she changes schools (Institute for Children, Poverty and Homelessness, 2014).

According to the National Center on Family Homelessness (2009), homeless students, when compared to their peers with homes, are

- eight times more likely to repeat a grade;
- three times more likely to be placed in a special education class;
- twice as likely to score below average on standardized tests;
- less likely to graduate from high school (less than 25%); and
- less proficient in reading and mathematics by the end of high school.

Observable indicators of a homeless student (Seattle University Project on Family Homelessness, 2014) may include the following:

- gaps in education, frequent school changes, and irregular attendance;
- health issues, such as missing immunization records, frequent illnesses, fatigue, and hunger;
- poor hygiene, such as lack of bathing or dirty clothes;
- difficulty forming friendships and low self-esteem; and
- unpreparedness for school, with missing homework or supplies.

In addition to academic needs, these students often have affective, behavioral, and physical needs that must be met. To create a positive learning environment for homeless students, teachers might consider the following:

- **Affective needs:** Create an environment where homeless students feel they “own” something (e.g., their own cubby, supplies, and desk) to increase their sense of belonging or stability. Follow a set routine to provide structure.

- Behavioral needs: Work with school counselors to help students develop both positive behavioral skills and trust. Many of them may have disruptive behaviors, attachment issues, or negative emotions.
- Physical needs: Inform the student and parent about obtaining free or reduced-price lunch as well as transportation options. If clothing is needed, determine how to obtain donated new or used clothing. Basic medical needs could be addressed by the school nurse and/or local health department.
- Academics: Because homeless students may have had negative classroom experiences, create a welcoming environment. Possibly have a classroom buddy assist with integration and tutoring. Provide alternative ways/deadlines for completing assignments. Keep a portfolio of the student's academic information that can be forwarded to the child's potential next teacher.

Teaching homeless students can be a challenge, but it also may be a rewarding experience—one that creates a brighter future for the child.

McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Education Act

To protect the rights of children who are homeless and help them stay in school, the McKinney-Vento Act was established in 1987 and reauthorized in 2002 as part of No Child Left Behind legislation. This federal act guarantees their right to immediate school enrollment even if they lack paperwork, to attend their school of origin (i.e., the school the student attended when permanently housed or the school in which the student was last enrolled), and to transportation if requested (U.S. Department of Education, 2004). The McKinney-Vento Act also provides grants to state agencies to ensure that all homeless children have equal access to education, while strictly prohibiting schools from segregating them.

Wendy Siegler is a second-grade teacher in Orange County Public Schools, Orlando, FL. She has worked as a graduate assistant in undergraduate classes that focus on working with diverse populations, and she currently works with diverse populations and homeless students. **Madeline Kovarik** has experience as an elementary teacher working with migrant and homeless populations, a guidance counselor, primary specialist, and school administrator. She currently teaches TESOL courses at the University of San Francisco.

Knowledge Is Power

For Teachers

Teachers should gain an understanding of the McKinney-Vento Act and the responsibilities as a teacher of a child who is homeless. Check with your district for training on homelessness.

For Parents

Make certain that the parents of children who are homeless are able to attend school functions, PTA/PTO meetings, and parent-teacher conferences. Work through the school's support or guidance team to determine the resources available to help them attend.

For Students

Increase the other students' awareness about homelessness and diverse situations in their community. One way to introduce the subject is to use children's literature. Here are a few suggestions:

- *December*, Eve Bunting (primary grades)
- *Fly Away Home*, Eve Bunting (primary)
- *A Shelter in Our Car*, Monica Gunning (primary)
- *Shoebox Sam*, Mary Brigid Barrett (primary)
- *The Lunch Thief*, Anne C. Bromley (primary)
- *Shelter Folks*, Virginia L. Kroll (intermediate)
- *Gracie's Girl*, Ellen Wittlinger (intermediate)
- *The Can Man*, Laura E. Williams (intermediate)
- *I Can Hear the Sun*, Patricia Polacco (intermediate)
- *No Place to Be: Voices of Homeless Children*, Judith Berck (upper)
- *The Homeless* (Opposing Viewpoints), Louise I. Gerdes (upper)
- *Current Controversies: Poverty and the Homeless*, Mary E. Williams (upper)
- *Monkey Island*, Paula Fox (upper)

References

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