



Coordinator Ensures Homeless Students Are Seen During Pandemic

By Sarah D. Sparks

In Washington state, where the first coronavirus cases were detected in the country last January, schools and emergency shelters shut down at the same time.

The simultaneous closing of two safe havens for homeless students and their families portended a looming disaster for those already struggling with housing insecurity.

“The temperatures at night were freezing—17 or 18 degrees [Fahrenheit]—and I was getting called about families who were sleeping in their car because the hotel wouldn’t rent to them because they were coughing,” said Amy Perusse, the coordinator of the homeless Kids in Transition program for the 20,000-student Everett school district, about 30 miles north of Seattle.

“There were no emergency shelters we could find.”

The fluidity of the situation and the novelty of the fast-moving pandemic made it easy for homeless children, who make up about 2.6 percent of all K-12 students nationally, to get lost in the shuffle. And indeed, as schools have moved to remote and hybrid-learning, districts across the country have reported that more than one in four of the nation’s record-high 1.5 million homeless children have fallen off the radar.

As a result of Perusse’s aggressive outreach, Everett, which averages about 1,100 homeless students annually, has identified 60 more homeless students this academic year than last year.

Even before the pandemic, student homelessness was a challenge in Everett. In 2009, the district enrolled 510 homeless students. But that number—which includes about 200 unaccompanied homeless children annually—has doubled in recent years. The growth mirrors a national rise in child poverty and homelessness in the last decade.

Perusse believes the key to locating and keeping track of homeless students during a crisis is ensuring that everyone is looking for them—and

Amy Perusse

Coordinator, Kids In Transition Program
Everett Public Schools, Everett, Wash.

LESSONS From the Leader

Coordinate online

Create easy ways for those working in education, housing, social services, and nonprofits to share the load for identification and services.

Get more eyes on students

Train all adults in schools, not just teachers, to identify homeless students in live and virtual environments.

Build on other services

Add questions that can flag potential homeless children in other critical forms, such as school meals applications, or on the main school site.

that every family feels seen.

“She really listens to each family, even with how time-consuming it can be, and she will figure out how to get them supported and connected to what they need,” said Chad Golden, Everett’s director of categorical programs, which are federal programs for disadvantaged students.

In part that’s because Perusse remembers what it’s like to feel unmoored. She graduated high school at 18, already married with two children. But the marriage fell apart abruptly when her children were in elementary school. Perusse had to leave her home on short notice and struggled to make ends meet and find a new place to live.

“There were times when my own children would have qualified for [McKinney-Vento],” the federal program to support education for homeless students, she said.

Perusse’s experience was like that of many of the families who become homeless but often fly under schools’ radar.

Under McKinney-Vento, any student without a “fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence” is considered homeless.

Students living on the street or in homeless shelters can be more easily identified, as are students moving frequently within the foster care system; however, many more homeless students live “doubled up,” as Perusse’s children were, sometimes with relatives, friends, or in motels. These children aren’t as readily spotted by school or social service officials, and often their parents do not realize they qualify for help.

“I worked in a school, and I talked with my administrators, and they knew my situation—and nobody ever offered support,” she said. “I drove my kids clear across town to go to school and got up really early in the morning. I didn’t know that because I was living at a friend’s house one night, and then over at my mom’s on another night, and sometimes in a motel, that I could have gotten any help.”

That personal experience fuels Perusse’s work, and she keeps her children in mind when working with families.

“Part of my passion for what I do now is [because] people need to know that this exists,” said Perusse, an 11-year veteran of Everett’s schools. “I also know we need to handle it delicately because you don’t want people to feel bad.”

Before the pandemic, Perusse noticed that some homeless families were uncomfortable connecting through email or calls. She got a department cell phone to send and receive text messages from families to put them at ease.

“That really came in handy when we started to go remote,” Golden said, because families still had a fast way to reach the school for help.

Perusse came to Everett in 2009 to coordinate academic

and transition services for high school students in the Snohomish County juvenile justice facility school that’s housed in the district—a job she considers one of her favorites.

Four years later, she became a high school graduation coordinator for the entire school system, and took over the district’s McKinney-Vento programs a year later.

Before Everett, Perusse worked for several Washington districts and, for a year, with the Washington Housing Authority, which she said has given her better insight into which housing programs may best fit her students’ families.

“Every position I’ve held has really prepared me for this,” she said.

Creating a regional support network

About five years ago, she began to hold quarterly countywide meetings for homeless education and foster-care coordinators. Those meetings initially focused on arranging transportation for homeless students who lived outside of their home districts. Over time, representatives from neighboring counties and local housing agencies also began to attend.

When the pandemic hit, Perusse brought together representatives from local homeless and domestic violence shelters, law enforcement, community groups, and housing officials via virtual meetings and joint Google Docs.

The group tracked homeless students across school and district boundaries, pooled community resources and connected families with everything from food, clothing, and pandemic-related health care needs to temporary housing and mental health. It also provided school support services such as portable Wi-Fi and phones.

“It was really understanding the mobility inherent in homelessness, going right away for a regional approach and creating the kinds of systems for liaisons to communicate with each other,” said Barbara Duffield, executive director of SchoolHouse Connection, a national nonprofit working to support homeless children’s education, which used Everett’s network to model guidance for other districts.

“They can say, OK, I’ve got X number of families living in my districts, but they’re enrolled in your school district. Here (are) the resources that they need.”

The collaboration has allowed Everett to adapt its supports quickly to meet the needs of students during the pandemic.

Some of those needs are immediate and practical. On the tech side, the district purchases mobile phones for

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Amy Perusse, the homeless education coordinator for the Everett, Wash. school district, has assembled a regional network to coordinate vital assistance for homeless students and families.

Jenny Riffle for Education Week

families in domestic violence shelters (where parents are often asked to surrender their phones) and noise-cancelling headsets for students, who may be crowded together with siblings and parents, to hear their teachers during their Zoom classes. The district also coordinates regular deliveries of masks and hygiene supplies.

Other assistance can include helping families wend their way through the bureaucracy. For example, at the end of a typical year, Perusse transitions about 500 students out of homeless education services after they graduate or their families find a stable place to live. In 2020, though, the sinking economy threatened the stability of families who had recently found stable housing. Perusse worked with state homeless coordinators to keep supports in place for families at risk of becoming homeless again.

Erika Phillips, the associate director of housing and resources for Millennia Ministries, a local nonprofit which helps connect homeless families to housing and social supports, called Perusse “a constant voice for the Everett public school district children.”

“Parents are overwhelmed, the kids are stressed out. It’s hard for kids to be on Zoom ... and it’s hard when you’re living in your car or when you are moving from shelter to shelter to hotel, to check in and keep your kids motivated,” Phillips said.

She added, “We’re able to get the moms and the dads emotional support, while Amy gets the kids the emotional support they need.” That might include therapy and other mental health services, or even just opportunities to participate in school clubs or activities that would otherwise be difficult to manage.

Perusse has steadily expanded supports for homeless students, with building-level coordinators at every school and partnerships with the district’s early-childhood program and local preschools. (Federal estimates suggest 45 percent

of all homeless children are younger than five years old.)

In high schools, she teamed with Western Washington University to create internships for college students in the human services program to work with the homeless coordinators, stock food pantries and clothing closets, and deliver supplies to shelters and campgrounds.

Last summer and fall, Everett also trained all district staff, not just teachers and principals, on how to recognize students who may be homeless, during in-person and virtual instruction.

A big part of training involves helping staff learn to ask more questions, rather than ticking off boxes about students’ home environments, she said.

When students are in the building, school staff may note “red flags,” such as tardiness or wearing the same clothes days in a row.

In virtual environments, this might mean asking children about others in their home if there seems to be many children or adults in view, or questioning whether a student has a set place to do schoolwork if their video background regularly shows different homes.

“There could be people who are living together, and it’s more of a roommate situation,” Perusse said. “But if you dig a little bit deeper and start peeling back that onion layer, you realize that, oh, the reason they’re really living together is because they lost [their] housing or they fled a domestic violence situation.

“There are so many layers to the story that people don’t even think to share details about with a school,” Perusse said. ■

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