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Homeless students face extra burdens

Transportation, health, fees and access to technology all pose problems for students who have lost their homes.

By [Julie Muhlstein](#) and [Sharon Salyer](#), Herald Writers

EVERETT -- They live in Rucker Hill mansions. They go home to suburban cul-de-sacs and low-income apartments. The Everett School District draws students from north Everett to Mill Creek. And walking the hall in every one of its 26 schools is a child who is homeless.

"We don't have a school in our district that doesn't have homeless students," said Mary Ellen Hardy, the district's "go-to" person that homeless families often first connect with.

As of Monday, 435 students in the Everett district were classified as "actively homeless," Hardy said. "We have a mother with two little girls living in a campground in Startup," she added.

Everett High School and Evergreen Middle School have the highest numbers of homeless students.

In the 2010-11 school year, the Everett district served 835 homeless students out of an overall enrollment of 18,536 students. In the current year, Hardy expects the number of homeless students to exceed 1,000 students. "It's a constant bombardment of phone calls," she said.

Children considered homeless include those living in shelters, unsheltered and living in cars or on the streets, those in motels or camping, and children whose families share housing with others because of the loss of their own home, said Cynthia Jones, the district's director of categorical programs who oversees services to homeless students.

An economy mired in the longest recession since the Great Depression has had a big impact on the number of homeless students in school districts throughout Snohomish County and statewide.

In Washington, the number of homeless students rose by more than half in five years, according to a report by the state Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction.

In December 2010, the state office reported that, of the state's 1.04 million students, close to 22,000 were homeless in 2010. That figure was up 5 percent from the previous school year, and up 56.5 percent from 2005-06.

In Snohomish County, 1,754 homeless elementary, middle and high school students were counted in 2009-10 school year. Updated numbers for the 2010-11 school year are expected next month.

The federal McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, passed in 1987, has a goal of increasing the success of homeless students by steps such as allowing them to remain enrolled in their home school, even if they are temporarily living in another public school district.

For a number of years, the state has mandated that questions about a student's residence be answered at the time of enrollment, Jones said.

Under the federal law, districts are required to work with families to provide stability in school attendance. This means districts must transport homeless students to schools from wherever they are living.

"Transportation is the biggest thing we do in terms of money and students staying in their school of origin," Jones said.

Last year, Jones said, the Everett district spent about \$700,000 to transport homeless students 288,979 miles. Getting these students to their schoolhouse door has involved working with a number of surrounding school districts, and some as far away as Renton.

Everett isn't alone.

For example, the Mukilteo School District spent an estimated \$345,000 last year providing transportation for homeless students, district spokesman Andy Muntz said.

The Mukilteo district now has 110 homeless students either coming in or going out of the school district, from destinations as distant as West Seattle and Mount Vernon.

The pick-up and delivery involves working with eight other school districts. Dispatchers spend three hours each day arranging rides using small buses or, in some cases, taxis, when bus transportation can't be arranged.

"It's a huge puzzle, as you might imagine," Muntz said. "Our schools open at different times. We have different school breaks. There are a lot of complications."

Yet keeping homeless students in the same school, regardless of where their family might be forced to move, is one of the most important things school districts can do, the Everett district's Jones said.

"It's a place to go where teachers know them and they have friends," Jones said. "These kids just want to feel normal."

Homelessness already puts students at a huge academic disadvantage, and students typically lose four to six months of educational progress by changing schools, Jones said.

The academic performance of homeless students versus those of in stable homes "doesn't compare," Jones said. "There's a huge gap."

For 11th-graders in the Everett district, the average grade point average is 2.53. For a homeless high school junior, it's 1.65, Jones said.

Absenteeism, even with the transportation, is still higher among homeless students of all grades.

"For the school year 2010-2011, our average high school student was absent 5.4 percent of the total days enrolled," Jones said. "Our average homeless high school student was absent 11.9 percent of the total days enrolled."

Overall, homeless high school students are in class 39 fewer days than their peers.

"So not only were our homeless kids absent more days when they were enrolled, they were enrolled for fewer days to begin with," Jones said. "The same trends are true at elementary and middle school."

Homeless students miss days for many reasons, she said. Time is lost while they move from place to place. And they're sick more often because of poor nutrition and lack of health care.

They also miss days because of depression and for the simple reason that school no longer is the most important or relevant part of their lives, Jones said.

"If you're worrying about where you're going to sleep at night, where your next meal is going to come from, you don't have a whole lot of energy to put into education."

Homelessness doesn't just happen, Hardy said.

"There's been a buildup. Mom lost a job, Dad lost a job. They couldn't get any more loans. All that stress has happened. The kids are sad. They're coming to school with that experience."

To help overcome these obstacles, the district provides support in large and small ways.

"We can't expect less in terms of graduation requirements and state tests," Jones said. "If there's any hope that they will get out of the cycle of poverty, they've got to have that educational foundation."

The district has provided homeless students with rented musical instruments and sports uniforms. It has also paid activity fees to play sports, for field trips and for graduation caps and gowns.

For the first time this year, the district will provide yearbooks to homeless students.

The district even loaned a laptop computer to a homeless student who was taking Running Start college-level classes. "Over the summer we loaned it out to a different family, and now it is with yet another student," Jones said.

Hardy said two seventh-grade boys, from different families, at an Everett middle school had behavior problems after becoming homeless. Working with a counselor, the district was able to arrange for a tutor for the boys. They are now doing better in school, Hardy said, and the behavior problems are gone.

This past holiday season, Hardy even wrote letters on behalf of homeless students to Christmas House, a nonprofit organization that provides gifts for families in need. The Everett charity normally requires proof that families live in Snohomish County. With the district's letter, homeless children were among those receiving Christmas House gifts last month.

"One of the most sobering parts of the job is realizing just how little can make such a big difference," Hardy said.

Even with all the challenges, some students overcome the odds.

In both of the past two years, Jones and Hardy said, 20 to 25 homeless students graduated from Everett high schools. They didn't have permanent homes, but earned diplomas and at least two are now in college.

Last year, Hardy was in the audience for Everett High School's graduation ceremonies. She cheered as some of what she calls "my kids" received their diploma.

"There we were the Hardy family cheering section," she said. "It's personal to me. I see their faces. I know their stories ... It felt great."

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By the numbers

A look at the effect of homelessness on students in Everett public schools.

Average GPA for 11th-grade students

Non-homeless: 2.53.

Homeless juniors: 1.65

Average credits by end of junior year

Non-homeless students: 16

Homeless students: 12

Average absenteeism rates for high school students

Non-homeless students: 5.4 percent

Homeless students: 11.9 percent.

This means that, on average, non-homeless high school students were in class 149 days, while homeless students were in class 110 days.

Source: Everett Public Schools

Homeless students' rights

The federal McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, passed in 1987, is designed to remove barriers to education created by homelessness, with the goal of increasing enrollment, attendance, and success of students experiencing homelessness.

The law allows:

- Students who are homeless to remain in one school, even if their temporary living situation is located in another school district or attendance area. Schools must provide transportation.

Students who are homeless to enroll in school and begin attending immediately, even if they cannot produce normally required documents, such as birth certificates, proof of guardianship, immunization records, or proof of residency.

Source: [The National Center for Homeless Education](#)

Resources

More information on homeless education, including a list of resources, is available online from the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction: www.k12.wa.us/HomelessEd/.

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