

Homeless Youth and Their Experience in Colorado Public Schools

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Abstract

The Colorado Department of Education, Office for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth, commissioned the Center for Research Strategies (CRS) to investigate the experience of homeless youth in Colorado's public high schools. To that end, CRS conducted interviews and focus groups with homeless or transitional young people whose experience of education included a high degree of mobility in both their home and school environments. This document is a report of those findings.

Homeless Youth and Their Experience in Colorado Public Schools

The Colorado Department of Education, Office for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth, commissioned the Center for Research Strategies (CRS) to investigate the experience of homeless youth in Colorado's public high schools. CRS interviewed over two dozen young people from the ages of sixteen to twenty who were either homeless, in transitional housing or unaccompanied youth. The continuum of remarks and suggestions that they made make up the body of this report.

Method

Twenty-seven youth contributed their perspectives to this document. The sample of youth voices in this brief study was chosen by convenience, because they were: a) known by the State Coordinator for Homeless Children and Youth, or b) living in shelters or attending programs known to serve homeless or transitional children and youth. Three of these youth described their public school experiences during private interviews, and 24 as part of focus groups. The first youth interviewed had graduated from Colorado's Finest, a charter high school in the Englewood School District. Two other youth who were interviewed were living at Inn Between of Longmont, Transitional Housing. One of the focus groups consisted of youth currently living at Urban Peak, a homeless shelter in Denver, Colorado and participating in a GED program that provides services for unaccompanied youth 16-21 years old. The other focus group was convened at The SPOT, an evening drop in center for teens, also in Denver, Colorado. The participants were asked four questions:

- 1) Can you quantify the level of school mobility you have experienced?
- 2) What were the best experiences you had in public schools?
- 3) What aspects of public schools did you find challenging (or, in some cases, impossible)?
- 4) If you had the ear of superintendents or principals, what would you suggest to them?

Adult professionals augmented the youth perspective by sharing their opinions on the influence of mobility. These were collected through: a) interviews with Kim Vela, homeless

liaison for Denver Public Schools and Andre Adeli, Assistant Director of Education for Boulder Preparatory High School, b) a policy paper by Michael Cohen, and the Aspen Institute on Transforming the American High School, c) quotes from national experts on educational issues sustained by homeless children and youth, and d) Kathleen Cushman's book, *Fires in the Bathroom: Suggestions by Teens to Teachers and Principals*.

Results

It's common for people not to realize what homelessness is; and if you don't see it in your daily life, it is easy to think it doesn't exist. It's a problem that is hidden in many communities.

Patricia Jullianelle, Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty

Quantification of the Degree of Mobility Experienced by Homeless Youth

The numbers of homeless children and youth are increasing dramatically. Denver Public Schools reported a 40% growth from the 2001-2 school year to 2002-3. Those records indicate that the racial/ethnic breakdown of homeless students includes a preponderance of youth of color. Data from Denver Public Schools show that 15% of the homeless students they worked with were Caucasian, 32% African American, 47% Hispanic, 4% American Indian, and 2% Asian. Kim Vela, Homeless Liaison for Denver Public Schools, reports that the numbers of homeless youth are always consistently higher in elementary school (66%), tapering in middle school (20%) and lower in high school (14%). It is her belief that students in high school work very hard not to be noticed because of the negative stigma attached to being homeless (Vela, 2003). Her second interpretation of the discrepancy between elementary and high school is that highly mobile students are more likely to dropout (Rumberger, 1998).

Of the 27 students interviewed:

- Two were stable in their elementary school experience. Research would lead us to believe these students have the greatest potential for learning the requisite basic educational skills. Another seven reported some movement but less than three elementary schools over their elementary school years.

- Fourteen of the students attended between three and six elementary schools. Research suggests that stability may be most important in primary grades. Multiple moves can result in the cumulative effect of children missing critical learning opportunities and may cause these students to struggle in later years because they lack basic skills (Colorado Affordable Housing, 2002).
- Four students reported attending more than six elementary schools. Research indicates that if a student changes elementary schools more than three times in a single year, they essentially lose the skill base that should have been developed in that year. This is due in a large part to the attention young people put on the social aspects of school. It takes a few months before new students feel as if they belong, which in turn allows them to focus more attention on their academic learning. In a 1988 study reported in the Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA), Wood et al. report, “after adjusting for other covariates, frequent family relocation was associated with an increased risk of children failing a grade in school and four or more frequently occurring behavioral problems.”
- Eight students had graduated with a diploma, some from alternative schools, and another fourteen were working towards or had attained their GED’s. These youth view education as an important link to obtaining employment.
- Only one student had remained stable throughout elementary, middle school and high school. This was a young man who had just graduated while living in transitional housing. He was particularly impressed with the flexibility that his high school had offered him that allowed him to continue his education and receive his diploma despite the instability in his living circumstances.
- Seven students had attended an alternative school.
- Ten had been in corrections and obtained some schooling during that time.
- Seven students had attended more than two middle schools.

- Two of the students were teen mothers.

Teachers show that they value and respect students partly by letting them know that they hold high expectations for them. And just as with respect, those expectations apply to both teacher and student. Teachers can make the bargain perfectly clear: They will provide schoolwork that really matters; along with the support students need to succeed at it. In return, students will give their best effort to master important knowledge and skills.

Cushman 2003

The Best Experiences while Attending Public Schools.

Adults working with homeless and highly mobile students often list meeting a student's "primary needs," such as food, shelter, clothing, and healthcare as their first priority. The literature points out that schools can provide the homeless or highly mobile child with the safety and consistency that the rest of his/her life may not offer. One young man in this study, who had remained stable in a single high school, while his family was upturned in crisis, was the only student who mentioned how important the school was in being able to help provide food and clothing to help him through those difficult times.

Once highly mobile and homeless students' primary needs are met, what then leads to their connecting or even bonding with the school environment? The young people we spoke with consistently reported that caring adults, who noticed whether they were doing well and responded appropriately, were what lead to their best school experiences. Over half listed a connection with one or more teachers as having made a "difference in their lives." One student commented on receiving this type of support:

One teacher was breaking the mold; he was nice to all people; we wanted to work in his class.

These students told stories of the times they needed an advocate to help them maneuver through a sometimes inflexible educational system. One student, whose life was in chaos during a move to transitional housing, reported,

An assistant principal at my school would go to teachers and help me work through situations. The school gave me more time and let me make up credits on independent study."

Many students found alternative schools to be their best experiences. When asked to explain, they spoke of smaller classes, a more caring environment, an acceptance of diversity, and atmosphere that was not punitive, as well as “smarter teachers.”

Even before anyone knew me, I felt like I fit in. They weren't tolerant of drugs, fighting or disrespect, but they were tolerant of differences.

These schools frequently were reported to have some program that brought students together. One reported a system of “veterans,” students who had been attending the school for over a year who volunteered to help other students. This same school established “families,” that is, a homeroom class where both the teacher and peers assisted students in their meeting the graduation requirements. The charter school assistant principal characterized his school’s commitment to giving students opportunities for self-efficacy. “Students are asked “What are you doing right?” and then the school creates their educational experience from there” (Adeli, 2003).

Youth commented positively on schools that had successfully developed programs adapted to student needs and interests. For instance, several students had attended both day and night programs. This allowed for flexibility in class scheduling when a student needed to balance school and work. Students reported a great appreciation for situations where they could freely choose the courses they took. They also appreciated, graduation requirements that mirrored responsibilities in normal adult life. Examples they mentioned included: a) being required to become a registered voter (Colorado’s Finest), b) having an acceptance letter from a local college in their file (Boulder Prep), or c) having completed a career inventory (Colorado’s Finest).

Physical education, sports, music, art and theatre were listed among the environments that created the best school experiences. Twenty students reported having good experiences while participating in these electives. Twelve suggested this was because of the increased attention provided to them by teachers within these topic areas. Technology classes engaged

them, partially because of attention from teachers and partially because they knew they would be using this knowledge in the future.

Anyone who has made it out of their teens most likely remembers the feelings of anonymity and captivity that even the best schools can convey. Whether in huge urban warehouses, sprawling suburban campuses, or newly consolidated rural schools, teachers with more than 125 students a day can't help but focus the majority of their attention on only the most urgent cases.

Cushman: Fires in the Bathroom, 2003

The Most Challenging Experiences While Attending Public Schools.

“It seemed like there was no one there for people like me.” This statement, from one of the young women we interviewed, sums up what the majority of youth told us. Related student comments were:

All I did in school was hang out with my friends. No one paid attention to me; it was like they expected me to fail. I didn't fit in their mold.

The classes are too big and the teachers don't have a chance to know or care about everyone.

I wasn't able to be the person I am. I was always in trouble for little stuff, how I dressed, talking, things like that.

In my whole school experience I only had four teachers that gave a rat's ass about how I did.

If the students were noticed, they felt like rules were inconsistently applied to them.

Expectations either seemed to be too high or not high enough

Teachers are invested in being right.

School was punitive.

I had teachers just pass me, even when I had only been to class three times.

It was especially frustrating to these students when the attendance and recording systems in public education broke down and interfered with their credits towards graduation. Moving, especially across state lines, was reported to have interfered with obtaining credits.

I was almost to graduation, and in another school, only to find out that a previous counselor had screwed up my credits.

Transferring credits across state lines is miserable, why can't educators get it together and teach similar stuff?

School cultures, which varied from school to school, limited the ability of these students to feel connected to their schools, leaving them also feeling misunderstood. In the students' words,

There was one school where you could feel the race, you know what I mean?" (Other youth shake their head, yes). There are a million labels and it sucks when they are put on you.

I was called a lesbian just because I wanted to play football.

I was labeled as a gang member because I wear red and was friends with boys.

When one person messes up, everyone suffers.

The most urgent reason to overhaul high schools is quite simple. Many young people are leaving high school lacking both the academic preparation necessary for postsecondary education and the broad knowledge, habits of mind, and personal and social skills necessary for success in the workplace and in a diverse, democratic society. That's a crisis for students and their families, for their communities, and most certainly for the high schools. This crisis can't be solved simply by trying to push more students through the same pipeline that now works for only a portion of them.

Michael Cohen, Transforming the American High School

Suggestions for Superintendents and Principals.

Stories abound of extremely resilient youth who graduate from high school despite incredibly strong forces to the contrary. One young man lived for six months sleeping in a stranger's garage. One girl was taken to Urban Peak, went on to find an apartment, get a job, become involved in school activities and eventually earned her GED the first time she took the test. To serve the multiplicity of students in today's society, a school district must take responsibility to create options for students who are not achieving, employing the norm that every student should be empowered to succeed. Creating individualized approaches to the needs of homeless students can help to promote this goal. According to the assistant principal of Boulder Prep, "Be patient and gather all the background information you can, things are

frequently not what they seem, when dealing with this population” (Adeli, 2003). Echoing these sentiments, a student recommended:

Be flexible and try to understand what life must be like through my eyes.

Students interviewed as part of this project agreed that youth advocates can play a vital role in helping homeless students. This can be achieved by mediating with the system when their lives get in the way of their education, by sorting through issues with academic credits and by helping to work through system issues, such as transferring school records from another state.

Charter schools and alternative schools offer promising opportunities to youth who have not been able to bond with a more traditional school setting. Smaller schools, in particular, can provide more attention to the youth who developmentally need this type of direction. In these environments, youth are more likely to feel as if they “fit” or “have a place,” as one girl put it. Young people who are not engaged in the regular school setting, and for whom rules and regulations hold little sway, can be offered attendance in an alternative environment. By creating waivers for suspensions and expulsions for students to attend charters or alternative schools, school districts can maintain their zero tolerance policies while allowing more flexibility for youth who would otherwise leave the system entirely. Boulder Preparatory has used this approach, finding: a) the school district can maintain its student count, b) the community has one less unaccompanied youth to be concerned with and, most importantly, c) the young person not only maintains his/her academic career, but will at least be accepted to college as part of graduating, (Adeli, 2003).

Because students who have relocated frequently are often behind academically, sometimes severely so, a school district is well served by offering modular, self paced, independent study opportunities and other strategies that allow students to move at their own pace. A major challenge, frequently mentioned by homeless liaisons in Colorado, is the fact that in a majority of high schools, a high school student will not earn credit if they enroll between grading periods. This requires that these students wait until the start of the next semester to start earning credits

towards graduation. The Colorado Department of Education is exploring a project to develop learning modules that could be completed on-line through public libraries, or at other public locations, to enable students to complete partial course credits while waiting for the next grading period to start.

When dealing with homeless and highly mobile youth, educational leaders recommended that schools be kept small, with 75-100 students considered to be an optimal size (Adeli, 2003). Another suggestion was to “Take classes to the places where former students go.” For instance, a Denver charter school, PS1, will open an evening class at The SPOT, a drop in center for youth who have frequently dropped out. Other ideas offered by homeless students were:

Choose teachers that have strong skills in being willing and able to bond to students.

Encourage teachers to mentor us, to get involved. Listen to us, even if you can't help.

Schools should be our second family.

Relate to me like a friend and not like an authority; I am 19, work it out with me.

The young people we spoke to wanted more challenge and at the same time acknowledged that they needed remedial help. The majority of students agreed that high schools should offer college classes. They felt consistently that they should be allowed to sign up for any class that was interesting and they would find a way to get the work done, or learn from trying to tackle more than they could handle. They felt that it was self-defeating for teachers to tell them what they could or could not take.

Offer me remedial help when I am behind, but call it something different than Special Ed.

Challenge me; don't be boring.

Have more hands on and less bookwork.

Use peer tutors, it helps both of us.

Focus on the person in front of you, not what their records tell you. Why would you base your work on the decisions made by other people, years before and not take into account the person you know?

Don't worry about gang stuff so much; there isn't much you can do about it anyway.

Discussion

Homeless young people who are not engaged in traditional high school education fall on a continuum from feeling disenfranchised, sometimes suspended or expelled, to students who choose to drop out. Because of the academic disadvantage that comes from frequent relocation (Bainbridge, 2003), the homeless or mobile student is more likely to be the same student who drops out (Rumberger, 1998).

In this report, homeless youth themselves offer many concrete suggestions for improving the educational experiences of homeless and highly mobile students. Each of these suggestions challenges educational leaders in different ways. For instance, funding the array of educational opportunities recommended would be particularly difficult given the economic crisis of the current time. Building-level educational leaders may find it equally ambitious to influence classroom teachers to, “have patience, work to understand the life conditions that underlie what you see” relative to the performance and school attendance of mobile students.

Finally, educational leaders need to consider what strategies will better prepare the school of the future to face the challenges these students represent? One important long-term solution would be to include experiences in teacher preparation courses that would prepare new teachers to face the issues of economic diversity that today's students and their families bring to the public school environment (Berger, 1994; Oakes, 1993).

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