

School for homeless children finds new home

At monarch, the students hope to transform like butterflies

BY MAUREEN MAGEE

SATURDAY, APRIL 9, 2011 AT 2:52 P.M.



The Monarch School for homeless children. Peggy Peattie/San Diego Union-Tribune



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At the Monarch School for homeless children, the day is full of learning, nutritious food and sometimes a shopping spree in the storage locker that holds the countless donations of clothing for the children. Space is tight since there has been a dramatic increase in the population lately, and

class is held in the library for second and third graders. Peggy Peattie/San Diego Union-Tribune
Forget the bag ladies, winos and other cliché images of homelessness.

The transients at San Diego's Monarch School sport sparkly headbands and tote Hello Kitty backpacks. They cheer for the Padres and pine for the beach. They take on science projects and dread algebra.

This population of itinerant children is growing to the point that the campus — one of only a few schools for the homeless in the nation — needs a bigger campus and is on the verge of getting one.

After years of planning and setbacks, the Monarch School for homeless youth has sealed a real estate sale and swap with San Diego redevelopment officials that will give it larger accommodations for the region's rising population of transient children.

Monarch's enrollment has grown by 75 percent since the fall of 2009 and now serves up to 185 students — kindergartner through high school — on any given day.

"We see more students showing up and we have never turned anyone away — and we don't want to start," said Sarita Fuentes, Monarch's co-principal and CEO. "We say, 'Yes you are homeless, we get it and we'll help you break the cycle through education and support.'"

The \$14.2 million new school will span 51,000 square feet and feature a health center, computer lab, gym, garden and basketball courts on Newton Avenue downtown.

That's a far cry from the school's original "drop-in center" that the San Diego County Office of Education opened in 1987 with a single teacher. That morphed into the Monarch School, which opened its doors to 10,000-square-foot on West Cedar Street to 48 students in 2001.

Students arrive to school each morning — mostly by trolley — from local homeless shelters, motels and from parking lots where they live with their families. In addition to getting an education, Monarch gives students up three meals a day, clothes, health care and counseling.

Some students spend only a few days or weeks at the campus after their parents fall on tough times and search for housing. The average stint is about six months. Some have stayed as long as seven years at the school while their parents remain transient.

Federal law requires schools to help homeless students stay enrolled even when they lose their housing. Because families are often reluctant to reveal their housing troubles to schools, many move around and their children fall through the cracks.

The average student arrives at Monarch three years behind grade level. For every 6 months students spend at Monarch, officials said they progress more than a year academically.

A San Diego County Grand Jury Report issued in May 2008 described Monarch students as "happy, well-behaved and excited about learning," and praised the staff "for their hard work, perseverance,

and dedication” to students affected by homelessness.

Students feel so comfortable at Monarch, many never want to leave — even after their families find housing.

“You don’t have to hide anything when you’re here,” said Domminiece Willis, a senior who has attended Monarch since September. “I just love the people here, I love to read and I’m nervous about leaving.”

Since her family left “the blue house on 30th Street” about eight years ago, Domminiece and her mother and three siblings have lived in shelters and motels throughout California, Nevada, New York and Maine.

Many students come from chronically homeless families, like Domminiece’s. Others are thrust into homelessness after their parents lose steady income or succumb to addiction. Some older students even enroll themselves, Fuentes said.

Nationwide, a few private schools operate programs for transient students. But San Diego County is among four counties to be given permission from the federal government to run public schools specifically for homeless students. Monarch is one of five schools under the San Diego County Community School system that serve at-risk students.

The Monarch School will move out of its cramped quarters and into the Newton Avenue building that served as the city’s temporary homeless shelter this winter in time to open its doors in September 2012.

Monarch’s nonprofit will sell its existing campus to the city’s redevelopment agency for \$2.04 million. Monarch will buy the Newton Avenue building from the agency for \$1 and finance the renovation with donations.

The city has offered Monarch a ground lease with a five-year option to buy the real estate for \$2 million. The County Office of Education will lease the space from Monarch for about \$642,000 a year.

The school must now secure various planning and construction permits. With about \$5 million in donations in hand, organizers are working to generate another \$7 million to fund the expansion.

Although plans to build shelters and housing for the homeless have stirred heated debates in San Diego for years, the City Council — which oversees redevelopment money — voted unanimously for the new homeless school project. But the need for long-term housing persists in San Diego, said Bob McElroy, president of the Alpha Project for the Homeless.

“There is a perception that adults are homeless by choice. Kids are innocent,” McElroy said. “There is compassion for kids and rightly so. But people don’t realize they still go home to the shelter or tramp

motel or the car.”

maureen.magee@uniontrib.com (619) 293-1369

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