

EDUCATION WEEK

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Enrollment Surges at Schools for Homeless Students



Students perform a dance routine during rehearsals at the Monarch School, a San Diego-based, public K-12 institution that exclusively serves homeless students.


—Sandy Huffaker for Education Week

By Michelle D. Anderson

When Sarita Fuentes thinks of homelessness, she doesn't conjure the stereotypical image of a disheveled older man pushing a shopping cart through an urban neighborhood—she thinks of her students.

"What I see are these babies—elementary school children and their siblings," said Ms. Fuentes, the co-principal and CEO of Monarch School, a San Diego-based, public K-12 institution that exclusively serves homeless students.

Begun by the San Diego County Office of Education as a drop-in center for homeless high school students, the 170-student Monarch School is now a public-private partnership between the San Diego Board of Education and the nonprofit Monarch School Project. It's one of a small number of schools across the country that serve students affected by unstable housing conditions. These schools, along with other schools nationwide, are seeing a growing number of students who are homeless.

Experts say the economic recession has exacerbated youth homelessness, and schools serving this vulnerable population are now being challenged to keep up with the students and offer the unique services to which they are entitled under federal law. According to a 2009 [report](#)  released by the National Center on Family Homelessness, an average of one in 50 children in the United States

has experienced homelessness, which is defined as not having a stable, long-term place to stay. This ranges from children temporarily living with extended family members to living in homeless shelters or inside cars.

Bursting at the Seams

The San Diego area has been hit especially hard economically. According to the San Diego County Office of Department of Education, there were 13,204 homeless students countywide during the 2009-2010 academic year.

Joel Garcia, co-principal at Monarch School says the school has seen about a 74 percent increase in enrollment in the past three years. While the school never turns away its students, Mr. Garcia and Ms. Fuentes say the school has outgrown its current space. This summer, it will begin work on a new building in which school officials hope to serve about 350 students. When Ms. Fuentes arrived at the school in 2004, enrollment hovered around 100 students in grades 3 through 12.

"We're using every little space to maximize our facility," Ms. Fuentes said. The school has already started to use its library as a classroom, and it is currently looking for nearby space to erect "storefront classrooms" within walking distance of the school, she said.

In March, the school began a soft launch of a \$7.5 million capital campaign for its new home. It plans to remodel the interior of the building and move in by the 2012-2013 school year.

The school does not recruit students—most of its families learn about it by word of mouth or through social-service referrals, usually while living in shelters, Ms. Fuentes said.

Homeless in Arizona

Not too far away, in Arizona, another school serving homeless students has seen its waiting list grow.

Jarret Sharp, principal of Children First Academy, Phoenix Campus, part of a network of charter schools in that state, said enrollment in his K-8 school has increased by 12 percent to 18 percent in the past three years. Because the homeless student population is transient, the school's average enrollment fluctuates between 280 and 320 students, its maximum allowed capacity.

During the 2009-2010 academic year, the school's waiting list had about 12 students. As of this month, it had grown to 60 students, Mr. Sharp said.


Mr. Sharp estimates that about 60 percent of his students are native Arizona residents, while the remaining 40 percent hail from out-of-state, particularly from Midwestern states hit hard by the recession, including Michigan, Illinois, and Wisconsin.

He says many of the families who enroll their children have lost their support infrastructure—relatives and friends who could assist them with temporary housing. According to survey findings compiled by the National Coalition for the Homeless, living with family and friends is the most common living situation for people affected by homelessness, followed by emergency shelters, and hotels and motels.

At Monarch School, Ms. Fuentes is seeing changes in the demographic the school serves.

Many families are experiencing homelessness or housing instability for the first time in their lives.

"We're seeing more families who lost their homes to foreclosure. Previously, that had not been our population," Ms. Fuentes said.

Findings from "Foreclosure to Homelessness: The Forgotten Victims of the Subprime Crisis," the June 2009 [report](#)  of survey findings released by the National Coalition for the Homeless, found that an average of 10 percent of the social-service providers they polled said their clients became homeless as a result of foreclosure.

Institutions like Monarch School and Children First Academy are uncommon. The [McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act](#), a 1987 law designed to help homeless students continue their education, discourages segregating homeless students, but it exempts schools in four counties from this rule: San Joaquin, Orange and San Diego counties in California and Maricopa County in Arizona. A subsequent reauthorization of the law expanded on those provisions.

A Student's Perspective

Jessica Valenzuela, 18, enrolled in the Monarch School last fall after her father's job offer fell through at the last minute.

"When we were in Arizona, we were feeding the homeless. All of a sudden, it just twisted on us," said Ms. Valenzuela, who has since lived in a car with her family, and later, in a shelter.

Through an organization called Dreams for Change, which offers social services for San Diego's homeless population, Ms. Valenzuela received a referral to attend the Monarch School. She said the school has helped her tremendously through its "Shopping Day" services, through which she and other students receive free clothes, shoes, and toiletries.

"They understand what you're going through," she said.

The national trend in increased youth homelessness, largely stagnant unemployment rates, and a growing shortage of affordable housing raises the question of how schools can accommodate students affected by homelessness, especially at a time when districts are facing steep budget cuts. At Monarch, teachers, curriculum, and support staff, such as counselors and teaching assistants, are funded by the San Diego school system, while about 55 percent of the school's funding comes from the nonprofit segment of the school, according to Ms. Fuentes.

Joseph Murphy, an associate dean at the Peabody College of Education and Human Development at Vanderbilt University, in Nashville, and the author of a new book, [Homelessness Comes to School](#), said research on what schools can and should do to accommodate students is virtually nonexistent, unlike the research that shows how homelessness affects children, which is abundant.

The biggest problem facing schools is how to serve these kids well, Mr. Murphy said.

"The most at-risk kids are the homeless kids," he added. "They need more voice."

Law's Impact

Mr. Murphy cites the McKinney-Vento law for helping to identify and serve homeless students who had previously been overlooked.

Before the law was passed, only about 25 percent of homeless students were in school. Today, that number is 85 percent, Mr. Murphy said.

The law requires that schools waive typical requirements, such as proof of residency, giving students the option to attend either their school of origin, the one nearest to where they are temporarily residing or schools like Monarch School and Children First Academy, if students live near those schools.



Austin Wood, foreground, plays the steel drums while Sebastian Bowerman, center, and Dylan Whittaker look on at the Monarch School in San Diego.

—Sandy Huffaker for Education Week

It also waives requirements mandating that parents provide medical, immunization, and academic records, and requires schools to offer transportation options. Those options range from changing the district's bus routes by picking up students from shelters and motels to offering public bus passes and even taxi cab fare—measures many school districts are finding costly.

Addressing the academic needs of this vulnerable population is just one element to helping students, Mr. Murphy pointed out.

"There just needs to be a broader social attack," Mr. Murphy said. He said that should include improved housing policies and helping parents obtain education, which may give them access to better paying jobs.

Invisible Population

The face of homelessness changed around 1980, when more minorities, children, and families began facing homelessness, according to Mr. Murphy.

Stacy Bermingham, the head teacher at the Monarch School, described her students as an invisible population with special needs. All are at least two grade levels behind their peers, and many routinely come to school hungry, without a shower, and with psychological challenges. Her students have large gaps of conceptual knowledge, and many have learning disabilities and behavioral issues that have been undiagnosed and untreated because they move frequently or simply attend schools that don't attend to their needs.

Data from the National Center on Family Homelessness, based in Needham, Mass., indicate that students affected by homelessness are four times more likely to show delayed development and are twice as likely to have learning disabilities as nonhomeless children. About 36 percent repeat a grade level.

As a trained reading specialist, Ms. Bermingham has set up a reading clinic where she works with a small group of high school students with literacy challenges. Many of her students lack a quiet space to read and study because they live in shelters and other crowded conditions, she said.

Ms. Fuentes said students receive academic assessments every 120 days, and many of Monarch's students are English-language learners. Despite the students' academic challenges, the school has made steady progress on the state's standardized academic tests, Ms. Fuentes said.

Meeting Special Needs

The new Monarch School facility will include a health clinic, since homeless students are more likely to face health challenges, including obesity, dental diseases, and gastrointestinal problems.

Ms. Fuentes says the students who come to Monarch spend an average of six months at the school, but some students attend the school for far less time.

Patricia Graham, 19, a Monarch School alumna who is now a sophomore at Connecticut College in New London, Conn., came to Monarch School after her family was evicted from their home the summer before 9th grade, in 2005. She stayed long enough to graduate.

As an honors student in middle school, Ms. Graham grappled with the reality that Monarch offered no advanced courses, such as those offered through the International Baccalaureate or Advanced Placement programs, that would make her a more competitive applicant to colleges. However, she stayed at Monarch because of the unique services the school offered, services that she felt she could not get in other schools. She also stayed because she believed her teachers were more understanding of the circumstances that affected her family.

"It really helped me with my home life," Ms. Graham said. "I'm still in contact with teachers I had at Monarch."

Ms. Fuentes says Monarch's services include shower and laundry facilities, conflict mediation, and expressive arts therapy and mandatory after-school tutoring for the students who need it.

"We make sure students are exposed to extracurricular activities that other students who are not homeless have access to," Ms. Fuentes said.

Such activities includes a Junior Achievement-supported program called Butterfly Enterprises, which allows students to learn all components of business by creating and selling artistic products, such a butterfly-themed jewelry; a steel drum band; photography; athletics; and a vegan baking course. The school is also open year-round, and it offers full-time academic instruction in the summer.

Mr. Garcia, co-principal, says summer school instruction is a time for intervention for those students. "That's when we're filling any academic gaps students may have," Mr. Garcia said. Ms. Fuentes said students tell school officials over and over that they have this sense of family because everyone knows their situation. "It's not an easy population to work with," Ms. Fuentes said, "and their needs are so great."