

Innovative School Serving Homeless Students Offers Transportation Options



An alternative school started by the San Diego County Office of Education in the late 1980s has grown to relieve much stress from school districts that must address rising populations of homeless students.

Over the past year, the United States has experienced a 9 percent rise in family homelessness. The U.S. Conference of Mayors 2010 Status Report on Hunger and Homelessness in American Cities found that unemployment rates and rising housing costs were cited as the leading causes of homelessness, and low wages ran a close third. Of the officials in the 27 cities that were studied, 72 percent responded that they expected the number of homeless families to continue to increase through the end of this year. Meanwhile, three-quarters said they also expected to see decreases in resources available to help provide emergency shelters. In 2010, 64 percent of the cities had to turn away from shelters families who had children.

According to the National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth, public schools nationwide reported that the number of these children had increased by 41 percent by the end of the 2008-2009 school year. So how are these kids expected to continue getting to school to receive an education?

The McKinney-Vento Act defines homelessness as “unstable, night-time residency” and requires school districts to offer homeless children transportation services to their school of origin for the remainder of the current school year. Students may also attend a school in the area where they are currently receiving shelter. To address this growing problem, the San Diego County Office of Education started what is now known as the Monarch School in 1987 where homeless children could receive an alternative education, and transportation.

Then known as PLACE, short for the Progressive Learning Alternative for Children’s Education. The school, or "drop-in" center, at the time had only one teacher, Sandra McBrayer, who was named San Diego County, California and National Teacher of the Year in 1993. She is now the CEO of the Children’s Initiative and is an adjunct professor at San Diego State University.

By 1998, PLACE was renamed the Monarch School, as in the Monarch butterfly. The students voted on the name as they felt it depicted their own ongoing educational and social metamorphosis.

The K-12 school has been forced to expand so much in recent years that it will break ground this fall on a 51,000-square-foot warehouse near Petco Park, the home of the San Diego Padres Major League Baseball team. The new facility will still be located near a major homeless shelter downtown, but the school draws students from all over the county, making transportation vital.

Monarch School offers monthly trolley passes to each student, a \$36-per-student subsidy covered by the the county’s juvenile court system. Parents can also receive passes worth \$72 a month if they need to accompany their younger children. The juvenile court also covers teacher salaries, the cost of creating and implementing the curriculum and educational supplies. As a non-profit, Monarch Schools also has funds to cover replacement trolley passes as well as providing transportation to students who live further away.

“If we call a parent to come in for a parent conference, our non-profit pays for the day pass for that parent to come and to attend our meeting because we know it’s an economic hardship for them,” said Sarita Fuentes, CEO and co-principal of Monarch School.

For example, on Mother’s Day weekend, the school provided day passes so parents could attend a school-sponsored brunch.

Fuentes added that the school was looking at purchasing a school bus a few years ago but decided against it as the trolley system made more sense. Otherwise, she said Monarch School would be presented with a dilemma that many school districts nationwide know all too well: exorbitant transportation costs tied to running the bus literally all over the county.

Students can attend Monarch School from anywhere in San Diego County, but most are temporarily residing in a downtown shelter. They could still attend their school of origin, say at El Cajon High School south of San Diego, but they’ll likely need to take a trolley or a transit bus, or a combination of the two, to get to school. That can result in obvious logistical challenges, not to mention requiring students to start their daily commute before 5 a.m. And they likely won’t return to the shelter until long after dark.

Fuentes explained that students can instead elect to attend the nearby Monarch School, where they can also attend with their younger siblings.

“They’ll opt to come into our program, and sometimes they’re here for a day, a week, six months,” she said. “We’ve had students that have graduated from our program that were here for eight years — homeless the entire time.”

When it comes to the actual school day, the enrollment of approximately 150 students is in constant flux. Fuentes said she’s seen plenty of students enroll and fill out all of the necessary paperwork. But they never show up.

“And, you know, we’ve had graduates,” she reminded.