

Homeless Student Case Studies

Lessons from Elementary School

Kayla

Kayla started the year as a bright-eyed, silly little girl who made up for her lack of academic motivation with flashes of insight and a great collaborative nature. In short, she was a very typical 9-year-old student.

The change started after the winter break. She started getting a dull look in her eyes and her spark was all but gone.

I became suspicious that her home life was starting to unravel and began to question her gently and discuss her case with the counselor. She was not one to share, however, and no solid information was forthcoming for three months or more.

Kayla always had regular attendance, so when she was absent for a couple days in a row it caught my attention. Upon her return she shared that she and her mom had moved in with her older brother. Two weeks later she began talking about living in a different area of town in a room in the basement of a friend. Attendance continued to suffer due to lack of transportation.

I updated the counselor who immediately contacted the family to offer the services of the homeless bus. Kayla was able to ride that bus for the last part of the school year, but more importantly, her mother became aware of the services available to help her daughter in future years.

Lessons Learned

When they become old enough to understand the living situation of others, many children are embarrassed by what is occurring in their lives because they know it is different. And not just different from other kids; different from what they used to know as well.

This relentless pressure of not fitting in, but wanting to do so, is like taking sandpaper to their little psyches...and they can't hide the result.

Be aware: Attendance patterns can communicate a lot about what is happening in a student's life

Tonya and LaTiya

I often get to know the siblings of my students quite well as I seek to form relationships with the families. In this case, Tonya was my student but LaTiya was just a grade behind and I was expecting her in my room the following year.

This family was more open about discussing their situation than Kayla, possibly because they had been experiencing homelessness for longer and were already aware of their options for transportation and assistance.

Tonya would often share that that she and her sister had moved out of the their mother's apartment and into grandma's house, a cycle that repeated itself several times during the year.

Lessons Learned

Some kids are more naturally accepting of their living situation. This is particularly true if they have at least one committed parent who makes them and their education a priority.

All the kids matter; keeping an eye on siblings in different grades (in coordination with their classroom teacher) shows true homelessness awareness.

Rolando

Rolando was recovering from homelessness when I knew him. He and his sister had lived on the streets in Arizona while his dad was in prison.

Now that his father was back in the picture and trying hard to give Rolando support in school, things were looking up in his life...but he was bitter and explosive from the past turmoil and the continuing abandonment of his mentally-ill mother who sent false promises of a reunion from out of state.

I profiled my approach to Rolando's difficult behavior issues in the discipline case studies section.

Lessons Learned

Homelessness leaves open wounds in some kids. Healing those wounds takes time. Teachers can play a pivotal role in the life of a child in this situation, helping to minimize the scars they will carry. And there's not always a happy ending. As I kept up with Rolando's status in subsequent years, I learned that his father's continuing struggles with meth addiction were threatening to disrupt Rolando's life again. I just hope there'll always be another teacher out there who cares enough to give him a hand!

Cintana

Cintana was what you might call "borderline homeless." She lived in a house...but with 14 people sharing two bedrooms and one bathroom. Although her situation remained stable - or perhaps I should say "consistent" - throughout the year, she still showed signs of neglect.

Understandably, her hygiene suffered, which can be devastating when other girls notice the smells from lack of bathing.

As always, though, the mental impact was worse. I recall Cintana being extremely upset one day at school since someone had not allowed her to sleep on the couch the night before...and she only got the couch once every two weeks.

The night before, my own children had slept in their own beds in their own rooms, and I couldn't imagine sending them to school ready to learn if they had not.

Lesson Learned

Don't be too narrow in your definition of homelessness. From the child's perspective, is there any real difference between sleeping on the floor in your own house and sleeping on the floor in a friend's house?

Lessons from Middle and High School

Trey

Trey hadn't lived with his parents for two years by the time he came to the attention of the homeless liaison during his sophomore year. He had fallen slowly down a "slippery slope" of homeless situations, ending up in a shelter.

Trey was never kicked out of home. But he had difficult relationships with both his mom and dad (divorced) and started playing one against the other in middle school, alternating his residency between them erratically.

When he started experimenting with drugs as a freshman, he figured out that he could tell mom he was staying at dad's (and vice versa) when he was really hanging at friends' houses. Since there was no parental communication, he always had an alibi.

By the time he was a sophomore, he didn't care about keeping up appearances with his parents at all, and in truth, they had given up as well. His own friends were starting to drift from home by then, so their couches weren't available...and so he found himself one very cold night with literally no place to sleep inside.

The shelter called the district homeless liaison who stepped in with some needed services (medical and transportation)...and got child protective services involved. He did stay in school, but never graduated.

Lessons Learned

The process by which a child or young adult ends up in a shelter can mirror what happens to adults; one bad decision and one bad luck situation leads to another, and they all lead to a downward spiral.

As with the homeless population in general, drug use is a "bad luck multiplier."

Alicia

Alicia was stubborn. And creative. She had developed a personal style in elementary school that allowed her to stay fashionable and cutting edge even though all of her clothing and jewelry came from thrift stores. From outward appearances, one would never suspect that she was living in a very run-down motel room that was sometimes without power or hot water.

But stubbornness and creativity can only get you so far. By 7th grade, her social life was fraying; she could never have friends visit her "house" and had a very limited ability to travel to theirs. For a social girl, this constant stress began to wear down all aspects of her life and school performance began to suffer.

An observant teacher suspected that Alicia's situation was not ideal; clues from clothing, possessiveness of her few belongings and stories that did not quite sound right gave her away. When homework and test results began to decline, the teacher knew it was time to step in.

Her relationship with her students made it all possible for Alicia to open up to a trustworthy adult. The homeless liaison was able to assist the family with services of which they were not aware and a fraction of normalcy returned to Alicia's life...enough for her inborn stubbornness to cope and her grades to rebound.

Lessons Learned

Many kids are playing a role in middle school as they seek to establish a unique identity. Surface impressions can mislead, which is why it is so important to develop personal relationships.

This is more challenging with the number of students above the elementary level. Thoughtful observation and an openness to conversation must make up for greater numbers of kids to track.

Quintilla and Alonzo

Quintilla was basically a mom by the time she was a sophomore. Not from getting pregnant...from raising her younger brother nearly by herself. They were part of a large extended family, so they had always shared space in some kind of housing, but their address constantly changed as they floated from one overcrowded place to another.

Somewhere along the way, Quintilla's mom floated one direction and she and Alonzo floated another.

She went from babysitting to feeding, clothing and managing homework. Alonzo, 4 years younger than her, was a charming little boy, but Quintilla was head of a small household when she should have been just a teenager. Alonzo always needed her attention to get settled into different schools and living situations, and this cut into her ability to socialize and have a life of her own.

Her younger brother was the one who got them the attention they needed. On the verge of another move, his 6th grade teacher got him to talk about his situation and then Quintilla's frequent presence - but not a parent's - began to make sense.

The homeless liaison, working through the state, was able to get a foster parent relationship established with an adult relative, and their situation stabilized. The availability of the homeless bus meant no more switching schools.

Quintilla was still older than her years - nothing could undo that - but she was able to graduate...and even have a little fun during high school!

Lessons Learned

There are degrees of homelessness. Kids may not be completely without shelter or family oversight, but if the impact on school is the same (transiency, lack of continuity, absenteeism)...then what does it matter? Education will suffer and with it the chance at breaking out of the cycle.

And again...teachers who pay attention and care can make a huge difference.