

United Coalition East Prevention Project

a program of Social Model Recovery Systems, Inc.

Children Left Behind:

The Plight of Homeless Students—Their Struggle to Achieve



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**The Lack of Knowledge is
Darker than Night.**

—African Proverb

Background

United Coalition East Prevention Project (UCEPP) was founded in 1996 to address the related problems of drugs and alcohol in the downtown area of the city of Los Angeles, commonly known as *skid row*. In 2003, UCEPP began working with young people eager for the opportunity to change their living circumstances. With the clarity of young minds, these youth chose the name “Youth Coalition X” (with X representing the unknown) to reflect their uncertain future in our community.

UCEPP and the youth of *skid row* have gathered data that convey their attitudes and experiences as homeless youth. The *Toxic Playground* report (“Report”), released in November 2005, summarizes key findings and conveys the life experiences as well as the resiliency of the youth residing in *skid row*. UCEPP’s ultimate goal is to dispel the stereotypical images that abound, and to develop effective, long-term, and positive systemic changes.

Key findings show that these youth are not runaways. The majority of these youth live with their parents and attend school. Most have resisted drug use and other negative factors so commonplace in our community.

Relocating these vulnerable youth from our community to shelters in remote areas or separating them from their families and placing them in foster care will not salvage their lives. Instead, UCEPP emphasizes prevention and investment in a viable infrastructure with accessible services in *skid row* and throughout Los Angeles County. Our experience has shown that long-term strategies together with community-based solutions that engage and connect families to needed resources can prevent youth from falling through the cracks.

Stop-gap measures cannot erase the toll that constant exposure to violence and substance abuse exacts on the human spirit. The fundamental causes of poor educational achievement among students of color are to be found in the schools’ failure to meaningfully engage students and families in the educational process. Systemic policy failures, not student shortcomings, have restricted access to education by impoverished students, particularly students of color. As a consequence, lack of social mobility and self-reliance are further trapping the youth in a web of poverty and disenfranchisement.

“ too many children are born into zip codes of shame, being punished for where they live. But we have a moral and ethical obligation to help them.

Zelenne L. Cárdenas, UCEPP director

Homeless Students’ Experience within LAUSD

This document, although limited in scope, attempts to convey a first-hand account of homeless students’ treatment by the Los Angeles Unified School District (“LAUSD”).

In the *Toxic Playground* report, suspension from school is one of the major problems; 53 percent of youth had been suspended. Of these students, 50 percent reported being in trouble for not having school uniforms. Suspending students for not having proper uniforms penalizes them unfairly for the challenges of laundering and/or purchasing clothing when laundromats are scarce and there is barely enough money for basic necessities. Schools should be places where children are welcomed and accepted despite their hardships. The suspensions not only go against the *No Child Left Behind Act* (Act), but also demoralize our students and erode their self-image.

In order for youth to be prepared for higher education or employment, they must feel accepted and experience a sense of connection with their school. Within the school culture, lack of school supplies signals lack of student preparedness. The average low-income family in Los Angeles County subsists on less than \$1,000 per month. Homeless children without supplies and uniforms become socially segregated and experience a lack of acceptance that eventually results in academic failure.

The Report also identified absences/ditching as a common reason why homeless youth get in trouble at school. Chronic absences among homeless students can be attributed mainly to economic hardships such as the lack of transportation, uniforms, and/or P.E. clothes, as well as fear of being teased by peers or stigmatized by staff.

Federal Law Requires that Homeless Students have Equal Access to Education

Behind every grim statistic are students and their families. No child is raised in a vacuum; children depend on public sector resources and policies to ensure their educational success. Herein lies a major challenge for Los Angeles Unified School District: to provide the most vulnerable populations of the city an education on equal terms.

The McKinney-Vento Act was signed into law on July 22, 1987, by President Ronald Reagan. Title VII authorized the Education of Homeless Children and Youth Program. It was reauthorized as the *McKinney-Vento Homeless Education Assistance Improvements Act* in the *No Child Left Behind Act*, signed into law by President George W. Bush on January 8, 2002.

Congress was influenced by statistics showing that more than one million children and youth were likely to experience homelessness in a given year, and that extreme poverty, coupled with high mobility and loss of housing, placed these children at great risk for educational challenges. As a result, the Act was expanded to include additional provisions to ensure educational opportunities for homeless students.

Amendments to the Act detailed the obligation of states and local education agencies to ensure access to education by homeless children and youth. Additionally, the amendments specified the rights of homeless preschoolers to a “free and appropriate preschool education”, gave parents of homeless children and youth a voice regarding their children’s school placement, and required educational authorities to coordinate with housing authorities.

The amendments acknowledge that the true challenge wasn’t simply to enroll homeless children, but to promote their academic success in public school. The amendments require homeless education coordinators to look beyond residency issues to other issues that were keeping homeless children and youth out of school. The state’s responsibility to eliminate barriers to the education of homeless children and youth entailed a review and revision of *all* policies, practices, laws, and regulations that may hinder enrollment, attendance, or academic success of homeless children and youth.

States were additionally responsible for assuming a leadership role in ensuring that local education agencies review and revise policies and procedures that may similarly impede the access of homeless children and youth to a free and appropriate public education.

Funds established under the Act may be used to provide preschool programs, before-and-after-school programs, tutoring programs, referrals for medical and mental health services, parent education, counseling, transportation, social work, and other services that may not otherwise have been provided by the public school program. (For more information go to: <http://www.nationalhomeless.org/publications/facts/McKinney.pdf>)

The McKinney-Vento Act defines homeless children and youth as individuals who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate night-time residence. The term includes children and youth who:

- share the housing of other persons due to the loss of housing, economic hardship, or a similar reason;
- are living in motels, hotels, trailer parks, or camping ground due to the lack of alternative adequate accommodations;
- are living in emergency or transitional shelters;
- are abandoned in hospitals;
- are awaiting foster care placement;
- have a primary night-time residence that is a public or private place not designed for, or ordinarily used as, a regular sleeping accommodation for human beings;
- are living in cars, parks, public spaces, abandoned buildings, substandard housing, bus or train stations, or similar settings;
- are migratory children who qualify as homeless because they are living in circumstances described above.

Despite the road map provided in the *No Child Left Behind Act*, school districts throughout the country, including LAUSD are failing to meet the needs and address the realities of homeless students.

“The State of California may bear no greater responsibility than providing young people with the finest quality education possible. By identifying homeless students and devoting sufficient resources to keep them in school, we are helping them become productive citizens. The result is a win-win, for the children and for the future of our state.”

—Mark Ridley-Thomas
California State Assemblymember - District 48
Democratic Caucus, Chair

“Access for All” Resolution

At the urging of UCEPP and its members, including youth, LAUSD was compelled to acknowledge the importance of the Act and was prompted to pass UCEPP’s *Access for All Resolution* (“Resolution”) to guide implementation of the Act.

UCEPP has been particularly concerned about the implementation of Section 722(g)(H) of McKinney-Vento. This section addresses delays in enrolling homeless students that are caused by immunization, residency, uniform and dress code requirements; and the lack of medical and school records, birth certificates, guardianship, and other documents. Focus group meetings conducted with homeless youth and their families living in *skid row* pointed to these issues as major barriers to enrollment, especially when the families had no fixed night-time residence and could not show proof of residency. Until recently, students and their families bore the brunt of this bad policy.

The Resolution earmarks monies from Title I (b) to hire additional Homeless Assistance Unit staff to ensure effective implementation of the Act. However, long-term sustainable change is the responsibility of the State Department of Education, which must make policy changes and funding commitments that address school culture and organizational structures.

Legislation cannot mandate compassion towards human beings. But sensitivity to the culture of homelessness and knowledge of the circumstances and interpersonal issues that perpetuate homelessness can go a long way. It is far easier for LAUSD to review and alter its policies than for it to attempt to address the causes of poverty. UCEPP believes this is the best way to counter the attrition rate of homeless students in public schools.

Concern for the success of students from low socio-economic backgrounds has been a focus of government programs for decades. Yet in American schools the achievement gap between students from high and low economic backgrounds continues to widen.

The risks that children face by being born poor are enormous. According to the report, *Academic Performance in High-Poverty Schools*, a child’s school experience may either exacerbate or counteract the adverse effects of poverty. Most high-poverty schools (schools with a high percentage of students enrolled in the National Free and Reduced School Lunch Program [FRLP]) tend to score lower on student achievement assessments, and have higher dropout rates, and lower rates of attendance.

The Resolution also calls for the immediate creation of a Homeless Collaborative, designed to bring together LAUSD and local policy makers, parents, teachers, students, and relevant organizations to identify key factors that high-poverty schools can address to counteract the risks of homelessness for their students. The State would do well to convene a peer review board to assess the effectiveness of current outreach materials and signage. This board would also oversee proper dissemination as well as language-appropriate literature.

UCEPP Continues to Recommend that the LAUSD:

- Annually notify *all* staff members of the McKinney-Vento Education for Homeless Children and Youth program (Title VII-B), which mandates that state educational agencies ensure equal access by homeless children and youth to free, appropriate public education.
- Ensure that all eligible students are receiving the services and resources mandated by McKinney-Vento.
- Assign a liaison at every school district to respond to the children’s special needs, i.e., uniforms, school supplies, transportation, truancy, tardiness, hygiene, health-related issues, and hunger.
- Educate principals and key school administrative staff about McKinney-Vento at schools where homeless children are enrolled, and develop materials in appropriate languages to educate parents and caregivers.
- Require quarterly district-wide reporting regarding delivery of service and compliance with McKinney-Vento.
- Create a district-wide system to identify and track homeless students, to ensure that they are receiving services.
- Collaborate with key community groups to provide alternatives to suspension and/or expulsion for “behavioral issues” and work with these groups to develop a program that provides a custodial setting.
- Comply with LAUSD regulations that require the parent or legal guardian to be informed before releasing a student from school.
- Partner with foundations and philanthropic organizations to earmark resources for educational and recreational opportunities for homeless students.

“To achieve a society of true equality and justice for all, we must ensure equal opportunities and expand support for the more than 10,000 homeless students currently enrolled in the LAUSD. The future of our city lies with our children, and the future of our children depends on full access to a good education.”

—Antonio R. Villaraigosa
Mayor, City of Los Angeles

LAUSD Collaboration

Since the passing of the Resolution, UCEPP and its members have worked closely with LAUSD to develop the Homeless Collaborative, identify additional areas of need and create practical solutions, especially in prioritized homeless schools highlighted in the *Toxic Playground* report. UCEPP also sought outside help from USC students, who provided invaluable field work to verify the experiences of homeless parents in our community and document areas for improvement.

The UCEPP team mapped the schools homeless students' attend (elementary, middle and high school) and created a profile for each matriculation level utilizing key indicators: number of homeless students enrolled, student demographics, average class size and income (based on free lunch program eligibility), Annual Performance Index (API), Program Improvement school status, and graduation rates. For comparison purposes, UCEPP identified six additional schools from neighboring districts and profiled them using the same key indicators.

When we compared our homeless students' schools with similar schools in other districts, we found a profound disparity. Homeless students in our community are more likely to attend schools that have larger class sizes, lower APIs and graduation rates, and higher poverty rates (based on eligibility for school lunches).

Unfortunately, these data are not unique to our communities. According to Gary Blasi, professor of law at UCLA, black and brown elementary school students in the district are three times more likely to be taught by a teacher lacking a full credential. Nearly half the middle schools serving students of color are so overcrowded that they have been placed on a year-round, multi-track "Concept 6" schedule that offers 17 fewer days of instruction each year than do schools not on such a schedule. By contrast, not one of the district's middle schools with mostly white students operates on a Concept 6 schedule.

Add to this backdrop the poor conditions of inner-city schools and the educational gap that exists between white and non-white students and the outlook is dismal. According to The Civil Rights Project at Harvard University, white fourth-graders in LAUSD are three times more likely than black or brown fourth-graders to be identified as "proficient" readers, while fully 70 percent of the district's brown and black children cannot read at even a basic level. Fewer than half of black and brown students who start 9th grade complete 12th grade four years later.

The comparative data above paint a grim picture of the status of homeless students in the district. Equally disturbing are parents' reports about the frustrating barriers they confront within the LAUSD. To affirm the parents' problems and focus our efforts, the UCEPP team (led by USC interns) developed a protocol, visited the prioritized schools, and posed as relatives or parents of homeless students. The interns interviewed staff at local schools and found severe lack of knowledge or understanding of policies designed to help eliminate barriers to enrollment and school involvement for homeless families.

Homeless youth and their families face innumerable challenges that often preclude them from successfully navigating the district's bureaucratic maze. The students' success is contingent on their parents' ability to repair and stabilize their lives. But parents often must make painful and precarious choices between meeting their immediate human needs or the schools' rigid priorities.

Despite all its wealth, Los Angeles remains the homeless capital of the nation capped by a housing crisis. Homeless parents are resource-poor and deficient in resolve. They have lost the ability to trust a system that has repeatedly failed them. They are at the mercy of intrusive systems that pry into their lives, disclose the intimate details of their housing situation, and leave them feeling powerless.

“most of the time, i feel i don't got nothing. the president and the congress passed the no child left behind act but they didn't just leave us behind, they hid us, and they're acting like they don't see us.”

Franklin Arburtha, 14, a resident of *skid row*

The federal mandate requires the removal of all barriers to enrolling homeless youth. Yet homeless parents are repeatedly turned away and not allowed to enroll their children at local schools. The district has no policy designating specific enrollment days for homeless students. Individual school administrators create arbitrary policies for their own convenience that conflict with the urgent nature of homelessness.

The UCEPP team found that 57 percent of the schools attended by homeless students that were prioritized in the *Toxic Playground* report had no signage or information indicating enrollment criteria or available services. Nearly all the schools in our sample had no specific enrollment days. Parents who are finally able to enroll their children are shuffled between schools and other institutions to obtain required documents. The UCEPP team usually spoke with several individuals before reaching the appropriate person for enrollment information. Sadly, more than 85 percent of the staff lacked familiarity with the McKinney-Vento Act.

“it’s hard to be motivated about school when you live on skid row. you look around and you think, what’s the point of trying to do better? there are plenty of people who did go to school and had jobs and they ended up there. i can go to school, go to college and the same thing could happen to me, i could end up here again.”

Roshawn Cornett, 18, a resident of *skid row*

Conclusion

Shamefully, it was the homeless youth themselves who brought the inequities of their education to the forefront and began public debate on this issue. Their work was the impetus for the LAUSD’s “Access for All Resolution,” which earmarked monies for additional staff to assist with the implementation of the McKinney-Vento Homeless Students Assistance Act.

Moreover, UCEPP has worked closely with the LAUSD to create the Homeless Collaborative. UCEPP hopes this group will utilize its considerable expertise to transform the academic and social experience of thousands of homeless students and their families, and to restore trust in the educational system.

Permanent changes in the existing system must be implemented to better prepare our communities’ most vulnerable youth for productive futures and end the cycle of poverty and homelessness they have inherited.

“We are obligated by law and by a moral imperative to ensure that homeless students get the extra help and support they need to succeed in school. State and local education agencies must eliminate barriers to enrollment, attendance and academic success.”

—José Huizar
Los Angeles City Councilmember - District 14

To verify the experiences faced by homeless students and their parents, USC interns working with UCEPP visited local schools. The following are excerpts of their descriptions of how they were treated by LAUSD staff.

“Every school I visited seemed unaware of the services available to homeless students. One school included a Student Residency Questionnaire [the questionnaire used to identify homeless students] in the enrollment packet; however none of the other schools provided me with this form.

For the most part, schools were unaware of any policy that provides school uniforms, P.E. uniforms or school supplies for students. I was usually told that there were no such provisions in place. Some schools were aware of a program to provide bus tokens to students; however, few knew the procedure for actually obtaining the tokens. I often received contradictory information that left me confused. I would be told that there was no policy regarding uniforms; however I would walk away from a school with a printed uniform policy in hand. Additionally, some schools informed me of a policy regarding appropriate colors while others did not.

Some schools were aware that there was a specific staff member designated to explain issues relating to homeless families. However, this staff member was often unavailable, and I would be asked to return at a later date in order to speak with this person. School staff often needed to get assistance from other staff members in the office, in order to provide me with the necessary information. This information was often either partial information, or completely incorrect.”

—Marina F, student intern, USC School of Policy, Planning, and Development

“I visited a Middle School and High School. I went into the schools wearing an old sweatshirt, jeans and tennis shoes. I was pretending that I, my sister, and her two children had just lost our home and were living in a shelter. I told the schools that the kids needed to get enrolled in school.

At one of the schools, I walked into the office and was immediately asked if I needed help. I explained to them my situation, and the lady told me that without an address, my nieces would not be able to enroll in school. I then asked her what we were supposed to do, because we were not sure when we would be able to move out of the shelter. The lady told me to hold on and yelled to another woman in the back of the office, ‘Hey, how do kids living in a shelter get into school!’ Everybody in the office was staring at me. I felt so stupid.”

—Tescia M., student intern, USC School of Social Work

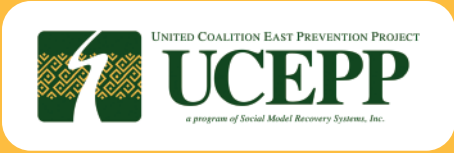
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The United Coalition East Prevention Program (UCEPP) is a program of Social Model Recovery Systems, Inc., a multi-faceted human services organization. For more information, please visit www.socialmodel.com or call 213.622.1621. The mission of UCEPP is to engage the most vulnerable populations of the Central City East area of Los Angeles, also known as skid row, to challenge systemic conditions and social disparities that threaten a healthy environment.

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