

NDPS Certification Program Field Project Report

OPEN Doors Homeless Program

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Funding Sources:

Texas Education for Homeless Children and Youth (TEHCY) competitive grant, Title 1

Project Cost and Budget Narrative:

TEHCY is a competitive grant the District applies for on a three-year grant cycle. This funding is part of the provisions of the McKinney-Vento Homeless Education Act which came out of federal legislation aimed at protecting the rights of homeless children and youth to enroll in the educational environment. The NOGA (Notice of Grant Award) is determined by many factors, including the number of homeless students assisted on an annual basis and the type of assistance they receive.

In addition, the program receives Title 1 set-asides to provide assistance to homeless children and youth.

Project Description:

OPEN Doors is a strategic program the District uses to ensure that all staff are in compliance with McKinney-Vento legislation regarding the rights of homeless students to enroll and receive resources necessary to help ensure academic success. Every school district is required to have a similar program along with a Liaison who is responsible for compliance, staff training, student advocacy, budget management, and more. The program works closely with school staff to make sure rights of homeless students are protected and with area shelters to identify homeless children and assist with enrollment, transportation, and other concerns.

Staffing Pattern:

- Director
- Specialist
- Administrative Associate

Population Served: Students who are

- Living in a motel
- Living in an emergency or transitional shelter
- Living in substandard housing
- Living in a car, park or public place
- Living in the home of friends or family due to eviction or economic hardship
- Living at a campground or inadequate trailer housing

The program serves, on average, almost 3,900 students per year and a total of almost 27,000 students over the last seven school years.

Project Origination:

The program started when No Child Left Behind legislation went into effect in 2001 and has been called OPEN Doors for over 16 years.

Issues Addressed:

This program addresses most things related to school enrollment such as school of origin transportation, document retrieval, and free school meals. Program emphasis is on equalizing opportunities for homeless students to achieve to the same or greater level as their housed peers. Therefore, most services are aimed at helping the student succeed in school academically, socially, and emotionally. Whatever services the students need that we cannot provide are referred to community organizations and agencies with whom we share partnerships and collaborations so that services are not duplicated or missed altogether.

OPEN Doors also has a “parent” component to assist in navigating the school environment and setting expectations for their students. Building communication between the parents and school staff is integral in helping students achieve. Parents also need to know they are a part of the larger community and learn steps to independent living for themselves and their families.

Desired Outcomes and Measurable Objectives:

The desired outcome of this program is to see increased academic success in homeless students. Many variables come into play in measuring how our homeless students are progressing. Attendance and grades are the primary indicators used to determine success. Currently, homeless students have a slightly lower attendance rate than our permanently housed students. Lack of transportation is one thing that affects attendance rates, but there are other factors as well.

Gaps in grades/achievement also exist. The high mobility rate of homeless students definitely accounts for some of these gaps. Each move results in missed instruction, increased instability for the child, emotional upset, and much more.

Strategies and/or Interventions of the Project:

OPEN Doors employs various strategies and interventions to help homeless students succeed. For highly mobile students, we arrange transportation so they can stay in their school of origin. This reduces the amount of instruction lost, as well as offers the students stability in school when life around them is hectic. The program also implements tutoring at school for students who are struggling academically. The program pays for tutors to spend extra time with students to help them grasp concepts or catch up on missing work. Lack of appropriate clothing can keep students out of school, so we try to ensure that students have what they need to integrate into the regular school population—clothing that isn’t worn or dirty, shoes that fit, coats/jackets for cold weather, etc. Students needing school supplies or fees for certain activities are usually accommodated. The program also expedites the free school meals process so students don’t “stand out” to others.

Referrals are made for counseling, food, shelter/housing, eviction prevention, and many other services the community can provide. Fees for graduating seniors are paid through O.P.E.N. Doors, and the program liaison meets with all homeless seniors to inform them of services the program provides and next steps after graduation.

Periodic educational field trips and other enrichment activities are provided to enhance classroom instruction and broaden the scope of students' experiences.

Results (Outcomes and Achievements):

Evaluating long-term achievement with this population is very difficult due to their mobility. Many times, evaluations are not even begun before the student has moved on. We can track progress with individual students for a time and have seen students who went on to college or jobs because of interventions our program offers. Young students, too, who are behind in reading have made huge gains due to the tutoring we offer during the school day.

Project Timeline:

The program runs year round and continues with students and their families as long as the students are enrolled in school.

Outcomes Related to School Completion, Dropout Prevention, and/or Graduation Rates:

The program was created to ensure a successful educational experience for students in homeless situations in the district by collaborating with parents, school personnel, and community resources to remove barriers, provide academic opportunities, and promote a healthy sense of self.

Special Conditions, Expertise, and/or Skills Required to Carry Out Project:

- Relationship building skills
- The ability to connect with students who experiencing difficulties
- Social work background
- School and community collaboration
- Ability to provide and promote a safe learning environment

Current Status of Project:

This project is continuously running throughout the year.

Role in Project as a NDPS Certification Program Participant:

- Assist in identifying and referring students who are considered homeless and in need of services
- Assist with referrals to community agencies
- Serve as a guide or bridge between student services and students' assigned campuses

Lessons Learned:

- Never take for granted the items, breaths, or opportunities that you are afforded daily.
- Always keep an open door and line of communication for students and families to be able to speak with you when they feel the need.

Advice for Dropout Prevention Practitioners about the Project:

Never turn your back on a student or their family simply because you believe their issue is not

oppressing enough to fail. Everyone handles difficult situations differently and you may be in a position to create change within their environment, but you have to keep your eyes, ears, heart, and door open in order for them to walk in and be heard.