

# RESEARCH

*Report on an Educational Program*  
Department of Research and Accountability

## **PROJECT SU CASA 2003–2004**

Houston Independent School District



# **HOUSTON INDEPENDENT SCHOOL DISTRICT**

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

### PROJECT SU CASA PROGRAM 2003–2004 HOUSTON INDEPENDENT SCHOOL DISTRICT

#### Background

Homelessness can be a devastating experience for children and youth, disrupting nearly every aspect of family life, damaging the physical and emotional health of family members and interfering with children's educational and social development, while separating family members (National Coalition for the Homeless, 2001). Research has shown that one of the fastest growing segments of the homeless population is families with children. Specifically, a survey conducted by the U.S. Conference of Mayors in twenty-five cities throughout the United States found that in 2000, families with children accounted for 36% of the homeless population. Further, the U.S. Bureau of the Census determined in 1999 that 39% of persons living in poverty were children and the poverty rate for children was almost twice as high as the poverty rate for any other age group.

The literature also maintains that two subpopulations of children who face increased barriers to education are homeless pre-schoolers and youth. After conducting a survey in 1997 of state coordinators, the National Law Center on Homelessness & Poverty, found that 30% of the respondents estimated that few or no homeless children were enrolled in preschool. In addition, 70% of the state coordinators reported that funding was inadequate to meet the preschool needs of homeless children, and 80% of all respondents indicated that public preschool programs have waiting lists from less than 30 days to more than 12 months. Homeless youth are often prevented from enrolling in and attending school, liability concerns, and legal guardianship requirements (Anderson et al., 1995). In addition, homeless pre-schoolers also face difficulty accessing public preschool education.

The National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth has found that when families become homeless, they tend to move frequently. Length-of-stay restrictions in shelters, short

stays with friends and relatives, and/or relocation to seek employment make it difficult for homeless children to attend school regularly. In addition, guardianship requirements, delays in transfer of school records, lack of a permanent address and/or immunization records often prevent homeless children from enrolling in school. Homeless children and youth who are able to enroll in school are often unable to attend school due to lack of transportation. Without an opportunity to receive an education, homeless children are much less likely to acquire the skills needed to avoid poverty as adults.

To that end, the McKinney Act, Education of Homeless Children and Youth (EHCY) program was established by Congress in 1987, and reauthorized in 2001 and in 2002. The program was initiated in response to reports that over 50% of homeless children were not attending school regularly. Consequently, programs were established to ensure that homeless children and youth have the following rights:

- Immediate enrollment in school, even if lacking paperwork normally required for enrollment;
- Attendance in his/her school of origin (if requested by the parent and is feasible) or in the school in the attendance area where the family or youth is currently residing;
- Transportation to his/her school of origin;
- Services comparable to those received by housed schoolmates, including transportation and supplemental educational services;
- Attendance in school along with children not experiencing homelessness. Segregation based on a student's status as homeless is strictly prohibited;
- Posting of homeless students' rights in all schools and other places throughout the community (National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth, 2004).

In light of established federal, state, and local programs, findings from a three-year Head Start Demonstration Project revealed numerous challenges in serving homeless children and their families. These challenges include recruiting and enrolling homeless families, retaining homeless families and children in project services, involving homeless parents, and meeting the unique needs of homeless children and parents (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1999). Subsequently, school districts must sustain efforts to engage children and youth along with their families in services.

### **Program Description**

The Houston Independent School District, through the support of the Stewart B. McKinney-Vento Homeless Education Assistance Act, has provided educational support services to the homeless by engaging students and their families in Project Su Casa since 1987. Two full-time project social workers and a project liaison have coordinated efforts with school administrators, teachers, counselors, shelter workers, and social service agencies to identify homeless students. As of the 2003-04 academic year, an outreach worker was added to assist schools in identifying homeless students. After students were identified, linkages were made to provide educational and support services to students and their families as well as monitor their progress.

Further, networks established by Project Su Casa staff with key stakeholders within the HISD system facilitated appropriate academic placement of students in special education, tutorials, and after-school programs. The program facilitated the enrollment in schools without obstacles, and provided students with immunizations and medical records. Additional assistance was provided to parents by leveraging housing, medical care, and mental health treatment. Parental empowerment was facilitated through the provision of information regarding educational opportunities available to their children. Parents were also familiarized concerning their legal rights in light of their homeless condition. Direct access, through pagers and established schedules, facilitated access to services by students and their families.

Project Su Casa staff facilitated the adjustment of students to the school environment through the distribution of school uniforms, supplies, and instructional tools prior to school opening. Shelter staff from some of the largest shelters in Houston were among the many providers that attended this event held in August 2004.

Since homeless students are highly mobile, a system for distribution of these materials on a routine basis throughout the academic year was established at schools and at many shelters. Emergency assistance was enhanced by the Homeless Coalition network agencies and the United Way to secure additional resources, such as clothing, housing, and other basic needed services for students and their families.

Transportation was offered by the district to and from school and to after-school activities. This service sometimes required that the HISD Transportation Department reschedule and reroute bus services to accommodate students who resided, particularly, at non-traditional locations such as motels. Continuation of bus transportation to schools outside of the HISD area remained an option for students who chose to stay in their previously attended school, rather than transfer to their newly zoned school.

To enhance awareness and sensitivity to homelessness, inservices were conducted by Project Su Casa staff to train teachers, school administrators, counselors, shelter personnel, social workers, nurses, registrars, data clerks, secretaries, technology personnel, special education evaluators, and psychologists. Topics addressed focused on learning more about how to relate to homelessness and laws governing services to the homeless. Relevant brochures that were developed by the Texas Homeless Education Office (THEO) on how to remove barriers were issued to parents and placed in public areas of service delivery sites for reference.

Tutorials and homework assistance were initiated by Project Su Casa staff by contracting with extended-time, certified teachers at Star of Hope and Salvation Army shelters. School administrators worked alongside the project to ensure inclusion of homeless students in after-school and summer programs at many of the targeted schools. Lesson plans reflected tutorials at all grade levels, including early childhood and in various subject areas, including reading and math to support the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS), High Frequency Word Examination, and the Stanford test. Services for students with learning difficulties were arranged by Special Education, Child Study, Early Childhood, Head Start, Title I, and Psychological Services of HISD.

Consultations were arranged with teachers, parents, and social service providers to collaborate on student's health and medical needs. Providers included the HISD Curriculum Department, Baylor College of Medicine, HISD school clinics, and Prevent

Blindness of Houston. Parent education through support groups, children's social skills groups, parent enrichment classes, and home-based therapy by contract agencies included Depelchin Children's Center, Parents in Pursuit of Excellence Services, and Project HOPE.

Professional development was available through the United Way to improve awareness of laws governing enrollment and education as well as sensitivity for parents, teachers, and providers. Training modules included "Imagine the Possibilities." Counseling was incorporated for students and families at schools and shelters to enhance communication and coping skills. Referrals were made to Houston Safe Schools/Healthy Students Initiative, MHMRA, and Family Service Center. Coordination of Services with Title 1 (for funds), Communities-in-Schools, and Community Youth Services ensured that students received added instructional support.

### **Purpose of the Evaluation Report**

The purpose of this report was to evaluate the effectiveness of Project Su Casa in meeting its objectives for HISD's students who were experiencing homelessness during the 2003–2004 academic year. The objectives were as follows:

- Obj. 1: Provide tutoring, supplemental instruction; enriched educational services and/or other direct educational services to at least 1,600 homeless students, 300 non-homeless students including pre-school children.
- Obj. 2: Ensure that homeless children and youth have prompt access to needed evaluation services for enrollment in special programs.
- Obj. 3: Ensure that educators and other school personnel are aware of and sensitive to the needs of children and youth who are experiencing homelessness, including the specific needs of runaway and unaccompanied youth, and the rights of such children and youth under the McKinney-Vento Act and the Runaway and Homeless Youth Assistance Act. Ensure that non-homeless students are sensitive to the needs of their peers who are experiencing homelessness.
- Obj. 4: Ensure that physical and mental health needs of homeless children and youth, and those who are impacted by domestic violence are identified and addressed.
- Obj. 5: Ensure that homeless students are able to regularly and safely get to school.
- Obj. 6: Ensure that homeless children and youth are aware of district programs that may address their needs and are provided access to and opportunity to enroll in such programs.
- Obj. 7: Ensure that homeless students have access to school supplies and other extraordinary or emergency assistance determined by Region 10 Education Service Center or its designee as essential to enable homeless children and youth to attend school, including payment of fees or other costs associated with school enrollment.
- Obj. 8: Provide education and training to the parents/caretakers of homeless children and youth about the rights of and resources available to their children, effectively advocating for their children, effective parenting skills, and actively participating in their children's education.

Based on the preceding program objectives, this evaluation addressed the following questions:

1. What was the profile of students receiving services as a result of Project Su Casa during the 2003–2004 academic year? How did this population compare to students served in the previous year?
2. What services were implemented through Project Su Casa?
3. What were the most significant barriers impacting the educational success of Project Su Casa students in 2003–2004? What solutions were implemented to remove those barriers?
4. What was the academic performance of Project Su Casa students on norm-referenced and criterion-referenced tests? How did the performance of Project Su Casa students compare to students of similar demographic characteristics?
5. What were the promotion rates of Project Su Casa students? How did these rates compare to the district?
6. In what ways did Project Su Casa work to effectively meet the needs of students experiencing homelessness?

## Findings

- There was a 79% increase in the number of students served by Project Su Casa over the past two years. Participation numbers indicated 605 students served in 2003 compared to 1,058 students in 2004. While ninth grade had the highest increase in the number served (65 students), prekindergarten had the highest percentage increase over the two-year period (196%). Between 2003 and 2004, The findings were 59 first grade students in 2003 and 116 students in 2004.
- There were 21 shelters and nine other providers sites that provided services to Project Su Casa students and families. Additionally, there were 39 elementary schools compared to 19 middle and 14 high schools whose students received services through the program.
- On the TAKS, in grades three through eleven, the majority of Project Su Casa students served in spring 2004 met standards on the reading and mathematics subtest in both spring 2003 and spring 2004. The results on the reading subtest were 73% and 69% in the respective years, while the results on the mathematics subtest were 53% and 57% in the respective years.
- The majority of Project Su Casa students met standards in spring 2004 and in spring 2003 on the TAKS social studies subtest (64% and 55%, respectively).
- TAKS science subtest results yielded 38% of Project Su Casa students that met standards in spring 2004 compared to 39% of those students in spring 2003. The highest percentage that met standards in spring 2004 was at the fifth grade compared to the tenth grade in 2003 (46% and 43%, respectively). In addition, only 13% of students at tenth grade met standards in spring 2004, while 43% of the tenth grade students met standards in spring 2003.
- Seventy-six percent of Project Su Casa students tested in spring 2004 and spring 2003 met standards on the TAKS writing subtest. Seventh grade had the highest percentage of students that met standards in spring 2004 (81%), while fourth grade had the highest percentage that met standards in spring 2003 (80%).
- A t-test analysis of Project Su Casa TAKS performance yielded an increase in the mean scale scores of students on the reading, mathematics, writing, science, and social studies subtests from 2003 to 2004. In addition, a significant difference was apparent between the social studies subtest scores of program students from 2003 to 2004 at the  $p < .05$  level.
- On the Stanford 10 reading subtest, students districtwide outperformed project students at first grade by 40 NCEs; however, project students outperformed the district by 24 NCEs at second grade. NCE performance was fairly comparable at third, fifth, and ninth grades, varying by only one NCE in favor of the district. In these cases, both groups attained NCEs that fell within the average range (between 46-52 NCEs). In addition, Project Su Casa students and students districtwide achieved at the same level at the sixth, seventh, and eleventh grades, with both groups achieving NCEs that fell within the average range (between 49-56 NCEs).
- Project Su Casa and districtwide student performance on the Stanford 10 mathematics subtest yielded fairly comparable results at the fifth and eighth grades, differing by only one NCE. In these cases, NCEs were within the average range for both groups (between 54-59 NCEs). Additionally, project students and students districtwide achieved at the same level at third grade (57 NCEs).
- The promotion rate of students districtwide was substantially higher than the promotion rate of homeless students from 2001 to 2002 (95% vs. 87%). However, from 2003 to 2004, there was a reduction in the gap between the groups, yielding a slightly higher promotion rate of district students than homeless students by only two percentage points (95% vs. 93%).
- Student survey respondents overwhelmingly indicated that they were provided adequate educational resources allowing them to attend school regularly (71.4%). In addition, 91.5% of parents

felt that the academic performance of their child had been enhanced since participation.

- Eighty-eight percent of surveyed teachers indicated that they had become more sensitive to the needs of homeless children, while nearly 26% lacked adequate knowledge concerning the laws governing the education of homeless children and youth. On the other hand, 17% of parents indicated that teachers lacked sensitivity, while 26% were also not aware of laws governing the education of homeless children and youth.

**Recommendations:**

1. Although the proportion of students classified as homeless has increased over the past year, the Project Su Casa program liaison should continue to work with school administration to address procedures for coding students as homeless.
2. A system of accountability has been developed to document the number of students and their families served by contract agencies, such as Covenant House and the Star of Hope Family Shelter. However, documentation should be obtained from these agencies as a means to monitor program outcomes more closely.
3. Stanford and TAKS comparisons reflect that homeless students lag behind students districtwide at the first grade level in reading and mathematics achievement. Project Su Casa liaison and evaluator will investigate further all homeless students that lag behind to determine what additional supplemental academic support is needed.
4. Since barriers may continue to exist for students experiencing homelessness, continue to explore alternative solutions concerning the educational barriers of homeless students (i.e., additional uniforms and tutorials), by establishing quarterly Project Su Casa meetings for collaboration among service providers and school personnel.
5. School staff and service providers continue to express the need for ongoing training on effective ways of working with homeless students. Consideration should be given to accommodate these groups by increasing the number of professional development opportunities on relevant topics, visits to local shelters, and focus groups with homeless students and their families.