

**HOPE FOR HOMELESS CHILDREN—
AN EDUCATIONAL SUCCESS**



**A Report by the
2007/2008 San Diego County Grand Jury
May 14, 2008**

HOPE FOR HOMELESS CHILDREN – AN EDUCATIONAL SUCCESS

SUMMARY

The County of San Diego is home to a unique educational program operated as the Hope Region for homeless and at-risk children and youths. This group potentially constitutes a large percentage of high school dropouts. A recent research project undertaken at the University of California Santa Barbara estimated the potential cost to the State of the 120,000 Californians per year that turn 20 and do not have a high school diploma. The study showed this group of high school dropouts over a lifetime would cost the state \$46.4 billion mainly in lost earnings. Because of growing concerns over recent budget cuts and educational opportunities, 2007/2008 San Diego County Grand Jury members reviewed what is being accomplished in San Diego County by the Hope Region which is a component of the San Diego County Office of Education, Juvenile Court, and Community Schools.

PURPOSE

- To inquire how well the needs of homeless youths were being met by the Hope Region.
- To document how well the District and supporting agencies are working together to accomplish their goals.
- To make recommendations to San Diego County Office of Education about additional efforts that can be made on behalf of homeless and at-risk students.

PROCEDURES

Members of the Grand Jury:

- Visited the three schools that comprise the Hope Region: Harbor Summit Elementary, Toussaint Academy of the Arts and Sciences (TAAS) and Monarch School.
- Interviewed San Diego County Office of Education district administrators, a district counselor, support organizations' department heads and presidents. Reviewed Federal regulations on homelessness, San Diego County Office of Education policies and documents, and supporting agencies published documents and press releases.

DISCUSSION Homeless Education In San Diego County

According to estimates by the San Diego Regional Task Force on the Homeless there may be as many as 1,625 homeless children and adolescents in San Diego County, on any given day. The average age of a homeless person is now nine years. Homeless children

often lack resources to attend school. These students are covered under certain sections of Federal Law known as the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act (Title 42 US Code Chapter 119) that was originally enacted July 22, 1987. Part of the Act provides federal funds to assist states in ensuring that homeless children and youths can enroll and attend public schools. The Act defines "homelessness" as lacking a "fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence." and now specifically includes children and youth who are sharing the housing of others, living in motels, hotels, trailer parks or camp grounds, staying in shelters, sleeping in cars, parks, abandoned buildings, substandard housing, bus/train stations or public places or awaiting foster care placement (42 U.S.C § 11434A).

There are many difficulties at-risk and homeless youths face while attending schools. McKinney-Vento tries to assure that all children can have access to educational opportunities by attending their school of origin or any public school that other students living in the same attendance area are eligible to attend. "As long as it is feasible and consistent with parental wishes, homeless students must remain in their schools of origin"(42 U.S.C.§ 11432(g)(3)). Unfortunately, this Act depends on parents or legal guardians to perform responsibly when it comes to educating their children. While the homeless might be overwhelmed just by trying to find adequate housing, finding the "school of origin" or even knowing where to turn can pose insurmountable problems in achieving school enrollment. School of origin also becomes a problem because of the length of stay and uncertainty of housing, or lack of it, for the homeless.

States that receive McKinney-Vento Act assistance are prohibited from segregating homeless students in separate schools, separate programs within schools, or separate settings within schools. San Diego County applied for and received an exemption and was still eligible to receive McKinney-Vento funds. Three other counties in the United States were also granted exemptions but they have been less successful in their homeless school projects. San Diego County is the only county that now has a proven track record indicating separate schools for at-risk and homeless children can work if run properly. Organized under the Hope Region, part of the San Diego County Office of Education, Juvenile Court, and Community Schools, the homeless children of San Diego County have been granted a unique opportunity and can be educated and succeed through enrollment in one of three schools: Harbor Summit, Monarch School, and Toussaint Academy of the Arts and Sciences (TAAS).

DISCUSSION General School Region Overview

All teaching and administrative staffing at the Hope Region is paid for and provided by San Diego County Office of Education. Recently received funds from Title 1 have allowed adding a parent liaison staff member to the Hope Region. The staff, without exception, proved to be enthusiastic and caring. One high-ranking administrator serves as an exemplary role model for these students. As a high school drop out and single parent of two she returned to school, got a high school diploma, an Associate of Arts degree, a Bachelor of Arts degree, a teaching credential and a Master's degree all within a six year period. Another outstanding administrator decided he had a desire to help

disadvantaged children and switched careers after first starting with the Juvenile Court and Community Schools. He ended up at Toussaint Academy, and went on to earn an administrator credential. The staff spoke passionately about the love they have for teaching in this type of environment and their desire to make a difference. They felt that this type of school, where 100% of the students live in poverty, and the uncertainty of where they will be living on a permanent basis, works because the students feel a sense of “fitting-in.” This contradicts the McKinney-Vento philosophy and intent that homeless children should be entitled to be educated and mainstreamed into “traditional or comprehensive schools.”

An ongoing problem the district faces in staffing is hiring teacher assistants. Teacher Assistants (TA) are a valuable resource in classroom setting, allowing for more one-on-one instruction. One requirement to be a TA is that an applicant must be enrolled in college and be taking at least 6 units or credits. Because of this restriction from the San Diego County Office of Education “qualified” people with college degrees and not currently enrolled in college cannot be considered for hiring as TAs.

Also provided and paid for by the San Diego County Office of Education are the State Adopted Curriculum and most technological equipment. The property sites of the three schools are owned by supporting agencies. Harbor Summit and TAAS are owned by Father Joe’s Villages. Monarch School is owned by the Monarch School Project. The Regional Office is located within Monarch School. Because of limited space and student over-population there are plans for expansion and/or relocation of all three schools. A high ranking administrator of Hope Region has stated that their “population would triple if the word got out about their schools and their abilities to address specific needs of most, if not all, at-risk and homeless children.”

The student population in Hope Region is segregated by age depending on the school the student attends. Monarch School serves homeless and at-risk students from San Diego County ages 8-18. A student can enroll himself or herself in Monarch School. Most students find out about Monarch through “word of mouth.” Harbor Summit and TAAS both serve the needs of students who primarily have families that are in programs and living in shelters provided by Father Joe’s Villages. Harbor Summit services grades K-8; TAAS grades 9-12.

Primarily because of unstable housing arrangements and other family social problems, average attendance time for students attending Hope Region schools is only 6 months. It is estimated that 15-20% of students will attend these district schools for 1.5 years or longer, but in reality their stay usually is 6 weeks or less. The most common reason students are truant from school is the lack of support and encouragement from their parents. Students “of color” make up 76% of the student base—although because of the constant changing populations in the homeless community hard statistical facts can be difficult to obtain. Approximately 56% of the students are from an environment where only Spanish is spoken; and of that group 10% speak only Spanish.

Within one week of enrolling at Hope Region students in grades 2-12 must take a Measure of Academic Progress (MAP) test which measures math, reading comprehension, and language usage. The majority of students entering Hope Region test three grade levels behind students at "traditional schools." The MAP scores allow the staff to assess the individual needs of the students. Because of high standards, dedicated staff, and high expectations, students within the Hope Region Schools, on the average, advance one grade level for each 6 months they are in attendance. Within the 2007 school year Hope Region, was able to score the highest 10th grade MAP scores out of all the other schools that comprise San Diego County Juvenile Court and Community Schools. This score is important because it is a strong indicator of passing either the General Educational Development (GED) or High School Exit Exam. In one specific instance, Monarch High School students earned record scores on the Academic Performance Index (API) even outpacing students in some comprehensive schools. Under new leadership, the Hope Region API rose from 430 to approximately 675 over a 3-year time period.

Because of the structure and limitations of Juvenile Court and Community Schools and their operation by San Diego County Office of Education there are no Advanced Placement (AP) or Gifted and Talented Education (GATE) programs offered at Monarch, Harbor Summit, or Toussaint Academy of the Arts and Sciences. Students currently qualifying for GATE or AP programs would have to be transitioned into comprehensive schools for those opportunities. There are also no available vocational training classes on site being offered to the two age appropriate student bodies at TAAS or Monarch.

DISCUSSION Overview Of Sites

The Harbor Summit School is a year round public school for grades K-8 in partnership with Father Joe's Villages. There are three classrooms in which several grades are combined. It is different from what most people would think of as an elementary school as it is located in an apartment building in downtown San Diego, and all its students are homeless. At times no Spanish-speaking TA's or teachers are in attendance. We observed other classmates eagerly helping non-English speaking students with their work. There is a small playground available for student use. Plans are being made in the future to move the school to a much-needed larger facility. The majority of students live within the Father Joe's Villages system with a parent, family member or guardian, and appear to be happy, well adjusted, and generally well behaved.

Since it opened its doors in 1992, TAAS for grades 9-12 has welcomed over 700 homeless teens. The school has over 40,000 sq. ft. that includes classrooms, a dining room, laundry room, computer lab, music and exercise rooms, and offices. There are dormitories for approximately one third of the students in attendance. Because of social problems, boarding students find it is more beneficial to live away from the family unit (if there is a family unit). In September 2007, Toussaint added a Science Lab, which now provides students with hands-on experience for required curriculum. This lab was funded through generous donations from major San Diego companies and foundations. Upon an extensive tour of TAAS facilities, the Grand Jury found the High School students to be

friendly, well mannered, interested in their work, and appeared to be very similar to their peers at comprehensive schools. Staff was casual and friendly. They seemed to assimilate into the school population while teaching and yet have complete control of classroom behavior. Students looked content and above all interested in learning.

Monarch School, the third school in the Hope Region, operates independently of Father Joe's Villages. It is located on a 10,000 sq. ft. site on Cedar St. and Kettner Blvd., obtained with the cooperation of the Centre City Development Corporation. The school operates grades 3-12 with hopes to expand to 40,000 sq. ft. and include additional grades, PreK-2nd. It is perhaps the only school in the United States where students can enroll themselves. The first questions they are asked are if they are hungry and if they have a place to stay. In addition to their educational needs, students are provided with two meals a day as well as a variety of services ranging from health and dental services, clothing, bus or trolley passes, and after school programs. Families of Monarch students are encouraged to participate in family meals twice a week offered by the school and are provided a laundry facility onsite. Students were observed to be happy, well behaved, and excited about learning.

DISCUSSION Supporting Agencies

San Diego County Office of Education generally provides teaching, administrative, and counseling staff, state mandated curriculum, and most technical equipment. There are two support agencies that are responsible for the additional funding that contribute to the success of Hope Region Schools. Father Joe's Villages and the Monarch School Project provide any additional support and funds through donations and grants that are available.

FATHER JOE'S VILLAGES—A major mission of Father Joe's Villages is to promote and provide comprehensive services dedicated to "breaking the cycle of homelessness while respecting the dignity of the individuals that are served." This is very evident in the funding behind, and the support for, additional services received at Harbor Summit Elementary and TAAS through Father Joe's efforts. At TAAS, the support agency focuses heavily on education; 90% of the teens that graduate TAAS go to college. In addition to meeting educational goals, all teens are expected to find a part-time job at age 16. Students under 16 are expected to participate in volunteer activities in the community. Pierre's Place eating establishment was started in 2007 on the TAAS site and is open to the public. Paid for with more than \$400,000 in donations, Pierre's Place provides jobs for students and alumni, with some profits going toward college scholarships.

Additional funds go to provide a wide array of programs ranging from art, music and dance to health classes and life skills training. At TAAS there is a student-operated store where donated items can be purchased with "token money" earned for achievement and good behavior. Extra equipment, supplies, transportation, clothing, or further needed services are all provided by the supporting agency from donations and grants. Emphasis is put on teens to complete their education at TAAS then go on to higher education. Upon college enrollment, agency representatives monitor the student's activities. The biggest risk age for failure of homeless and at risk youths is 18-24 and so the support

agency feels they must offer help, guidance, and follow-up to that age group. Even though most of these students' early years may have been spent as homeless, more than 80 percent are able to find and maintain stable housing after graduating from TAAS.

MONARCH SCHOOL PROJECT--When the 501(c)(3) Monarch School Project was formed in 1999, its mission was to provide financial and volunteer assistance to Monarch School above and beyond what was included in the budget of the San Diego County Office of Education. The project has successfully expanded to include approximately 14 paid staff as well as many volunteers and major donors. The services provided to Monarch School through this agency include, among other things, fresh fruit and vegetables donated and delivered daily to the school on a volunteer basis, gift certificates for clothing and groceries for the homeless attendees and their parents, needed bus or trolley passes for students, and after school programs that are available for all students from the Hope Region. Administrators expressed their passion and pride for the project, and stated that it is easy to get volunteers and donors. They proudly acknowledge that once someone visits the school, observes the children, and sees the success of the school, they are eager to get involved in the Monarch School Project.

The Monarch School Project is currently attempting to expand the Monarch School. Cramped for space, dealing with overcrowding, and with a desire to extend the program to include Pre-K- 2nd grade, the Project is searching for a new location or trying to rebuild at its present location. Administrators of The Monarch School Project feel that moving the school to a location outside of downtown would not be in the best interest of the students. Most social services agencies are located close to or in the downtown area, plus the bus and trolley system provide needed transportation for the students. The increase in land prices, parking issues, and the large growth in downtown San Diego in recent years have made this expansion challenging.

FACTS/FINDINGS

- Fact:*** Homeless children in San Diego County need a safe and welcoming environment in which to attend school and acquire an education.
- Fact:*** Of the four counties originally granted educational exceptions to the McKinney-Vento Act San Diego is currently the only county in the nation to be successful in continuing its efforts to educate homeless children.
- Fact:*** While attending schools in this Region, students on average, attain one grade level advancement for each six months they attend.
- Finding:*** The Hope Region provides schools for at-risk and homeless children.
- Finding:*** The Hope Region is fulfilling the educational requirements of homeless children in San Diego County, and in some cases actually exceeding the test results obtained by some comprehensive schools.

Finding: The Hope Region success appears to be largely due to the efforts of the staff and support agencies.

Fact: Advanced Placement programs or GATE Certified classes are not available at any school in the Hope Region.

Finding: Students within Hope Region need to take additional classes at a community college or at available high schools out of the Region if their opportunities to attend a four-year college are to be realized.

Fact: Some Hope Region students must drop out of school and work full time because of the need to provide support to their families.

Fact: No vocational Education classes are currently being offered within the Hope Region.

Finding: A counselor within the Hope Region is trying to provide students with vocational training classes as well as job intern opportunities. In addition many students receive part time job opportunities because of supporting agencies, but more are needed.

Fact: Teacher Assistants can provide a one-on-one learning experience to help students meet their educational objectives.

Finding: San Diego County Office of Education policy prevents the hiring of qualified teacher assistants who are not currently attending college.

COMMENDATION

The 2007/2008 San Diego County Grand Jury commends the San Diego County Office of Education and the staff of the Hope Region for their hard work, perseverance, and dedication to all the homeless and at-risk children and youths enrolled in all three Hope Region Schools. The belief that homeless and at-risk youths need separate facilities compared to being “mainstreamed” into comprehensive schools can work if there is help from strong supporting agencies. Because of these efforts it seems clear why Hope Region in San Diego County has been the only school district in America that has been very successful in their “exception” from McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act. In addition the San Diego County Grand Jury commends the supporting agencies Monarch School Project and Father Joe’s Villages for their overwhelming support and dedication to the education, emotional well being, and future of homeless children and youths of San Diego County.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The 2007/2008 San Diego County Grand Jury recommends that the San Diego County Office of Education:

- 08-57:** Review the policy that prohibits hiring teacher's aids or classroom assistants if they hold college degrees but are not currently enrolled in college and consider giving the Hope Region schools an exemption from the requirement.
- 08-58:** Consider introducing and funding vocational training programs into the Hope Region curriculum.
- 08-59:** Give as much assistance as possible to supporting agencies to help obtain, enlarge, and expedite new sites and/or remodel Monarch and Harbor Summit Schools.

REQUIREMENTS AND INSTRUCTIONS

The California Penal Code §933(c) requires any public agency which the Grand Jury has reviewed, and about which it has issued a final report, to comment to the Presiding Judge of the Superior Court on the findings and recommendations pertaining to matters under the control of the agency. Such comment shall be made *no later than 90 days* after the Grand Jury publishes its report (filed with the Clerk of the Court); except that in the case of a report containing findings and recommendations pertaining to a department or agency headed by an elected County official (e.g. District Attorney, Sheriff, etc.), such comment shall be made *within 60 days* to the Presiding Judge with an information copy sent to the Board of Supervisors.

Furthermore, California Penal Code §933.05(a), (b), (c), details, as follows, the manner in which such comment(s) are to be made:

- (a) As to each grand jury finding, the responding person or entity shall indicate one of the following:
- (1) The respondent agrees with the finding
 - (2) The respondent disagrees wholly or partially with the finding, in which case the response shall specify the portion of the finding that is disputed and shall include an explanation of the reasons therefor.
- (b) As to each grand jury recommendation, the responding person or entity shall report one of the following actions:
- (1) The recommendation has been implemented, with a summary regarding the implemented action.
 - (2) The recommendation has not yet been implemented, but will be implemented in the future, with a time frame for implementation.
 - (3) The recommendation requires further analysis, with an explanation and the scope and parameters of an analysis or

study, and a time frame for the matter to be prepared for discussion by the officer or head of the agency or department being investigated or reviewed, including the governing body of the public agency when applicable. This time frame shall not exceed six months from the date of publication of the grand jury report.

(4) The recommendation will not be implemented because it is not warranted or is not reasonable, with an explanation therefor.

(c) If a finding or recommendation of the grand jury addresses budgetary or personnel matters of a county agency or department headed by an elected officer, both the agency or department head and the Board of Supervisors shall respond if requested by the grand jury, but the response of the Board of Supervisors shall address only those budgetary or personnel matters over which it has some decision making authority. The response of the elected agency or department head shall address all aspects of the findings or recommendations affecting his or her agency or department.

Comments to the Presiding Judge of the Superior Court in compliance with the Penal Code §933.05 are required from the:

| <u>Responding Agency</u> | <u>Recommendations</u> | <u>Date</u> |
|--------------------------------------|------------------------|-------------|
| San Diego County Office of Education | 08-57 through 08-59 | 8/13/08 |