

Schools scramble to help students with no place to live

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Jonathan Santiago, 9, rested with his mother, Frances, outside the House of Hope homeless shelter, where they live, in Lowell. (Ellen Harasimowicz for The Boston Globe)

By Connie Paige
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With the numbers of homeless across the state on the rise, local school officials are scrambling to provide services and absorb costs for an expected surge in homeless students.

Boston, for example, has 100 more homeless students than at this time last year, troubling educators who say that homelessness threatens not only children's ability to perform in school but also their well-being.

"For children, school is not only the place where they learn and grow, it's also the place where they get their most reliable meals of the day, breakfast and lunch," said Boston's Emergency Shelter Commission director, Jim Greene. "We know that mobility - bouncing around from school to school - can result in children falling behind in their studies."

Student homelessness has skyrocketed over the past few years. In the three academic years starting in 2004, official tallies show the number of homeless students across the state climbing from about 7,000 to almost 12,000.

The tally - the latest figures available - come from the state Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. Later numbers will not be available until December. Officials at several school systems say they anticipate an increase.

This week, with about 350 homeless students, Boston schools have 100 more than last October, said Mary William, the schools' homeless liaison. Last year, the number reached 1,200 by the end of the year.

Cambridge has 249 homeless students now, compared with 207 last year, said schools spokesman Justin T. Martin. Framingham homeless liaison Pamela Laquidara said the schools there have identified 160 homeless students so far, a number inching up to and expected to surpass the 170 enrolled last year. Worcester homeless liaison Judith A. Thompson said she also anticipates an increase in the system, where last year, 10 percent of the 24,000 students were homeless.

Based on preliminary data, Katherine A. Martin, Fitchburg schools director of grants, said she expects the number of homeless students to climb from last year's 344 to 375. "It's definitely getting grimmer," Martin said.

The high populations reflect not just students living in shelters or on the streets, but also those doubled up with relatives or friends, in foster care, or thrown out of their homes or runaways. By law, schools must designate all of them as homeless, keep a cumulative roster of their numbers, and provide services for them.

While educators do not keep a ledger showing the price tag of all the extra services, they say - and parents confirm - there are many hidden costs.

Frances Santiago, living for more than seven months at a Lowell shelter, House of Hope, said her 9-year-old son, Jonathan, is receiving help from a psychologist and tutor at school. Santiago said relocating four times in the past two years has set Jonathan back two grade levels.

In addition to social and academic extras, one of the largest expenses for the homeless students comes from the cost of transportation. Districts are required by law to transport homeless students from wherever they end up living to a school in their original community. The bill can go as high as \$200 per day per child, or more, if the student has special needs that require tailored equipment, officials said.

In Holyoke last year, the cost of transportation for the homeless reached \$244,623, according to Holyoke school Superintendent Eduardo B. Caballo.

In some communities, outside organizations have stepped up to the plate.

In Fitchburg, for instance, after school officials canvassed the city for help, L.L. Bean donated backpacks for all the homeless students enrolling this fall, and Staples provided school supplies to fill them, said Superintendent Andre Ravenelle - an important contribution "to put them on equal ground with everyone else," he said.

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