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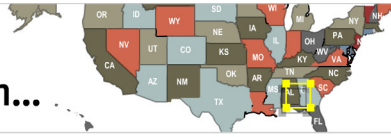
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Suit puts 88 more homeless students in school

The state's settlement includes shelter visits and transportation aid

STORY SUMMARY | READ THE FULL STORY

Nearly 1,000 homeless students are now enrolled Hawaii public schools after the state Education Department settled a lawsuit filed by homeless families.

The number of homeless children attending public schools increased by nearly 10 percent from 910 last year to 998 this fall.

Assistant Superintendent Daniel Hamada attributed the increase to a computer system that keeps track of homeless children, as well as 16 liaisons who visit shelters and agencies and help families register for class and receive benefits.

Those services resulted from a class-action lawsuit filed on behalf of three homeless families who accused the Education Department of failing to provide them with an adequate education.

The Education Department, which settled the case in August, is also giving out city bus passes to 47 homeless students living beyond school bus routes and offering mileage reimbursement to homeless parents who drive their children.

Advocates say schools here and nationally should prepare for an influx of homeless students -- and the costs associated with serving them -- as families are expected to lose their homes because of the slumping economy.

By Alexandre Da Silva

FULL STORY >>

By Alexandre Da Silva

POSTED: 01:30 a.m. HST, Oct 19, 2008

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When Daniel "Makalii" Hatchie was 6 and in second grade, the school day began long before the bell rang.

His homeless adoptive mother, Alice Greenwood, would wake him up at Mailli Beach Park at 4 a.m., hold his tiny hand and board the first of two city buses to get to Nanakuli Elementary on time.

It didn't take long for Daniel to start missing classes, being late, falling behind and getting into trouble as his mother worried more about finding a place to live than his progress in reading and math.

"He was getting very physical because he couldn't keep up with the rest of his classmates," said Greenwood, who has been homeless and jobless for two years after suffering herniated disks on her neck and lower back. "The only thing he knew was his middle name. He didn't know how to read, anything."

But Greenwood, who blames schools for failing to help her adopted son, has not given up on Hatchie, now a third-grader who wants to join the military once he graduates.

She has already overcome one battle.

In August, Greenwood and two other homeless families won a class-action lawsuit alleging the state Education Department had violated a federal mandate requiring it to inform the homeless about their rights, provide access to transportation and school choice.

U.S. District Judge Helen Gillmor ordered the Education Department to revise enrollment forms and computer registration programs to better identify, track and service homeless students as part of the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act of 1987.

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The law, which provides Hawaii with about \$200,000 in federal funds, instructs schools to offer transportation for homeless students and allow them to stay at the campus where they originally enrolled even if they move outside the district in search of shelter.

HOMELESS student enrollment in Hawaii has risen to 998 from 910 at the end of the previous academic year, a nearly 10 percent jump, said Assistant Superintendent Daniel Hamada. He attributed the increase to upgrades of a computer system that better tracks homeless children, as well as 16 liaisons who visit shelters and agencies and help families register for class and receive benefits.

The Education Department also gave city bus passes to 47 homeless students living beyond school bus routes and began offering mileage reimbursement to homeless parents who drive their children, Hamada said.

The department, which is facing up to \$70 million in budget cuts in the next school year, could not immediately estimate how much it is spending on the beefed-up homeless initiatives.

The homeless deficiencies found in the islands' educational system are not rare, and lawsuits have uncovered problems in several states, including Maryland and New York, and in the District of Columbia, according to Eric Tars, children and youth attorney with the National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty.

In Suffolk County on New York's Long Island, for example, schools were turning away homeless parents because they could not prove district residency, Tars said. A consent decree was issued in 2005 to ensure schools in that region were complying with the law, he said.

Tars said \$64 million that Congress appropriated in the 2008 fiscal year for school aid for the homeless nationally will need to at least double to keep up with a projected rise in the homeless population.

WHILE living at Maili Beach, Venise Lewis, another plaintiff in the Hawaii case, said she was told by an area school that she could not enroll two of her three children there because she lacked a permanent address.

After the suit ended, Lewis said, she was able to swiftly transfer her one son and two daughters from Waianae to schools in Kapolei after moving in with relatives in the neighborhood. Her boy, who is 14, also was allowed to have free lunch whereas before only the girls, ages 12 and 10, were getting meals at no charge.

"We told them that we were homeless and they just approved it," the 37-year-old said.

Esther Santos, a children services case manager at the Ka Hale A Keola Homeless Resource Center on Maui, said about 12 children are for the first time being bused to the school they were enrolled in before relocating to a shelter closer to other campuses.

"There has been a great difference," she said. "The law states they get to stay at their home school. They don't have to transfer."

Studies have shown that homeless students can be set back by as much as eight months academically each time they change schools, said Victor Geminiani, executive director of Lawyers for Equal Justice, which joined with other legal groups in bringing the lawsuit against the Education Department.

He said the organization is pleased with how education officials have responded so far.

"We have not heard any problems at all," Geminiani said. "I'm really happy that the state finally settled the case."

HOMELESS advocates say schools nationwide should prepare for an influx in homeless students -- and the higher costs of serving them -- as more families fall victim to the financial crisis and lose their homes.

There were 688,174 homeless students attending U.S. schools in 2006-07, the most recent year for which figures are available, according to Barbara Duffield, policy director for the National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth.

But mortgage woes could displace families of about 2 million children from their homes, according to an April report by First Focus, a Washington, D.C., bipartisan children's advocacy group. It predicted 6,800 Hawaii children would be affected by foreclosures.

"School districts are reporting tremendous increases (in homeless students) because of the foreclosure crisis and the economy," Duffield said, adding that school districts are seeing 20 percent to 50 percent more homeless children this year. "Our numbers are going through the roof."

The 998 homeless students in Hawaii still represent a small portion of the 177,871 children in the statewide public system. But Geminiani said he expects homeless enrollment to grow because of the slumping economy and broader outreach by schools.

Lorri Cardoza, an Education Department homeless concerns liaison on Maui, said two of five new homeless families she identified last week had recently lost their homes. One homeless family who found permanent housing last week will be monitored until the end of the school year in case they face obstacles.

"When you get on your own, you need that help still," Cardoza said.

IN THE MEANTIME, Greenwood, the former Maili Beach denizen, has been homeschooling Daniel, who is now 7, after they moved to a homeless shelter in Waianae. Greenwood, who said her son is catching up fast, is looking forward to putting him back in school.



"Now he is on his third book," she said on a recent afternoon as Daniel lay on a park bench, exhausted from a teaching session. "He knows how to spell and write his first, middle and last name."

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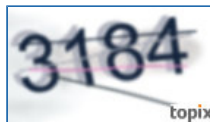
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