

# Access to Success

## *Meeting the Educational Needs of Homeless Children and Families*

### **Education: An Underlying Tenet in the Struggle Against Poverty**

Today in New York City, almost 6,000 families are living in shelters. These are young families with painful and fragmented pasts. They include over 10,000 children, 8,000 of whom are under the age of six. The lives of these families are dominated by a seemingly insurmountable poverty typified by domestic violence, child abuse, substance abuse, foster care, chronic health problems and inadequate education. It is this last characteristic—an inadequate education—that cripples a family’s ability to survive. For both parents and children, only education can provide a viable exit from poverty.

*Homelessness is not a housing issue; it is an education issue, a children’s issue, and a family issue.*

Education is children’s work. Their days should be dedicated to learning, with school providing the essential building blocks for the future. The following comparison between New York City’s homeless and non-homeless children of similar ages, however, highlights a grim reality.<sup>1</sup>

#### **Homeless Children are...**

- *nine times more likely to repeat a grade;*
- *four times as likely to drop out of school;*
- *three times more likely to be placed in a special education program; and*
- *two times as likely to score lower on standardized tests*

**...than non-homeless children.**

Parents play a pivotal role in educating their children. Yet two-thirds of homeless parents have not graduated from high school. Therefore, they must first complete or continue their own education and gain the basic skills essential for independent living before they can become effective teachers for their children.

More importantly, they must embrace education in order to

better promote their children’s intellectual growth and academic achievement. Unfortunately, because homeless parents often feel ill-equipped, they seldom assist their children with school assignments or teach them basic skills; they rarely read to their children or introduce early learning experiences in the home. Consequently, it is imperative that parents learn to value education so that they can help their children understand its worth.

In order to address the educational needs of both children and their parents, Homes for the Homeless (HFH) has instituted a family-based approach to education, where children and parents are seen as both students and teachers. HFH’s overarching goal is to teach, through example, that education needs to become a way of life rather than merely one aspect of family members’ lives. Through its comprehensive approach, HFH has begun to see the cycle of poverty slowly being replaced by the burgeoning promise of a cycle of education.

### **Early Childhood Education: A “Jump Start” on the Future**

Early childhood education lays the foundation for future academic success; it encourages a child’s cognitive and social development in the short-term and produces substantial educational benefits in the long-term.<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately, low-income and homeless children participate in preschool at significantly lower rates than children of middle- and upper-income groups and therefore miss many of the benefits of early childhood education.

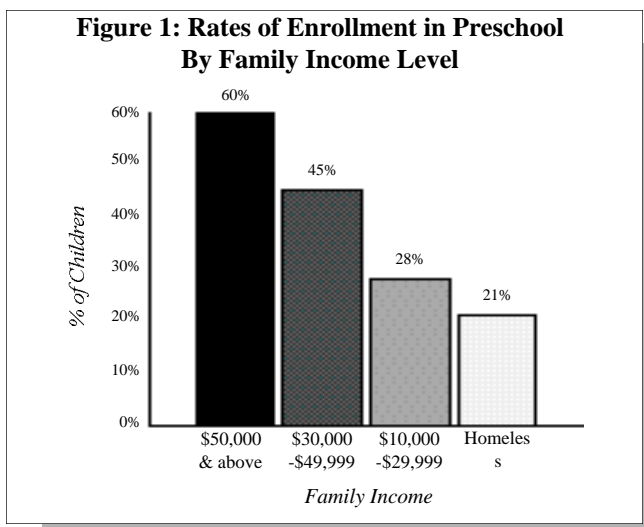
In a recent survey of families residing at HFH’s American Family Inn transitional housing facilities, the Institute for Children and Poverty (ICP) found that nearly eighty percent of school-age children did not attend preschool prior to kindergarten.<sup>3</sup> In contrast, sixty percent of children from upper socioeconomic groups and forty-five percent of children from middle socioeconomic groups had attended, on average, at least one year of preschool (See Figure 1, following page). Clearly, a family’s financial status is largely responsible for this discrepancy. While Head Start (a federally financed preschool program) was designed to ensure that low-income children could attend preschool, it serves less than twenty percent of all those eligible.<sup>4</sup>

Recognizing the invaluable effects of early childhood education, HFH developed the Jump-Start Program. This program is comprised of a Child Development Center, a Literacy Program and an Intergenerational Program, and serves over half of the 500 preschool-age children living in HFH's facilities.

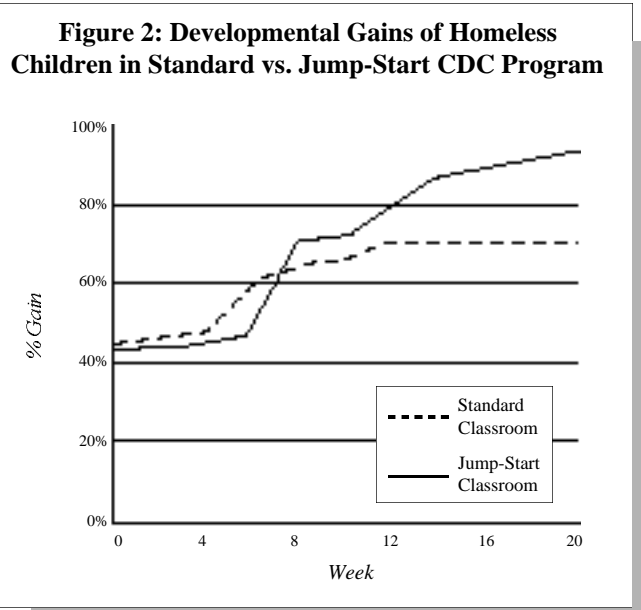
The Child Development Centers are the crux of the Jump-Start Program and serve both infant and preschool-age children. The infant care component offers children a nurturing environment meant to enhance their mental and social development. Infant rooms are tailored to provide the youngest infants with stimuli in the areas of sight and sound, and older infants with more advanced psychomotor activities.

The Child Development Centers offer preschool-age children a "jump start" on their education by utilizing a variation of the High/Scope curriculum, an educational method known for its effective application with at-risk or disadvantaged children. Developed at the University of Michigan, the High/Scope model is child-directed. By using the children's interests to plan their day, the activities not only accomplish their immediate goals (such as painting, participating in mock Olympics or planting vegetables), but also foster a sense of control and initiative in children. Incorporating motor skills activities, communication and teamwork, creativity, logic and spatial relationships into the daily curriculum enriches both children's educational and social development.

Over time, HFH has found that homeless parents often lack a support network from which to get accurate information or within which to voice their own pride, fears or reflections about their children's development. Therefore, parents



Although participation in preschool leads to lower dropout rates and incidence of teenage pregnancy, criminal behavior and welfare dependency, homeless children participate in preschool significantly less than children of other socioeconomic groups.<sup>5</sup>



Standardized tests reveal that homeless preschoolers manifest a number of developmental lags. However, in just weeks, children in HFH's Jump-Start CDC Program show marked improvements in gross and fine motor skills, language comprehension and social skills, exhibiting even greater gains than those children participating in standard day care.

have been integrated into the Child Development Center's infant and preschool activities. Parents learn about the development process—from infancy through the toddler stages—as well as about ideas for activities to engage in with their children. The Child Development staff targets parents to stress that the Centers are more than simply drop-off services; they are places where children can learn and develop through simple activities and where parents can become familiar with the curriculum and encourage it within the home.

The Jump-Start Child Development Centers have had an enormous impact on the homeless children who participate (See Figure 2). Children show rapid developmental, social and emotional growth in as little as eight weeks, well above the strides made in more conventional early childhood education programs. Their language skills improve dramatically, their attention spans lengthen and they exhibit more cooperative behavior, develop self-confidence and become more spirited and alert. They also experience growth spurts and weight gain.

The Literacy and Intergenerational components of the Jump-Start Program complement the Child Development Centers' efforts. The Literacy Program encourages parents and their children—whether they are participating in a CDC or not—to join in activities such as group storybook readings, trips to local libraries, workshops on how to read to children or visits to the CDCs' quiet reading corners, stacked with books donated by the Reading is Fundamental Foundation (RIF). The Intergenerational Program works in

conjunction with local senior citizen centers to sponsor workshops on puppetry, clay-molding and paper maché. These activities allow children to interact with older adults who provide them with an overabundance of attention and care. In addition, parents also reap the benefits of elderly role models who share their own experiences with parenting and working with children.

For homeless children, who spend roughly nine to twelve months of their young lives without a permanent home, the Jump-Start Program provides educational and creative outlets, allows for the development of bonding relationships and nurtures children's natural capacity for initiative, curiosity and independence. In all, the Jump-Start Program successfully sparks an interest in learning which helps ensure the future educational achievement of homeless children.

## Accelerated Education: The Learning Fast-Track

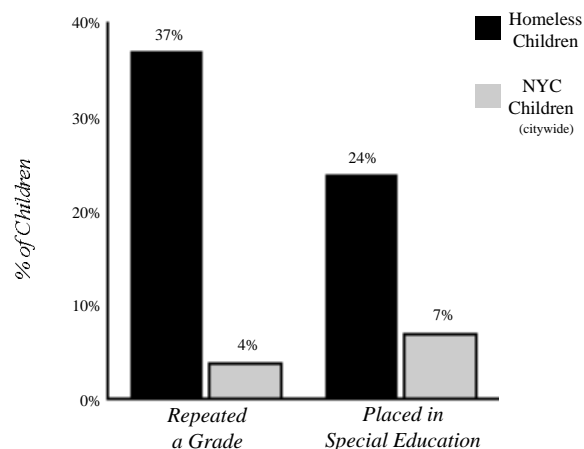
School-age children require a supportive and nurturing environment in order to achieve academic success. However, homeless children—who often live in a shelter environment for an entire academic year—rarely receive such encouragement due to frequent moves, unstable living conditions and, in some cases, abusive or neglectful situations. These conditions all adversely affect school attendance and academic performance.

The ICP found that during the 1991-92 school year, nearly forty percent of all school-age children entering HFH facilities had attended at least two different schools; twenty-seven percent had attended two or three different schools and thirteen percent had attended at least four. These children, on average, had missed three weeks of school. Worse yet, twenty percent had missed more than six weeks of school.

The impact of this instability is reflected in academic performance: twenty-four percent of school-age children living in HFH facilities have been placed in special education classes due to developmental delays, and thirty-seven percent have repeated a grade (See Figure 3). More disturbing, only twenty-three percent were found to score at grade level in math and only thirty-eight percent scored at grade level in reading. These devastating indicators predict educational failure and a future of continued poverty for this generation of homeless children if not aggressively confronted.

Faced with this challenge, HFH developed the Brownstone School for children five to thirteen years of age, to compen-

**Figure 3: The Educational Status of Homeless Children vs. Non-Homeless Children**



*Homelessness takes its toll on the academic achievement of children. Nearly nine times as many homeless children as non-homeless children in New York City had repeated a grade and three-and-a-half times as many were placed in a special education class during the 1991-92 school year.*

sate for the disparity in educational achievement between homeless and non-homeless children. This accelerated afterschool program is based on the premise that children who are behind academically should not be placed in the “slow lane” or a remedial program to catch up, but rather into the “fast lane” or an accelerated program. With guidance from the educational model developed by Henry Levin at Stanford University, the Brownstone School emphasizes a low student-to-teacher ratio with a high degree of individualization to address the needs of each child.<sup>6</sup> The model stresses the teaching of concepts, analysis and problem-solving to instill and strengthen reading, writing, science and mathematics skills, and discourages the use of repetition and drills.

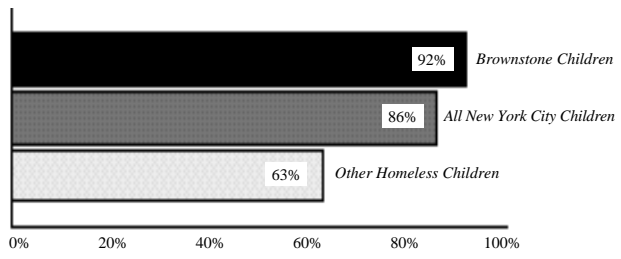
An evaluation of the Brownstone School showed marked improvements in the academic performance of participating students. A review of the academic gains of children in the program revealed extraordinary results in as little as six months; the children's reading scores rose by fifty percent while their math scores more than doubled (See Figure 4, following page).

Furthermore, the Brownstone School has made a positive impact on school attendance. Public school attendance among Brownstone School students is almost thirty percent higher than the citywide attendance rate for homeless children—ninety-two percent versus sixty-three percent (See Figure 5, following page).<sup>7</sup> School attendance is also higher for Brownstone School students than for all children in New York City schools (86%). Another interesting comparison shows that sixty percent of the absences by school-age children at HFH facilities not participating in the Brown-

stone School were considered unexcused or unrelated to illness, while only thirty-five percent of the absences of Brownstone School students were considered unexcused. Clearly, the Brownstone School's accelerated curriculum has captured the enthusiasm and energy these children exhibit, and has positively channeled it to achieve an educational end.

Through the Brownstone's innovative teaching techniques, educational programs, field work and computer learning applications, as well as the bonding encouraged between students and teachers, the children develop stronger learning abilities, greater self-confidence and a sense of accomplishment. In addition, the Brownstone School helps parents become directly involved in their children's education by sponsoring family activities such as literacy workshops and group field trips, as well as projects such as a community garden and mother-teen workshops. The Brownstone staff also facilitates greater collaboration between parents and their children's public school by encouraging that parents attend teacher conferences and use their children's teachers as resources for advice and guidance. This has proven highly successful: the ICP found that an astounding eighty-six percent of Brownstone parents visit their children's school often while only twenty-six percent of parents whose children do not participate in the Brownstone School report that they do the same. Forming partnerships between parents and teachers will help parents continue to communicate with their children's teachers in later years.

**Figure 5: Comparative Daily Attendance Rates for School-Aged Children**



Studies have shown that excessive absenteeism, particularly among low-income students, makes students more likely to drop out.<sup>9</sup> As a result, HFH closely monitors the school attendance of all its students. Children who participate in the Brownstone School have higher attendance rates than other homeless children and New York City students systemwide.

### Kids Just Want to Have Fun: Building on Hidden Talents

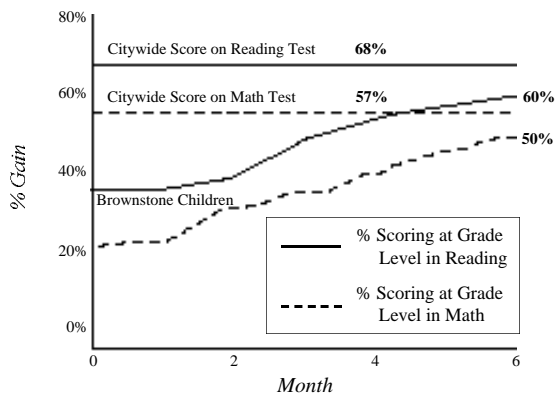
Extracurricular activities are essential to round out children's educational and social development. Unfortunately, homeless children often spend after-school hours consumed by anxiety and confusion about what has happened to their family. They miss their old neighborhoods and friends, and sometimes feel unwelcome or uncomfortable in a new school where they are may be taunted for being homeless.

In response, HFH has created Healthy Living Centers as a place solely for children. These centers provide a setting for creative and recreational activities and offer homeless children an outlet in which to express their feelings. They serve as an alternative to the destructive or violent pastimes to which so many of today's poor children fall victim.

Theatre, art, dance and poetry allow children to express typical adolescent feelings, as well as those about poverty and homelessness not otherwise articulated. Sports teams and theater troupes encourage cooperation and teach socialization skills. Workshops and rap groups on substance abuse, AIDS, pregnancy and crime help children develop coping and decision-making skills to handle such issues. Special outings to Madison Square Garden, Shea Stadium and the occasional Broadway production, are additional treats. Children, however, must attend school everyday in order to participate in any of the Healthy Living Center's activities.

In sum, the Healthy Living Centers are a vehicles through which children can develop untapped skills, improve their self-esteem and confidence, cultivate role models and friendships, and round out their school-based educational experiences.

**Figure 4: Academic Gains of School-Aged Homeless Children in the Brownstone School**



When homeless children learn in an accelerated environment, they show remarkable gains in as little as six months. Children increase their scores in math and reading comprehension nearly two-fold; the percent of Brownstone School participants reading at grade level increased from thirty-nine percent to sixty percent and the percent comprehending math at grade level increased from twenty-three percent to fifty percent.<sup>8</sup>

## Parents: The Vanguard of Education

HFH's educational programs for children have acted as magnets for parents. As these young parents—whose average age is just twenty-two—watch their children blossom and thrive through involvement in either the Jump-Start Program, the Brownstone School, or the Healthy Living Centers, they become inspired to get more actively involved in their children's educational development. This involvement often takes the form of volunteering for the program their children attend. Many parents have also chosen to complete their own education. The ICP found that over sixty percent of the parents who lack a high school diploma and whose children attend the Brownstone School were working to obtain their General Equivalency Diploma (GED). The overwhelming reason given by parents for doing so is to "set a good example for my children."

To support the educational needs of parents and to promote learning as a shared family activity, HFH developed on-site Adult Learning Centers which house Alternative High Schools and serve as the hub for all adult education activities. At the Alternative High Schools, licensed teachers help adults (fourteen through twenty-one years of age) who have dropped out of school complete their education and prepare for their GED exam. Computers and educational programs tutor parents in math, reading and writing.

The Adult Learning Centers harness the interest and curiosity parents experience when they become involved in their children's education. The Centers work closely with the Child Development Centers to sponsor reading and literacy activities for parents and children. While helping parents complete their own education—prepare for the GED exam, college or job training—in the short-term, a more long-lasting effect is the message this educational mind-set sends to children. By promoting the education of parents, the Adult Learning Centers also ensure the continued education of children.

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## Can We Make a Difference?

By allowing homeless children to grow up without a focus on education, society not only fails to cultivate a future for these children, but also promotes a continued cycle of poverty. Early intervention in their educational lives, along with on-going academic support, ensures that children will have every opportunity to succeed. Implementing an effective strategy that is family-based, child-centered and education-focused as a method for working with homeless families is feasible and necessary. The components of such a model include:

- **Expanded availability of educational programs.** *The Jump-Start Program, complete with its Child Development Center, Literacy Program and Intergenerational Program, serves as an excellent foundation for the educational and social development of homeless children. Parental involvement in these activities further reinforces education as a way of life for homeless families.*
- **Accelerated afterschool learning programs.** *The Brownstone School is a model for helping children who are not succeeding in school—at risk of repeating a grade or dropping out—improve their academic performance and potential through an accelerated, rather than remedial, approach to learning. Again, parental involvement is necessary to ensure that children feel encouraged and supported to achieve beyond remedial expectations.*
- **Healthy Living Centers.** *Extracurricular activities not only round-out a child's education, but also help improve his or her social skills and self-esteem. Healthy Living Centers encourage consistent school attendance and success, as well as foster coping mechanisms to help children deal with the pressures of being an adolescent in a volatile urban environment.*
- **Adult Learning Centers.** *Adult education is a crucial component if learning is to be a family activity. Parents must complete their own education in order to have the skills, knowledge and self-esteem needed to promote their children's education and, ultimately, improve their family's socioeconomic status.*

Over the last six years, HFH has developed an educational strategy based on its experience working with over 6,100 families and 15,000 children. The challenges faced by the families it serves are representative of those faced by homeless families nationwide. While divisions continue to exist among advocates, service providers and policy makers as to what the solution to the homeless problem is, most would agree that the solution is not simply housing. As the majority of homeless heads-of-household lack the independent living skills necessary to face the challenges of urban poverty, *it is education* rather than housing that holds the key to ameliorating this deplorable crisis begun in the 1980s. By prioritizing the education of society's most vulnerable children, we invest in the nation's social infrastructure. With an estimated 600,000 families, including roughly *one million children*, living in shelters and doubled-up housing situations nationwide, the magnitude of the challenge is great.<sup>10</sup> However, the potential of the homeless children who are inspired to adopt education as a way of life is even greater.

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**Notes**

1. Figures obtained from a sample of 112 homeless school-age children at Homes for the Homeless during the 1992 spring semester; New York City Board of Education, Statistics and Data Department (1992); Y. Rafferty, *And Miles to Go* (Long Island City, NY: Advocates for Children, November 1991) p. 15.
2. J. Molnar, *Home is Where the Heart Is* (New York: Edna McConnell Clark Foundation, March 1988) p. 60.
3. Figures obtained from a sample of 112 homeless, school-age children at Homes for the Homeless; US Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *Current Population Reports: School Enrollment: Social and Economics Characteristics of Students: October 1988* (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1998) p. 19, Table 4.
4. R. Reich, "What is a Nation?," *Political Science Quarterly* 106 (2), p. 196.
5. National Center for Children in Poverty, *Five Million Children* (New York: National Center for Children in Poverty, 1991) p. 72.
6. US Department of Education, *What Works: Research about Teaching and Learning* (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1987) p. 57.
7. Y. Rafferty, 1991, p. 12.
8. Y. Rafferty, 1991, p. 15.
9. Accelerated Schools Project: Stanford University, CA.
10. These figures represent a conservative estimate of homelessness nationwide. Recent research from the Census Bureau has estimated that 2.5 million families are living doubled- or tripled-up with friends and relatives. Estimates obtained from: US Conference of Mayors, *The Status Report on Hunger and Homelessness in America's Cities: 1990* (Washington, DC: US Conference of Mayors, 1990); G.A. Morse, "Causes of Homelessness," *Homelessness: A National Perspective*, eds. M.J. Robertson and M. Greenblatt (New York: Plenum Press, 1992) p. 3.

**HOMES FOR THE HOMELESS (HFH)** is the nation's largest single provider of residential education and employment training programs for homeless children and families. Every day, over 530 families benefit from the innovative programs available at the American Family Inns run by HFH. The **INSTITUTE FOR CHILDREN AND POVERTY (ICP)** is HFH's research and training division.

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