

Located in Cincinnati, Ohio, the Yellow Bus Summer Camp offers young homeless children living in shelters free meals each day as well as swimming gear, and offers many exciting, first-time learning experiences.



Summertime

Not a Break for Homeless Families

By Lauren Blundin

Every June, kids across the United States are counting down to summer vacation. They cannot wait for the break—a time for family outings to beaches, parks, and museums, for riding bikes and going swimming.

Summer also brings a less welcome phenomenon—often called the “summer surge”—of increasing numbers of people, including families, needing shelter. There are many reasons for this increase, but at least one cause can be linked to the summer break itself; relatives and friends who have allowed homeless families to live with them during the school year are less patient with the situation once summer break has started and children are home all day.

For children experiencing homelessness, a break from school can mean a break from the one stable place in their lives. “School is a critical, normalizing part of life,” says Nan Roman, president and CEO of the National Alliance to End Homelessness. “School is a time for being with peers, pursuing interests, and being out of the stressful situation of being homeless.”

Different Challenges and Barriers

Summer break often finds homeless students without a safe place to play and without opportunities for educational or cultural activities. Sadly, summertime for some kids also means having fewer positive interactions with caring adults.

Summer learning loss—the loss of academic knowledge and skills over the break—is a concern for all children. Homeless students in particular cannot afford to lose skills, as they are often already behind their peers academically.

With 1 child in 30 homeless every year, the public school system is the obvious choice for providing and funneling services and supports to homeless children and their families. Schools may provide free breakfasts and lunches (and less frequently, dinners), access to health care and dental care, food pantry programs, access to before- and after-school care, and enrichment activities. When the calendar flips to June, the need for food, quality educational activities, and other services does not just go away.

The Hunger Gap

“About 21 million students receive free and reduced price meals at school during the school year,” says Ross Fraser, director of national relations for Feeding America, which represents a nationwide network of member food banks. “Of those, about 10 million also get a free breakfast. So for a significant number of children there are one or two meals a day they receive free or at a reduced price.”

What happens during the summer break? There is a U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) summer food service program, but it reaches only about one in eight, or 20 percent, of the children who receive free or reduced price meals during the school year. Lack of transportation to the summer meal sites is a common barrier for children, especially those in rural areas, resulting in a huge gap between the number of children eligible for food programs and the number of students accessing those programs.

Breaking Down Barriers to Food

Feeding America’s member food banks work with national donors to move food to 60,000 different programs. Special summer programs try to reach the other seven in eight children who still need food assistance. “A lot of our food banks are finding innovative ways to feed kids during the summer,” says

Fraser. “Some have retrofitted school buses to drive around and stop at different trailer parks to feed kids. Some are partnering with the public library. Innovation is the name of the game—trying to find new ways to get food to children.”

In childhood hunger, the stakes are high. Inadequate nourishment can hinder intellectual, emotional, and physical development and set a child up for failure in school later on. Add to this the phenomenon of summer learning loss. Clearly, the need for summertime academic intervention and enrichment for children experiencing homelessness is an urgent one.

Serving the Unseen

The Yellow Bus Summer Camp addresses this need head-on in Cincinnati, Ohio. For 18 years, the yellow bus has transported children ages 5 to 12 from shelters to summer fun and learning. The camp is run by the nonprofit Faces without Places and provides a free breakfast and lunch each day. The camp also provides each camper with a swimsuit, towel, and shoes. The camp is exclusively for students experiencing homelessness, and is free of charge.

“We are the only local nonprofit that exclusively serves the educational needs of students experiencing homelessness in the greater Cincinnati region [which includes parts of Kentucky],” says Mike Moroski, executive director. “That number on average is 6,000 students a year. Kentucky is ranked last in the nation regarding childhood homelessness. Cincinnati has the second worst childhood poverty rate in the country at 52 percent. That is not to paint a doom and gloom picture of the region. I just find that when I state those two numbers in the region, people seem shocked. It is literally an unseen population.”

Faces without Places supports the educational needs of this unseen population year-round. A mentoring program pairs homeless and at-risk youth with university students, while a literacy pro-

Hands-on activities such as pizza making, provide learning opportunities and teach nutrition, the importance of healthy eating, and cooking skills. The activity is part of the GREAT Youth and Families summer camps hosted by Housing Families in the Boston area.



gram brings regular story times and books to homeless shelters for children of all ages. A third program, the Education Stability Collaborative, provides transportation and material supplies that students need to attend school. But the Yellow Bus Summer Camp is the flagship program.

For eight weeks, kids at the Yellow Bus Summer Camp play sports, go on field trips, and swim. They also learn. In fact, the camp's true focus is developing children's literacy and math skills.

"We hire real teachers for the summer," says Moroski, "and we pay them competitively." The camp's investment in certified teachers has paid off. A 2014 analysis of the Yellow Bus Summer Camp found 95 percent of campers retained or increased their literacy and/or math skills. Campers also made significant gains in measures of well-being such as health, self-confidence, stability, belonging, and comfort.

Parent Kelly O'Brien found out about the Yellow Bus Summer Camp last summer when she and her three children were staying in a shelter in Kentucky. "Faces without Places helped me tremendously," says O'Brien. "At the time I needed to focus on getting out there and getting interviews so that I could get a job and get out of the shelter. Summer programs are so expensive."

O'Brien enrolled her school-age daughter in the summer program and was able to job hunt while her daughter had a safe place to go each day and learn. "She got to experience things she would not normally get to do," says O'Brien. "Like go behind the scenes at the airport and see the police dogs. She also went on a boat ride up and down the Ohio River. The camp is creating these experiences for kids instead of letting them hang out in an apartment or a shelter all day. The program helps keep kids positive and not focusing on the stressful situation at home."

Changing Lives

In Maryland, the Boys and Girls Club of Frederick County provides summer academic enrichment for students ages 6 through 14, some of whom are experiencing homelessness and living in transitional housing or shelters. Located in Frederick County—a rural, bedroom community with a large population of commuters to Washington, DC and Baltimore—the Club serves children from the city of Frederick and its surrounding suburbs. The program is not free, but the organization works hard to keep costs down and affordable, and offers some scholarships. The high-quality, affordable camp opportunity is so popular that online registration can fill within 30 minutes of opening to the public.

According to Executive Director Patrick Gunnin, the summer camp provides a critical stability and daily routine for children. The camp also provides extended hours before and after camp

so that parents who are working can drop students off and pick them up after work. As with the Yellow Bus Summer Camp, this camp focuses on academics.

"Programmatically, we are trying to reduce that summer learning loss," says Gunnin. "Especially for students with special needs. We try to do this in a fun manner in which they will enjoy learning, but not in a structured setting."

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Parent Kafilat Akande has seen her son D'quami Brown, 10, thrive during his three years with the Boys and Girls Club of Frederick. When D'quami started with the program, he and his mother were homeless. He has attended the summer camp on scholarship each year since then, although they are no longer homeless. Akande says that the camp helped her son learn to interact with his peers. "He had been through a lot," she says. "D'quami was one of the homeless children going to the club. He needed a place to relax and be a kid—somewhere he did not have to feel like he was taking on so much. I needed him to be in a place where he could be a child with other kids, and be happy. The camp gave him the opportunity to just relax and have fun."

According to Akande, some of her son's favorite activities at summer camp are basketball, science experiments, guest speakers, and field trips to museums. He has also developed an interest in history. When asked if the summer program has supported D'quami academically, Akande says, "Let us talk statistics. Last year he was a C student. After the summer program, D'quami has made the honor roll all three times."

The day she walked into the Boys and Girls Club of Frederick County, Akande's life changed. She herself was a homeless parent searching for a job and a quality program for her child. She found both. The same day she enrolled D'quami in camp, Akande was hired to work as the camp bus driver, where she immediately developed close relationships with each child,

making a point to get to know each one individually. She later began providing enrichment activities in different club locations. Today, Akande is a program director for the Boys and Girls Club of Frederick County, and she is just as passionate about improving students' self-esteem as she is about improving their academics. "The Boys and Girls Club of Frederick County changes lives," she says.

Having a GREAT Time While Learning

Housing Families, a family-focused shelter in the Boston area, provides a year-round after-school program for children as well as a series of two-week summer camps to reach as many students and age groups as possible. The camps are designed to help reduce summer learning loss through fun, hands-on activities. The camps also give kids the chance to try things like horseback riding, which they otherwise would never have the chance to do.

The camp's full name is the GREAT Youth and Families summer camps. The GREAT in the program's name is an acronym that staff created to describe the qualities that the program nurtures in children: Growth, Resilience, Empowerment, Acceptance, and Trust. Of course, the kids just think they are having a great time while doing experiments and taking field trips.

"The program provides a lot of learning, but within activities, so the kids do not realize they are learning," says Siobhan Malady, program manager for the shelter's GREAT Youth and Families summer camps. "We do a lot of science activities here. Last summer, we made 'poop' by mixing food with vinegar and squeezing it through nylon. The children were able to explain the process of how food moves through the body. And a year later they are remembering this."

In addition to combatting summer learning loss, Barbara Schwartz, director of the GREAT Youth and Families program, believes the camp provides parents a much-needed respite from supervising children. "Most of the parents I know are inordinately stressed because they feel like their kids are with them 24/7 in the summer, and they do not get a break." Summer camp gives parents that break.

Homeless at College

Most programs and legislation for the education of homeless students target kindergarten through 12th grade, but students in college are vulnerable to homelessness as well, particularly in the summer. The trend of the "summer surge" of homelessness in shelters is echoed at colleges across the country each spring as students lose access to college-provided housing and/or deplete their financial aid for the year and struggle to afford housing on or near campus.

Four-year colleges generally provide housing to students, but at a significant cost, and not always year-round. "We certainly see students struggle with housing during breaks," says Cykeia Lee, director of higher education initiatives for the National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth (NAEHCY). "Of course, in community college there is no housing at all, so those students struggle year-round. For students on campus, summer is the longest break. It can make the difference between a student coming back for sophomore year or not. Sometimes they have to go to a different state for housing with friends or family, and they might not return."

"A lot of students have not been taught how to plan financially. They do not come from homes or places where you have conversations about how to budget—to know that if you have \$2,000 in aid that is just for housing, you will still need money for food, toiletries, and those types of things."

Many college students are reluctant to reach out for help, and try to avoid shelters. "I have had students call me from barns," says Lee. "Some students are saying they live in 24-hour school libraries, and some are sleeping outside, but they may not say that to a lot of people."

Marcy Stidium, director of the Campus Awareness, Resource and Empowerment (C.A.R.E.) Center for homeless and at-risk students at Kennesaw State University in Georgia, explains why students may run into trouble in the summer. "A lot of students have not been taught how to plan financially," says Stidium. "They do not come from homes or places where you have conversations about how to budget—to know that if you have \$2,000 in aid that is just for housing, you will still need money for food, toiletries, and those types of things."

Students may fund tuition through scholarships or financial aid, but those funds are usually depleted by the summer time. Housing and food is expensive, and there may be limited availability to both during the summer. For example, a student who relied on her meal plan throughout the year may face hunger when she finds the plan does not extend over the summer. Students who rely on campus transportation systems to get to work can also find that reduced bus schedules make it challenging to get to work. While work-study is usually available, the number of hours available for students to work depends upon the department's funding. Often, students will deplete their allotted work-study

hours before the summer break, leaving them scrambling to find employment for the summer. These factors combine to create huge barriers to staying in school for homeless students. Some colleges have started to recognize and support the homeless populations on their campuses.

Unconquered Scholars

The Unconquered Scholars Program at Florida State University (FSU) is an intensive support program for students who have experienced foster care, homelessness, relative care, or ward of the state status. The program is a subset of the broader Center for Academic Retention and Enhancement, which supports FSU's first-generation college students who have been economically disadvantaged.

"Out of the youth who age out of foster care, only about two percent ever achieve a bachelor's degree, compared to about 28 percent of the general population," says Lisa Jackson, program coordinator of Unconquered Scholars. "So they are extraordinarily at risk of not obtaining a degree."

Jackson believes there is not a time when students are not vulnerable to becoming homeless, but concedes that the winter and especially summer breaks do require planning to avoid disaster. "Whenever we have a scheduled break when the dorm is closing, that is when I feel my students are at the greatest risk of homelessness. We do not have many dorm spaces available over the break, so we have to work very closely with the housing office."

Asked why former foster and homeless students would have difficulty maintaining homes, especially during the summer break, Jackson cites what she believes are the three major reasons: "Lack of financial management, not having a 'forever family,' and having a strong sense of self-reliance," which Jackson says is common among former foster children. "That can make the student not ask for help."

In terms of financial management, Jackson is referring to the challenge most college students face in making their financial aid, loans, and any personal savings stretch far enough to cover expenses over the summer break. Most college students can fall back on their immediate and extended families if they need to,



For eight weeks, kids at the Yellow Bus Summer Camp play sports, learn, go on field trips, and swim. Most importantly, the experience allows kids to be kids when summer is in full swing.

however, explains Jackson, "Many of our students do not have what we call a forever family. So when money is tight, they do not have anyone to go to."

To avoid these situations, Jackson brings up financial issues early and often with students. "When I meet with them, we will talk about financial responsibility, and I will say let us make sure we budget. There are conversations we have to try and address these things. How each person responds to the conversation, though, varies." She says she tries to "stay ahead" of the summer break by encouraging students to plan well ahead of time.

To further prepare students for the financial challenges that hit especially hard each summer, Unconquered Scholars will be rolling out a new financial therapy model in Fall 2015. "It is one thing to sit down with a student and say let us work on a budget to make sure you are saving," says Jackson. "It is another to help them understand the emotional reasons of why they want to spend and why they might overspend ... to really prepare them for it and to help them make more sound financial decisions."

Caring College

Kennesaw State University recognized that students without strong home support systems were struggling to stay in school

and maintain housing. The University created the Campus Awareness, Resource and Empowerment (C.A.R.E.) Center to support students who are homeless or are at-risk of being homeless. The Center provides students case management services and access to food, clothing, and emergency shelter. The Center is also the designated campus contact in a state-wide network to support former foster youth.

“I was directed to the C.A.R.E. Center by my academic advisor,” says Amberlyn Hutton, a student at Kennesaw State University who recently became overwhelmed financially and lost her housing, despite working two jobs. “I was talking to her, letting her know that I had nowhere to live. I had been really stressed because I had picked up a second job to make ends meet, so I was not able to go to class. I said to my advisor, ‘Maybe I should withdraw?’ And my advisor said that instead of withdrawing, I should call the C.A.R.E. Center. Within three days they found me a place to stay on campus that will be free until the lease is up in July.”

“I get financial aid, and I have student loans as well. However, my aid was not enough to cover the entire semester for me to stay on campus. I tried to stay with my parents but that did not work, and I got put out. I went from place to place, then started to sleep in my car.” Will Hutton be able to resume taking courses again in the fall? “It depends,” she says. “Housing on campus at Kennesaw is so expensive. I do not know.”

Hutton’s situation is painful and traumatic, but not necessarily unique. Financial aid only goes so far. She is working as much as she can this summer. She works part-time as a pharmacy technician during the day, and works at Chick-fil-A in the evenings. As of July, her housing situation, and the future of her education, is in question. She says she will do her best to stay in school, but covering her expenses during the summer break is tough and has set her back. “I have another meeting on Monday at the C.A.R.E. office to talk with them to see what I should do next,” she says. (To learn more about Kennesaw State University’s efforts to help students experiencing homelessness, see “Building Bridges” in our Spring 2015 issue of *UNCENSORED*.)

Growing Problems with Shrinking Budgets

School districts and communities are aware of the many needs of students during the summer break from school. The challenge, however, is meeting those increasing needs with a stagnant or shrinking budget. The number of homeless students more than doubled between the 2004–05 and 2012–13 school years according to the nonprofit research center Child Trends. Funding for public schools, however, has actually decreased in at least 30 states since the national recession of 2007–09. As school districts struggle to meet the needs of increasing numbers of homeless students during the school year, budgets for existing summer programs may suffer.

Barbara Wand James is project director for the Texas Homeless Education Office (THEO), a research unit of the University of Texas at Austin. She works with the Texas Education Agency and its regional service centers to support the education of homeless children.



Snakes and lizards and turtles—oh my! In addition to year-round programming, Housing Families offers two-week summer camps designed to help reduce summer learning loss through engaging activities. Hands-on experiences, like learning about reptiles, enrich their science skills in a fun new way.

James describes the problem this way. “We are seeing increasing needs for services with stagnant dollars. Some of our projects have cut out summer programs this year as they felt they did not get enough dollars to support a viable summer program.”

“The region 12 education service center at one time had a very large summer program [geared toward homeless students],” says James, giving an example. “They brought in kids from all over the region for the summer. It was very impressive, the kids loved it, and they had great learning activities. Unfortunately, their grants kept dwindling, and they got to the point where they could not provide that programming any longer.”

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“There was a lot of attention and collecting data on summer programs after the recession, finding a striking difference in funding [before and after the recession], and seeing a lot of districts cutting funding,” says Erik Peterson, vice president of policy for Afterschool Alliance, an advocacy group for summer and after-school programs. “We have seen a little bit of that funding come back, but not to levels before 2008.”

“In terms of general trends, funding continues to be a challenge for programs and parents,” says Peterson. “The key piece is that the number one source of funding is parent fees, and that is even true for low-income parents.” In 2014, parents on average paid \$281 per week for summer learning programs. For families experiencing homelessness, that cost is a monumental barrier.

Both the federal 21st Century Community Learning Centers (CCLC) program, which supports the creation of centers that provide academic enrichment opportunities for children who attend high-poverty and low-performing schools, and summer meals programs, provide funding for summer programs across the country. States administer more than \$1.1 billion in federal funding through 21st CCLC and \$461 million through summer meals programs. According to Peterson, funding for these programs remained steady this year. In terms of state funding, the picture is less clear. “Some states are putting more money back into education in general, and that is translating into summer learning,” says Peterson. “But some states are further behind.”

Moving in the Right Direction

In a move that will help stem the summer surge at the higher education level, NAEHCY is working with states to create higher education networks that will support homeless and unaccompanied youth and increase their access to higher education. Funding is an issue here too. “The state networks, except for two, do not have funding attached to them,” says NAEHCY Director of Higher Education Initiatives Cykeia Lee. “The vast majority of state networks are volunteer, and their staff are working to connect students to resources that already exist. Those few that do have funding have very small amounts of funding. We are hoping that funders will see that there is a need for this population.”

The state of California recognizes the value of higher education support for students at risk of homelessness. This session lawmakers considered legislation that would require higher education institutions to create a point of contact for homeless students on campus. This point of contact is a person who could help students prepare for the inevitable challenges of summer ahead of time. A decision on the law has yet to be made, but the potential is encouraging.

A Future at Stake

The summer learning loss phenomenon is a concern for all children. The stakes for homeless and economically disadvantaged children, however, are much higher than those of their economically stable peers. A study of the long-reaching consequences of the summer learning gap traced high school achievement back to first grade to see how early elementary summer experiences influenced later achievement. The results were astounding. A child’s achievement gains over the first nine years of schooling were found to be the result mainly of learning during the regular school year. But the achievement gap between high and low socioeconomic statuses at the ninth grade was mainly due to differences in summer learning over the elementary years. These summer experiences substantially influenced whether a child was placed in a college prep track at the high school level, whether a child graduated high school, and whether he or she attended college.

Anyone Could Need Help

Hardworking parents like Kelly O’Brien rely on programs like the Yellow Bus Summer Camp from Faces without Places to help ameliorate the socioeconomic achievement gap for their children. She wishes people understood that these programs are valuable and worth the investment in children’s lives. “I wish people could understand it could be their neighbor and their neighbors’ kids going through homelessness,” she says. “You would want your neighbors’ kids to have a safe place to go, so you would want to support a summer program like this.” ■