

Housing and Education: Putting the Pieces Together

The first in a series of papers demonstrating the value of affordable housing for people and communities across the State of Vermont

Every morning, in schools across Vermont, students arrive—eager to learn, perhaps, but unable to engage fully in the day’s lessons because they’re exhausted from having slept in the family car the night before, or hungry, because their parents didn’t have enough money left over for food after paying the rent. Or they’re late arriving because the only affordable housing they could find is outside the district where they began the year, and it’s a long trip even in ideal weather.



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In the classroom of Rebecca Haslam, who has been teaching first grade at Champlain Elementary School in Burlington for 11 years, these scenarios are routine.

“In public education we know that we have to address the basic needs of students, and also their social and emotional needs, *before* they’re even available to learn academically,” she says. “It’s hard to keep them focused on their academics when you know that that’s not really their number one priority.”

Within the Burlington School District, 51% of students are eligible for free or reduced lunch (FRL), a traditional measure of the number of low-income students in a school; at the end of the 2013–2014 academic year, approximately 90 district families were experiencing homelessness. But housing instability is not only a problem in high-population areas, or even Chittenden County. In Bradford, a town of 2,900 in eastern Orange County and home to a cross-section of Dartmouth College and Dartmouth-Hitchcock Medical Center employees,

the per capita numbers are just as high: 62 percent of the elementary school’s 210 students were eligible for free and reduced lunch last year.

The U.S. Department of Education’s National Center for Homeless Education indicates in its “Education for Homeless Children and Youths Program Data Collection Summary,” released in March 2014, that in 2011–2012, homelessness was an issue for 1,202 enrolled students in Vermont. Of those, 62.9% were “doubled-up” or staying in others’ homes; 24.8% were in hotels or motels; 7.8% were in shelters; and 4.5% were unsheltered.

That’s 148 students in shelters or on the street, on school nights and throughout the depths of winter. They might be early elementary students subsisting alongside their parents and siblings, or unaccompanied youth who’ve fled an abusive situation at home. There simply isn’t enough affordable housing for these kids or their families.

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The effects on children’s learning can be both short- and long-term. There are the daily struggles with feeling tired, hungry, distracted, and resentful. And over the course of a student’s time in elementary and secondary school—if he or she sticks around that long, since such students are 60% more likely to drop out of high school—effects include weaker social networks, less involvement in extracurricular activities, and lower-than-average test scores.

Vermont’s NECAP results underscore the latter point: the state’s low-income students scored anywhere from 14% to 29% lower in their tests across age groups in the 2012–2013 school year.

Encouragingly, however, a Johns Hopkins University study released in June 2014 confirmed that when families spend 30% of their income on

“Sometimes those kids experiencing housing challenges feel disconnected from their communities,” says Champlain Elementary’s Haslam, “which is even more damaging to their ability to access the academics, because socially and emotionally they’re just not ready.”

In Bradford, former principal Skip Barrett says school staff and administrators have routinely reached out to students, making home visits as needed to engage parents and ensure that students felt safe at school; their efforts were acknowledged by the Agency of Education in its 2009 report “Roots of Success.” Barrett says there was no magic bullet, no million-dollar reading program: “It was that connection with the kids that made the difference. It all goes back to understanding where they’re coming from, and housing is a big part of that.”

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Rebecca Haslam, first grade teacher

housing—the target for what is considered affordable—children’s cognitive abilities improve. When that percentage rises or drops, it suffers. That’s brought about in part by the kinds of environments they’re forced to live in, but also because those families don’t have the resources to provide the books, computers, and educational outings that can determine success in a child’s academic career. That lack often further alienates students who are struggling to fit in. An affordable home, for these kids and their future, could make all the difference.

Indeed, when a housing redevelopment project was completed in 2007, recalls Barrett, students, many of whom are casualties of long-standing generational poverty, began to realize for the first time that there were alternatives to the existence they and their parents had always known.

“From the kids’ perspective, it all has to fit together,” says Barrett. “It’s a jigsaw puzzle, and if the school is too disconnected from where they’re living, they can’t bring it all together. We have to make sure we’re fitting in the pieces they need to have in their lives to make it whole.”

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