

Press Clippings 11/6/2021 to 11/8/2021

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‘Oh my God, where are these kids?’: How COVID-19 obscured true picture of homeless suburban students

By Katlyn Smith



Maggie Schroeder, left, and Patty Briones are coordinators of the [Elgin Area School District U-46](#). Project Access. The program enables homeless students to access clothes, shoes, coats and other personal items in the district's Welcome Center. *Rick West | Staff Photographer*

Months into the pandemic, school districts across Illinois braced for a rise in the number of students without stable housing.

The COVID-19 crisis had unleashed widespread job loss and health complications, leaving "many more families and children homeless or at risk of homelessness," the Illinois State Board of Education warned in July 2020.

When the numbers came in, however, it was "quite a shock," said Deb Dempsey, an advocate for homeless students with the Kane County Regional Office of Education. Schools identified thousands fewer homeless students in 2020-21 than in the year before.

"It was like, 'Oh my God, where are these kids?'" Dempsey said.

But what appears to be a significant decline is not only misleading. It's cause for concern. Educators say there isn't a reduction in homelessness.

"It's just that we've lost track of them, which is the worst thing that can happen because then they're kind of falling through the cracks and not getting the services that they need," said Tom Bookler, a regional homeless liaison in the North Cook Intermediate Service Center.

Experts say the official figures do not reflect the true scope of student homelessness, for reasons both complex and confounding. Bookler's office serves 39 school districts from Evanston to Palatine. The number of homeless students in those districts fell by 263 from 2018-19 to the last school year.

"With e-learning, we just have lost the whereabouts of many of our families that were mobile and moving around quite a bit, which has been a concern," Bookler said.

Outside Chicago, 11,761 students were counted as "homeless" in a state-designated area spanning eight counties last school year. That's roughly a 21% decrease from 2018-19, when 14,912 homeless students attended schools in suburban Cook, DuPage, Grundy, Kane, Kendall, Lake, McHenry and Will counties.

"Those students are just not being identified by the school," said Alyssa Phillips, an education attorney with the Chicago Coalition for the Homeless.

"Because of the mobility with COVID and with the students being out of school," Bookler said, "we've had a lot that have not re-registered or come back into the schools, so we're not sure where they went."

Defining 'homeless'

Contrary to public perceptions, most "homeless" students in some of the largest suburban school districts aren't living in shelters or on the streets.

A Schaumburg High School senior who asked to remain anonymous has a place to sleep right now and a roof over his head, but it's not permanent.

The senior is staying with his siblings and his mom, who works as a bus driver, in a hotel because they can't afford rent at local apartments. Their living situation qualifies them as homeless under federal education law. But the student is uncomfortable with the label.

"Technically, yeah, we're homeless," he admits. "I don't like the term that much."

His situation is one of many in Palatine-Schaumburg High School District 211. The vast majority of "homeless" families in District 211 are "doubled up" with other relatives or friends, said Matt Hildebrand, director of administrative services and a liaison at the district level.

Families living doubled up are not considered homeless by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. But the federal McKinney-Vento Act defines the homeless to include students sharing housing with others "due to loss of housing, economic hardship, or a similar reason."

Before the pandemic, federal data showed 77% of the 1.38 million children identified as homeless during the 2018-19 school year shared housing with others.

That living situation comes with its own challenges: kids sleeping on the floor, no place to study, worry about where they'll wind up next.

"Many of the families are kind of walking on eggshells where they're staying because they don't want to be kicked out, but at the same time, they need to have a place to stay," Bookler said. "Some will move to several different places within a week, just so that they don't wear out their welcome anywhere."

Some don't realize they qualify as homeless.

"They think, 'Well, I'm staying with somebody, I'm not homeless,' but under McKinney-Vento they are, and they don't necessarily know their rights," Bookler said.

Knowing their rights

Districts across the nation are legally obligated to designate liaisons for homeless students. That liaison is a point person, trained to identify which students are homeless so they receive the additional resources they're entitled to under federal education law.

By law, homeless students are allowed to enroll in school without the paperwork typically required at registration. McKinney-Vento students are eligible for free school meals and transportation to their "school of origin," even if their families move out of district boundaries.

"All those things are really pivotal to a student succeeding academically, because if you don't have that consistent transportation, you have more days that a student might be absent," Phillips said.

In a [national survey](#) of liaisons in fall of 2020, most attributed the drop in their homeless student counts to virtual learning, according to SchoolHouse Connection, a nonprofit group. Other liaisons said homeless families moved frequently, making it difficult for them to stay in contact while schools were closed.

In District 211, 192 students qualified as homeless this school year. The district typically averages around 230.

Though schools have reopened, the district has continued waiving student fees, and officials say that may be contributing to the drop in numbers.

"The absence of requiring fees I think has kind of lessened the need for students or families to come forward," said 211's Hildebrand.

Some families may not self-report their living situations because of the stigma attached to homelessness. Others are unaware that they're eligible for services.

Kane County's Dempsey points to what research shows: "Every time a child moves from one school to another, they lose four to six months in academic progress."

Identifying students

The signs of housing insecurity aren't always obvious.

It might be a student arriving late to school or sleeping in class. A family might ask schools to send mail to a P.O. box. Or they might enroll in the middle of the school year.

"Training teachers and people who work in the front offices of schools and even bus drivers is really critical, because those are often the people who see the students first," Phillips said.

But school closures during the pandemic eliminated that face-to-face contact, forcing liaisons to rethink efforts to identify students in need.

"A lot of us went out trying to find them, knocking on doors and trying to call," Dempsey said.

Bookler's office in North Cook created a new, grant-funded position, an academic coordinator who tries to contact families to see where they've settled and what they may need to "get back on their feet or back in school."

If they re-enrolled elsewhere in the Illinois, officials should be able to track them down through ID numbers assigned to students.

"It's kind of like detective work," Bookler said.

Accessing resources

Elgin Area School District U-46 uses Title I funds to employ two homeless liaisons who run Project Access. Dempsey was instrumental in starting the program back in 1995.

The district is the second-largest in Illinois. It serves families from 11 suburban communities across a sprawling 90 square miles.

When Maggie Schroeder became a Project Access coordinator in 2005, the district was identifying nearly 100 homeless students. At the end of 2018-19, the district tallied 916.

Dempsey, Schroeder and her colleague Patty Briones credit the increase to awareness-building and relationships formed with social service groups in Elgin. "Staff members were identifying students more often, realizing what a difference it was making, how much of a difference it helps the students to be able to stay stable in school," Schroeder said.

Then COVID-19 struck, and the recorded number of homeless students fell to 795 at the end of 2019-20. This school year, the district has identified more than 530. It's too early to say how the end of eviction moratoriums will affect the numbers.

Schroeder and Briones are doing more than just identifying those students, Dempsey said.

"They are removing barriers and meeting their needs so that they have a level playing field in the classroom," she said.

Project Access helps families secure gas cards for transportation as well as clothing and personal care items in a closet area in the district's new Welcome Center near Elgin High School. Briones delivered meals "like crazy" during COVID-19, Dempsey said.

Beyond those basic needs, Schroeder and Briones, who is bilingual, arrange for students to meet with teachers in an after-school tutoring program. They also help students apply for scholarships and financial aid for college.

"We've seen a lot of kids succeed, a lot of students graduate," Briones said. "And a lot of families do eventually graduate from our program, and they get back on their feet."

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Elgin News Digest

By Mike Danahey

U-46 wants state limits on virtual meetings removed

School District U-46 board member Kate Thommes will be a delegate to the Nov. 20 Illinois Association of School Boards assembly, where she will request support for legislation allowing school boards to hold public meetings using audio or video conferencing technology.

The measure would remove restrictions on remote meeting participation, which right now is limited to cases of personal illness, disability, job situations or family emergencies. If approved, the law would allow board members to conduct meetings using audio or video feeds as needed.

U-46 officials said they are making the recommendation because their experience during the COVID-19 pandemic showed they could effectively conduct business while using communications technologies.

At the Nov. 20 meeting, delegates from across the state will also discuss the merits of 22 other proposals for legislation submitted by school districts, 10 of which have the backing of the association's resolutions committee. Each school board is allowed one delegate at the session, which this year will be held in Chicago.

For more information, go to www.iasb.com/advocacy/delegate-assembly.

Elgin Veterans Day ceremony at Schock Centre

The city of Elgin's annual Veterans Day ceremony will be held at 11 a.m., Thursday, Nov. 11, in the Heritage Ballroom at the Edward Schock Centre of Elgin, 100 Symphony Way.

Held in partnership with American Legion Post 57, the event to honor the nation's military veterans will include comments from Elgin Mayor David Kaptain and guest speaker Jerry Turnquist, a local historian, musical selections from the **Larkin High School Band** and representation from local veterans' organizations.

The program is open to the public and seating will be provided. Parking is available in the Centre Parking deck at the southwest corner of Symphony Way and Grove Avenue.

For more information, call Kate O'Leary at 847-931-6770 or go to www.cityofelgin.org/events.

---Daily Herald---11/7/2021

Marist ends South Elgin's perfect season

By Michael Dwojak for Shaw Media

Ron Dawczak and the Marist coaching staff wanted to see more from their players.

The Redhawks coaching staff challenged their players at halftime of their second-round Class 8A playoff game against **South Elgin** with a 14-7 lead, knowing that there was another level they could reach after leaving some plays on the field in the first half.

Marist players responded in the second half, with the defense posting a shutout and the offense more than doubling its points total to help take down the Storm 30-7 and move the Redhawks to the quarterfinals.

"It's a huge win for us and the program," senior Jimmy Rolder said. "Just all of our hard work coming to use and putting it on the field. There is no better feeling."

The Storm tied the game with three seconds left in the first quarter when Anthony Marshall rushed in for a 7-yard score. South Elgin took over on Marist's 21-yard line after a fumble and used four plays to score.

After that, the Storm struggled to come up with big plays. They relied heavily on sophomore quarterback Jake Sullivan to run the ball, taking some chances to throw.

Rolder said once the defense realized which direction they liked to run, he would head that way to stop the run, forcing South Elgin to throw sometimes when it wasn't used to passing.

"We just made them uncomfortable from the start of the second half and I feel like that was the difference in this game," Rolder said.

Sullivan led the way for the offense, passing for 52 yards and adding 47 on the ground. The Storm finished with 132 total yards of offense, 104 of which came in the first half.

South Elgin coach Dragan Teonic thought the lack of playoffs in the past spring season hurt his team, where the players didn't compete in a big-moment game like Marist has for much of the season playing in the CCL/ESCC Blue.

"They're really good, you have to give them a lot of credit," Teonic said. "I don't think we necessarily played badly. They're a really good football team."

After starting the game strong when Dontrell Jackson Jr. completed a 40-yard pass to Ryan Sims for a touchdown on its opening drive, the Marist offense stalled for much of the first half. Jaylon Johnson capped a seven-play drive in the second quarter when he scored on a 3-yard run to give his team a 14-7 lead with 6:25 left in the second quarter.

Marist buried a field goal in the third quarter before scoring twice in the fourth quarter -- once on a 55-yard pass from Jackson Jr. to Ak'Tavion Whitlock-Agee on the first play of the fourth quarter, and a 9-yard pass from Jackson Jr. to Whitlock-Agee with a little under two minutes left in the game.

Jackson Jr. led Marist with 218 passing yards, three touchdowns and an interception. He rushed for 14 yards while Johnson finished with 98 rushing yards. Marist had 364 total yards of offense.

South Elgin finished the season 10-1 with an Upstate Eight Conference championship.

With a strong defensive effort, Rolder was happy to see the offense reward the defense with a strong outing.

"It's a relief, any defensive player will say," Rolder said. "They did great out there."

Marist will play Glenbrook South in the Class 8A quarterfinals after the Titans beat Hinsdale Central 14-7. This will be the fourth straight quarterfinal appearance for the Redhawks, who played in the semifinals in the past two playoffs.

Dawczak told his players they should be proud of making it to the quarterfinals of such a difficult bracket, but issued them another challenge as they prepare for another week of playoff football.

"It's an accomplishment to be here, but we're not done," Dawczak said. "We have goals in front of us that we think that we can achieve, so it's a great accomplishment, but don't be satisfied with that. We have more work to do."

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Marist's Ak'Tavion Agee isn't used to this. Dropping passes, missing big plays. The Dayton recruit took it all out on South Elgin

By Steve Millar for the Daily Southtown



Marist's Ak'Tavion Agee (6) tries to escape from South Elgin's Eduardo Ramirez (60) during a Class 8A second-round playoff game in Chicago on Saturday, Nov. 6, 2021. (Vincent D. Johnson / Daily Southtown)

Senior receiver Ak'Tavion Agee missed a couple early opportunities Saturday, dropping passes on potential big plays for Marist.

The Dayton recruit made sure he delivered when it really mattered in the second half.

“As a receiver group, we think about it as the next play is the biggest play,” Agee said. “I had a few drops. That’s something I’m not used to doing.

“I just had to get it out of my mind and be ready for the next play. I know the coaches believe in me and they’re going to continue to get me involved in the game.”

Agee finished with five catches for 145 yards, including a pair of touchdowns in the fourth quarter, as 18th-seeded host Marist pulled away late for a 30-7 victory over second-seeded **South Elgin** in a Class 8A second-round playoff game.

The RedHawks (8-3) will visit Glenbrook South (9-2) — a 14-7 winner over Hinsdale Central — in the quarterfinals.



Marist Ryan Sims (4) slips past South Elgin's Jalen Jones and Jordan Jones, right, during a Class 8A second-round playoff game in Chicago on Saturday, Nov. 6, 2021. (Vincent D. Johnson / Daily Southtown)

South Elgin (10-1) trailed 17-7 after three quarters, but Agee gave Marist some cushion on the first play of the fourth by catching a 55-yard TD pass from Dontrell Jackson Jr.

“It felt great,” Agee said. “I had to give a speech at halftime to get the boys fired up. I told them the score shouldn’t be as close as it was, so we had to come out 10 times harder.

“Everyone’s behind me, so that’s a great feeling.”

Jackson completed 11 of 18 passes for 219 yards and three TDs.

Agee, who committed to Dayton earlier in the week, added a 9-yard TD catch from Jackson with 1 minute, 48 seconds remaining.

“I’m excited,” Agee said about committing to the Flyers. “I was ready to get it over with and find my home.”

Marist coach Ron Dawczak was happy to see Agee respond to the early adversity.

“He settled down and just played his game, looking the ball in and catching it,” Dawczak said. “He’s such an electric playmaker.

Marist's Jaylen Johnson (23) tries to squeeze through a gap in the South Elgin defense during a Class 8A second-round playoff game in Chicago on Saturday, Nov. 6, 2021. (Vincent D. Johnson / Daily Southtown)

“All he has to do is secure the ball and he’s a home-run threat every time he gets the ball in his hands. He did a great job in the second half.”

The Storm entered averaging 45 points a game behind an option attack, but only managed 136 yards against Marist.

South Elgin moved the ball well early, forcing a 7-7 tie on a 7-yard TD run by Anthony Marshall with three seconds left in the first quarter, but could not sustain offensive success.

“I think not having playoffs in the spring hurt us,” South Elgin coach Dragan Teonic said. “I think the lack of being ready for the big game hurt us. I’m not sure if it’s a conference thing or it’s a playoff thing, but their best players showed up really well and, at times, ours didn’t.

“I’m still proud of our guys. You have to give credit to Marist. They’re just a really good football team.”

Marist's Brian Winstead (45) comes up with a fumble against South Elgin during a Class 8A second-round playoff game in Chicago on Saturday, Nov. 6, 2021. (Vincent D. Johnson / Daily Southtown)

Kai Paz had an interception and Michael Tringali had a fumble recovery for South Elgin.

Jackson threw a 40-yard TD pass to Ryan Sims to get Marist on the board less than two minutes into the game.

Jaylen Johnson ran 19 times for 95 yards and a TD for the RedHawks.

Senior defensive end Jayson Harris-Woodward led a big defensive effort with a sack, a fumble recovery and several tackles.

“We don’t usually get to see a triple-option team like that,” Harris-Woodward said.

“That was a 10-0 team, but we’ve been battle-tested the whole season.

“We wanted to see if we could put those guys under adversity. I guess my switch hit. I played for my team.”