

Welcoming Our Children: The Importance of Health Care in the Education of our Children

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“In one school, a second- grader who had lost his home just put his head on his desk and cried all day,” says Barbara Duffield of the National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth (NAEHC). “Schools are seeing the impact of (foreclosures) on children firsthand.”

As we grapple with the financial crises which said goodbye to 2008 and are still very much with us in 2009 let us look at one of the most overlooked and vulnerable groups that is suffering considerably, our children.

It is estimated that approximately three million children may be affected by foreclosures resulting in not only the loss of their home but also having to find a new school. Under federal law, children who meet the definition of homelessness can stay in their school district if the district determines it to be in their best interest; however, many school districts and families are unaware of this legislation.

Researchers at First Focus and the NAEHC report that the consequences of foreclosures and frequent moves can include behavioral problems, learning deficiencies such as declining performance in math and reading, and emotional issues such as shame and anxiety. Their report also finds that while younger children might not be able to articulate their distress, they are just as affected as teenagers. Birth to age four is a critical time in the brain development of children, and significant stress and upheaval can lead to higher rates of developmental delays and a lag in motor skills. Security and a sense of stability are vital to children that age.

One of the other consequences of the financial crisis is that many children are losing their health insurance because parents cut back on that expense in order to keep up with the mortgage payments. Many researchers find a close link between educational success and good health care. Dr. Pedro Noguera, NYU School of Education, credits Canada’s universal health care system as a contributing factor in its standing as number two in the world in the area of literacy. “(Meanwhile in the USA) we have sick kids in our schools. We have kids with asthma. We have kids with health conditions that make it difficult to go to school. So in many ways we’re expecting schools to solve problems that are not simply educational.”

Here in Texas, as our 81st Legislative Session is about to get under way at the same time as the new administration in Washington, it is imperative that the weakest among us be the recipients of our legislative efforts and decisions. It is a sad reflection of our times that the crises of health care and educational opportunity have not been viewed upon with the same urgency as the recent crisis in Wall Street. Nevertheless, as we at the Texas Catholic Conference work to support and promote the Texas Bishops’ Agenda, which includes Education and Health and Human Services priorities, we should not lose the memory of the young second grader who cried all day at his desk.

“Whoever welcomes this child in my name, welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me, also welcomes the one who sent me. For he who is least among you all is the greatest (Luke 9-48).”

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