



## Research Brief

### *Education in Diverse Contexts of Homelessness*

May 2015

We studied student and family homelessness in the greater Madison region for a two-year period between 2012 and 2014. We wanted to learn about the factors that shape student success during periods of residential instability. Given the critical nature of social capital in supporting homeless students, we particularly wanted to know which relationships within and beyond schools are most important to students and families as they attempt to achieve school success amid wider life instabilities. We interviewed over 120 stakeholders, including homeless parents, school staff, and community personnel to learn about these questions. We also observed school and community practitioners as they attempted to serve families in situations of crisis. We did not enter into the study with hypotheses about which people or networks are most important to homeless students.

The study resulted in numerous interesting findings that have relevance for school and community policy as it relates to the support of highly mobile students. The clearest and most surprising finding was with regard to *Joining Forces for Families* (JFF). JFF was quickly identified as the central pillar in the relationship networks that serve homeless families and students in the region. We interviewed over 40 school social workers—whose primary responsibilities include the support homeless students in their schools. Over 90% of them, without prompting, mentioned JFF as their primary contact for serving these families. We collected literally hundreds of comments indicating the importance of JFF in supporting schools' work with highly mobile children. The following direct quotes from school personnel are representative of the many we heard:

*"I would say JFF is huge. Knowing them and the services they offer, they really have a good pulse on our whole housing situation in the neighborhoods. And that is critical."*  
-HS social worker

*"This JFF social worker is great. He is the contact person. He knows the families and has been here for years. He has ways of getting things taken care of. Utilities. Getting people back in their homes. Dealing with addictions. He knows landlords. He is the person. He knows all the stuff and he knows the families and get things done. He is the first person I call. He knows people at the energy companies. He knows everyone. I know he's screening things and getting down to it."*  
-Elementary school social worker



*“I just spoke with a mom who doesn't speak English. She was a domestic violence victim and had all kinds of needs. Becoming a single-parent all the sudden with three children. She has financial issues. She has insurance issues. She has language issues. We need translators. She really needs someone to help her navigate. The JFF worker knows all of these resources. They are key people because they are out in the community and hearing about issues and resources. They can hook people up with food pantry vouchers or all kinds of things and can help them access things like beds and washing machines. And when families become homeless, they can help.”*

-Middle school social worker

*“JFF is the number one relationship for me.”*

-Elementary school social worker

*“They are really aware of the students and their families. They know about siblings and the issues families are facing. We collaborate with them almost every day and it's hands on.”*

-Middle school social worker

As a result of the clear and unquestioned role of JFF social workers in the social fabric of Dane County neighborhoods, the primary recommendations resulting from this research study include further support for and integration of JFF social workers in the educational infrastructure of this community. More than any others we studied, JFF social workers had established strategic relationships with a vast range of stakeholders who have profound impact upon families that are struggling with poverty and instability. By collaborating with and tapping into JFF networks, schools and other community organizations can strengthen their own efforts to support all children and families. Further, the JFF model of community embeddedness is one that schools and others should learn from. JFF workers appeared to benefit greatly from their everyday closeness to and intermingling with local residents. They establish bonds of trust and are able to garner information and resources that few others appear able to gain. To the fullest extent possible, we recommend that community and school leaders fund, support, and learn from JFF. Our research indicates that JFF is one of Dane County's greatest assets for students and families facing poverty and homelessness.

For more information about our study, please contact:

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