Educators seek ideas to help homeless students graduate

Shawn D. Lewis, The Detroit News   *1:44 p.m. EDT October 4, 2016*

(Photo: Brandy Baker / The Detroit News)

Detroit — Jessica Romero was homeless off and on between the ages of 14 and 21.

"My mom and I lived in an apartment and we got evicted three months after my parents divorced," said Romero, 23, of Ypsilanti, whose father had been the sole support of the family.
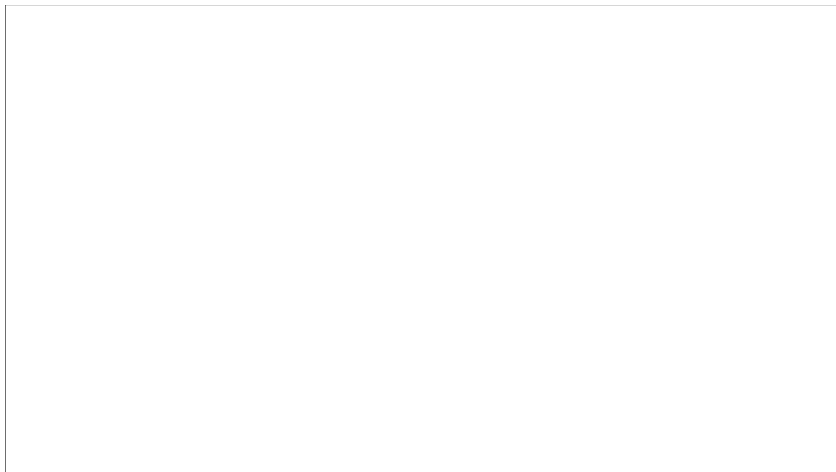
"I could not be around the company my mom began keeping after the divorce, so I did my own thing."

That "thing" involved moving around from Grand Rapids to Detroit to Texas, couch-surfing and once sleeping in a rural park in Fort Worth.

Romero was among the participants in a student homelessness workshop at the National Dropout Prevention Network Conference on Tuesday at the Renaissance Center.

She eventually found help from the Ozone House, a nonprofit agency that offers programs to help young people lead safe, healthy and productive lives through intensive intervention and prevention services.

She earned her GED and now works as a waitress while attending Washtenaw Community College.

Ozone House was among the organizations at the conference presenting workshops on student homelessness and providing information on how educators can help. Previously homeless young adults discussed how not having a place to live affects a young person's success in school, including attendance, falling behind on assignments and bullying. The presenters talked about how teachers and other school staff can connect youth to resources and other needed support.

The homeless session was one of dozens of presentations aimed at finding ways to lower the dropout rate in Detroit, the state and across the country using research and evidence-based solutions.

Recommendations included how to approach a student the teacher may think is homeless, such as talking to the student in private, not singling them out in class and using a caring manner. Others included emphasizing that the student is not in trouble and establishing trust with consistancy and follow through. Post resources, participants said, including posters and information cards to shelters, pantries and other places in every classroom, and offer multiple ways for students to communicate with the teacher, including social media.

Erica Muhammad offered other solutions.

She teaches seventh grade pre-algebra at Fisher Magnet Upper School on Detroit's east side and attended the homeless students' session.

"We have a washer and dryer at our school, and some teachers will provide students with clothing," she said. "Students also are able to take showers at the school so they won't be embarrassed. And when we serve breakfast in the morning, we'll always leave extra breakfasts so students can take the food with them for later, if needed."

The number of homeless students in Michigan is declining. According to the Michigan Department of Education, homeless student enrollment in pre-K-12 is 41,812 for 2015-16, down from 43,884 in 2014-15. That marks the first year-to-year decline since 2007-08.

"Reasons include a down tick in state unemployment and improved training to better identify homeless children," department spokesman William Disessa said.

The dropout-prevention conference started Monday and runs through Wednesday. In a workshop before the conference started, teachers Sunday pitched ideas for an app (/story/news/education/2016/10/02/dropout-prevention-conference-descends-detroit/91452868/)that would help to keep students engaged and in school. The winning team won $10,000.

The National Dropout Prevention Network, at Clemson University in South Carolina, was created in 1986 to serve as a clearinghouse on issues related to dropout prevention and to offer strategies to improve graduation rates. Its goal is to lower the dropout rates to 3 percent nationwide by 2018.

The most recent dropout numbers for Michigan shows a rate of 9.12 percent for the 2014-15 school year, according to the Michigan Department of Education. For the Detroit Public Schools, the predecessor to the Detroit Public Schools Community District, the dropout rate is 11.47 percent.

Detroit Public Schools' high school graduation rate rose last year to 77.4 percent, continuing an upward trend in the state's largest school district. The rate increased more than 6 percentage points in 2015, bringing the district's rate to within 2.4 points of the statewide rate of 79.8 percent.
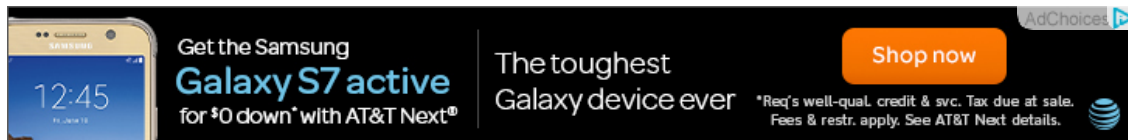
DPS' graduation rate also has risen every year since 2008, when it was 58.2 percent; the same year, Michigan's rate was 75.5 percent, according to the district. It had 18 schools with a graduation rate higher than the state's rate.

DPS graduated 2,555 students in June 2015.

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