



## Homeless teens find shelter from stormy lives at North Dallas High School

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Dozens of students crammed into the counseling center at North Dallas High School a week before winter break.

"What do you need?" asked the truancy officials and counselors who pulled the teens out of class, sympathy etched on their faces.

There are 76 homeless students enrolled at the school, more than most other high schools in Dallas ISD. Mark Pierce, homeless liaison for Dallas ISD, wanted these kids to have everything they needed before the break — food, coats, bus passes — whatever it took so that they could come back after vacation.

"If we're not really working hard to keep these kids in school and assist them in whatever they need, we're going to lose them," Pierce said.

District officials and campus staff hope to get these kids to school every day, to graduate after four years and to overcome whatever caused their homelessness, whether it be poverty, family instability, gangs, pregnancy or a string of bad luck.

Pierce's job is to help get students enrolled in schools, even if the homeless student has no address to give the district, or if their address frequently changes.

North Dallas High ended the 2011-12 school year with 96 homeless students, 45 of whom came back in the fall.

It is unclear if the rest graduated, moved or dropped out. Pierce hopes that through working closely with those who remain, he can track who they are and how the district can help them succeed.

That's why in November, it began offering a "drop-in center" every week with the help of volunteers from the nearby Church of the Incarnation. Homeless students can stop by a designated classroom before school, have breakfast and receive hygiene products, coats or a sleeping bag, and staff can find out who the students are.

"We can't help with whatever caused their homelessness," said the school principal, Dinnah Escanilla. "We can't keep them from their family problems or from pregnancy, but we can help them get through school."

Escanilla has made sure her staff understands the best practices in educating a homeless population. The principal says her staff has become increasingly sensitive and supportive of the kids facing very grown-up problems.

### Family misfortune

One of those students is Ariel Sanchez, 20, a senior who was homeless for half of his high school career.

Sanchez fled violence after much of his family was killed in Honduras a few years ago. It took him a month to get to the U.S.-Mexican border by train. He crossed over with the help of a coyote and made it to Dallas, where his older sister and niece lived.

Shortly after he moved in, Sanchez's sister was deported when she was caught stealing food for her 2-year-old girl. No one informed Sanchez, 16, at the time and he was left to provide for his niece. He worked weekends to provide and wasn't focused on school because of his home situation, he said.

Struggling to care for his niece on his own, Sanchez went to Rafael Rodriguez, a North Dallas High community liaison who has worked at his alma mater for about 14 years. Rodriguez soon learned the teen was homeless, staying with friends and neighbors with his niece.

Rodriguez arranged for food pantries to feed Sanchez and a family friend to care for the toddler. Security worker Charles Johnson took the student into the Oak Cliff home he shares with his mother.

Sanchez was the 38th student to live with Johnson. To date, he's taken in 41 students at North Dallas High who had nowhere else to go.

"They stay with me until their parents get out of jail or some other family comes along, whatever the situation," Johnson said. "But a lot of them stay with me until they graduate."

With Johnson's help, Sanchez got his green card and began focusing on school instead of just surviving. It was a house rule in Johnson's home for the kids to put forth their best effort in classes. With the time for class, Sanchez learned he liked — and was good at — chemistry.

"I'm behind, I know," Sanchez said in Spanish. "I'm a 20-year-old, trying to catch up with 17-year-olds in this country. But I'm going to do something with my life because it is why I'm here."

He moved out of Johnson's home in August, when a relative from Honduras arrived in Dallas to work. They live in an apartment in the Love Field area.

Sanchez's story is just one example of what students and their teachers are up against. Many students aren't willing to let adults help them; others just live their lives in the background, the staff never learning that the teens are homeless.

"This is an unseen population," Pierce said. "They don't want you to know what's going on. They might be embarrassed about it, or they don't want to end up in the system."

## Minors on their own

Once those students are identified, it falls to Sherrie Cleaver, North Dallas High's social service adviser, to understand their situation and meet their basic needs. They come to her for food, shelter or a winter coat but also might get guidance on college.

"Some of these kids, you just would never be able to tell they're homeless," Cleaver said. "And they're adorable kids who just want to help their families and they want to be teenagers, experiencing high school like everybody else."

Some are on their own — kicked out because of pregnancy or drugs. A few run away because of family disagreements. Dallas County's juvenile justice department estimates about 6,000 juveniles run away from home every year. About 10 percent, or 600, won't return home.

Those are the most vulnerable ones, according to Harriet Boorhem, president of Promise House, a shelter for homeless youth. The unaccompanied minors are susceptible to street crimes such as drugs or sex trafficking. Keeping them in school helps keep them accounted for and on a path out of poverty, Boorhem said.

She said helping the teens out of their situations is essential to ending homelessness. Otherwise, the youth may become the next generation of the chronically homeless, the adults who have been on the streets for years and suffer addictions and physical or mental issues.

"It's much cheaper to care for these kids," Boorhem said. "They don't have the mental health issues, the physical health issues because they haven't been on the street nearly as long. The longer they stay out there, the more expensive it is to help them."



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