**Meeting the Educational Needs of Migrant Students**

*The children of migrant farm laborers in the United States face numerous educational challenges because of frequent moves and economic hardship. Education World examines the special needs of migrant schoolchildren and tells how one school met those needs.*

**Best Approaches**

Migrant farmworkers are "the most undereducated major subgroup in the country," wrote Katherine Milton and Jack E. Watson in the paper Distance Education for Mexican-American Migrant Farmworkers prepared at Arizona State University.

Milton and Watson concluded that "distance learning programs that move with the students and which allow them to access their coursework from anywhere they live could provide the greatest potential for academic success."

"The most significant and unique challenge faced by migrant students is mobility-induced educational discontinuity," Ann Cranston-Gingras, associate professor of special education and director of the Center for the Study of Migrant Education at the University of South Florida, told Education World. Cranston-Gingras has studied the needs of students who are migrant farmworkers or the children of farmworkers who travel to find work harvesting crops.

Cranston-Gingras also told Education World that the "cumulative effects of several years of this lifestyle can be devastating from an educational and emotional standpoint."

**CHALLENGES OF MIGRANT EDUCATION**

Migrant children miss school when their families move from one work site to another. In addition, economic necessity often forces migrant students, particularly teens, to work instead of attend school.

"One of the most significant causes of low educational achievement is the fact that juvenile farmworkers simply spend too much time on the job," says Fingers to the Bone: United States Failure to Protect Child Farmworkers, a paper issued by Human Rights Watch in June 2000. The paper cites a 1992 Department of Agriculture study that "found that, nationally, approximately 37 percent of adolescent farmworkers work full time."

Even if not working in the fields, "teenagers are often put in charge of their younger siblings," according to Youth Employment in Agriculture.

And not all working students are adolescents. In Voices from the Field: Interviews With Students from Migrant Farmworker Families, researchers Yolanda G. Martinez, John Scott Jr., Ann Cranston-Gingras, and John S. Platt reported that "75 percent of the students interviewed had work experience and that age was not a determining factor. Despite legislation to keep children out of the fields, children as young as six years of age are still working in the fields."

Whether working in the fields or caring for younger siblings, "children as young as ten years old can make a significant contribution to their family's income by working rather than attending school," noted Anneka L. Kindler of the National Clearinghouse of Bilingual Education.

The research behind Voices from the Field also revealed that migrant children "report frequently missing school for reasons other than for illness. Absence from school to assist parents in translating or otherwise negotiating the system presents an important and addressable barrier to academic achievement."

**FALLING BEHIND AND DROPPING OUT**

Frequent moves and frequent absences mean that migrant students often fall behind academically. "Because of their mobile lifestyle, migrant students often start school late and leave early," Cranston-Gingras told Education World. "Often, they are retained in one or more grades and fall behind their age peers."

"Economic hardships as well as educational gaps place migrant children at risk to drop out of school before graduation," say Martinez and colleagues in Voices from the Field. The paper Fingers to the Bone reports that "all of the juvenile farmworkers interviewed by Human Rights Watch had dropped out of school or been held back at least one time. Nationally, the dropout rate for farmworker youth is 45 percent."

**ADDRESSING THE CHALLENGES: ONE SCHOOL'S STORY**

The San Jose School (La Escuela de San Jose) was established to address the main challenges to educating migrant schoolchildren, said Sister Gaye Moorhead, RSM, the director of the school and of the Mercy Migrant Education Ministry. She sees the following challenges:

**Mobility**

"The challenges [of migrant education] begin with mobility," Moorhead told Education World. The logical response? The San Jose School moves along with families as they travel between Ohio and Florida following the crops. "To our knowledge, we're the only mobile school in the country," Moorhead told Education World. The school serves students in kindergarten through third grade.

San Jose School is run by the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas. When planning the Mercy Migrant Education Ministry, Moorhead told Education World, "research showed a somewhat stable pattern of migration between Florida and Ohio. We connected with Catholic facilities in the north and the south." So, for San Jose students, the school year begins in late August at St. Joseph Elementary School in Fremont, Ohio, and then moves to the St. Clement Religious Education Building in Plant City, Florida.

When students start the school year at one school and then move to another, they find "new textbooks, a whole new scenario," Moorhead said. To overcome this discontinuity, San Jose School personnel -- even the bus driver -- move along with the students.

The school's mobility also prevents San Jose students from missing school altogether. Some migrant families may not send their children to the first few weeks of school in Ohio because they'll soon be leaving that school anyway, Sister Michele Schroeck, San Jose's education coordinator, told Education World. "When they arrive in Florida [where the school year begins earlier than in Ohio], they have missed almost a month of school."

**The Language Barrier**

Moorhead identified the language barrier as a second major challenge of working with migrant students. "Most start kindergarten speaking Spanish only," she said. All academic instruction at San Jose School is in English, although teachers will use some Spanish when explaining directions to students.

Small class sizes of 12 to 15 students help meet the challenge of limited English proficiency, Schroeck told Education World. She said that the program also has several volunteers, mostly from the Florida community, who work one-on-one with students.

**Poverty**

A third concern for educators of migrant students is "the challenges that poverty places on children trying to learn," Moorhead said. "They may live in substandard housing, they don't have the same clothes or book bags, they may look different" from other children at school.

Schroeck told Education World migrant children may have health-related problems resulting from poverty. Migrant families "may have less money for food when work is light," she explained. To help meet students' nutritional needs, the program offers a morning snack and a hot lunch (supplied through a government program).

**Self-Confidence and Self-Esteem**

All of those challenges lead to a lack of self-confidence, which Moorhead told Education World is "the biggest challenge" of migrant-education programs. The greatest benefit of San Jose School for its students, Schroeck told Education World, is that it "gives children the confidence and support they need to try and to learn."

The San Jose School has demonstrated that its mobile approach works. "Academically, about 66 to 75 percent of our students end up on grade level in reading and math," Schroeck told Education World. That's a higher rate than in local public schools, which typically exhibit about 50 percent of migrant students' performing at grade level, she said.

Despite the school's success, "we won't be able to continue our ministry after this year," Moorhead told Education World. She cited three reasons for this decision:

• the inability, despite a national advertising campaign, to find mobile staff members to move with the school;

• a shift in the migration pattern -- fewer migrant families are now working in Ohio;

• a lack of long-term corporate funding.

"We're very encouraged by our host schools' desire to absorb our students and staff until we can start a new school," Moorhead said. The new school will not be mobile, she said, but it will retain the other characteristics that have made San Jose School successful: an outreach program to help families connect with needed services, the provision of transportation, and a welcoming presence that includes bilingual components to encourage parents' involvement with their children's school.