

Michael is not excited

about going back to school – and he is not alone

Children who have suffered from housing instability and homelessness, and then struggle to adjust to shelter life, are regularly behind in school by at least one or two grade levels. They miss more school, are ill more often and have less parental support to pursue education.

This is true of children at **Catholic Charities Family Support Center** in downtown Santa Rosa, the largest shelter for families between the Golden Gate Bridge and the Oregon border.

Bridging the education gap for sheltered children

While children reside at the shelter for a full semester or more, staff members help parents embrace education as a family goal; demonstrate exciting and participatory learning; and bring students up to grade level performance. We believe these objectives can lead to long-term, healthy changes in a family's dynamics, and can ignite desire for more learning and lead to a path out of poverty.

The Family Support Center's BRIDGES Program provides children after school with many kid-friendly learning plans and safe places to receive individual attention, make progress, engage in cooperative play and become inspired about learning. (BRIDGES stands for Building Relationships, Integrating Developmental Goals, and Establishing Support.)

>> Assessment of children's needs and reading level is first, with clear communication with the school of prior residence and use of Read Naturally, Inc. placement materials. We recently discovered a 14-year-old boy who was functionally illiterate. He has made significant progress by working with a tutor daily, reading, drawing pictures and writing sentences.

>> Homework Club involves an array of activities and choices to keep it fun and dynamic for ages 4 – 18. Individual tutoring is available, as is working in the Discovery Center for computer learning, educational games and Internet research. Structured activities such as coloring books, drawing and flash cards are close at hand for those moments between tutors. There is buddy-reading that matches older students with younger ones, and flash-card games in age-appropriate groups keep kids moving around and excited to participate. Monthly learning themes help structure art and outside activities: October is Food and Fitness – learning about the new USDA food plate, exploratory food tastings, exercises, etc.

>> Kids love the tickets that are earned for achievements, such as completed homework assignments, an hour of online learning activities in the Discovery Center and full participation in after-school activities. They line up to purchase little toys, stickers, pens and the like from a special store closet.

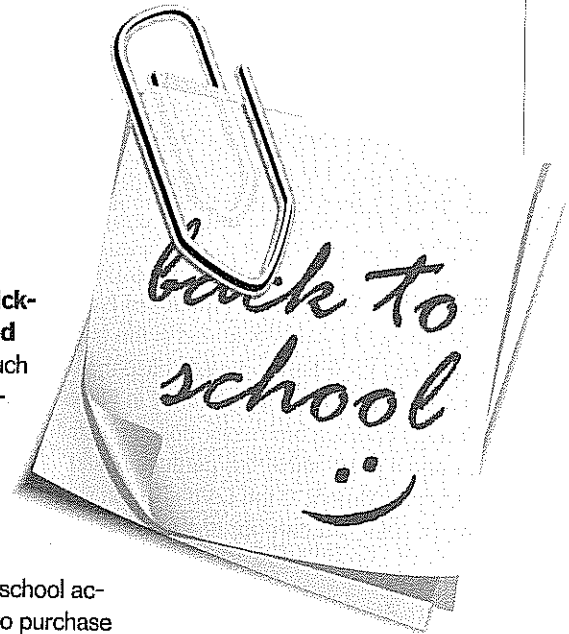
>> Parent participation is required at a monthly group meeting, where parents learn techniques to help their children – study and improve self-esteem, and share parenting challenges with others. Eight staffers are certified in the California First-Five Positive Parent Program (PPP) and help parents role-play difficult situations and encourage constructive communication with their children.

Collaboration

K-12 education is primarily the bailiwick of the public school system, so a special school counselor works among residents, staff and teachers. Additionally, volunteers with

professional credentials serve as tutors and leaders of the Read Naturally assessment process. Collaboration is a key building block of supportive services, and the list of volunteers in our "village community" ranges from city and county departments to nonprofit groups and individuals who donate to the programs in many ways.

Catholic Charities' post-shelter services for families in transitional and permanent supportive housing provide us more insight into how families stabilize in education and two other key areas – employment and housing. We believe our investment sets a firm foundation, and that continuing services after shelter will support their efforts and lead to self-sufficiency.



For information on programs at Catholic Charities Family Support Center:

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