

# HOW HOUSING MATTERS

The *How Housing Matters* conference is a project of the National Building Museum co-sponsored with the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, the Office of Policy Development & Research at the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, and the National Housing Conference.

October 2014

## Using Housing to Stabilize Families and Strengthen Classrooms

### A Profile of the McCarver Elementary School Special Housing Program in Tacoma, Washington

By Patrick Reed and Maya Brennan



## Type of Housing

Private Rental Homes via Housing Choice Vouchers

## Partners:

- Tacoma Housing Authority
- Tacoma Public Schools

## Main Funding Sources

Tacoma Housing Authority, Tacoma Public Schools, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, and the Sequoia Foundation

## Number of Households Served

50 homeless or at-risk households (home to around 80 children)

## Budget

\$150,000 for two school-based housing authority caseworkers, about \$250,000 per year in dedicated rental assistance, plus school district investments in the International Baccalaureate Primary Years Program

In the port city of Tacoma, Washington, the Tacoma Housing Authority (THA) and the Tacoma Public Schools (TPS) have collaborated on a program to increase stability for homeless and at-risk children. The McCarver Elementary School Special Housing Program provides Housing Choice Vouchers to fifty households with children enrolled at McCarver Elementary School. The vouchers are paired with service coordination, expectations of parent-school engagement, economic self-sufficiency goals, and a requirement for children to remain enrolled at McCarver. As a part of the program's investments, McCarver has enhanced educational quality and is now an International Baccalaureate (IB) candidate school and pursuing full IB authorization.

## Key Takeaways

Housing authorities can improve children's educational outcomes by offering stable, affordable housing and partnering with schools to strengthen quality. A two-generation approach can further support children by increasing households' economic security and incentivizing parental involvement in children's education.

## History

Despite its history as a leader in voluntary desegregation and as the nation's first magnet school, in recent years McCarver has faced high rates of student turnover (179% in 2006) and a large homeless and low-income population. The combined number of mid-year enrollments and withdrawals exceeded total enrollment, creating an unstable learning environment for transient students and as well as their classmates.

To combat turnover and improve educational opportunities, THA and TPS partnered on the McCarver Special Housing Program. Implemented in 2011, the program has five main elements:



Mother and son talking on the steps at McCarver Elementary School. © Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation/Michael Hanson.

- 1. Housing vouchers:** THA provides rental assistance to fifty homeless or at-risk families who have a child enrolled in kindergarten, first, or second grade at McCarver. The eighty-two children in these families constitute a fifth of the school. The special voucher sets households' rent at \$25 per month in the first year of the program. The family's contribution to the rent increases each year as the household works toward economic self-sufficiency. By the fifth and final year, families pay 80% of Tacoma's Fair Market Rent, approximately \$771 per month for a two-bedroom home.
- 2. Parent commitment:** The participating parents commit to keep their children enrolled at McCarver and consistently support their children's educational needs. This includes bringing them to school on time, making time and space for homework and family reading, attending parent-teacher-student conferences, and participating in PTA meetings. Parents also agree to pursue their own educational and employment advancement.
- 3. Supportive services:** Two THA case workers located at the school connect parents with a wide network of public and nonprofit service partners to obtain additional support in job training, parenting, and other areas.



**4. School improvements:** TPS has invested in curricular improvements and teacher training at McCarver to implement the highly-regarded IB primary years program at the school. McCarver is now an IB candidate school and will continue with the authorization process. The IB program has been connected with higher test scores in math and language arts compared with students at non-IB schools.

**5. Evaluation:** A commitment to data sharing allows the program to track outcomes and determine effectiveness.



A teacher and family meet about student progress at McCarver Elementary School.  
© Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation/Michael Hanson.

Households in the McCarver Special Housing Program are a racially and ethnically diverse slice of the local homeless population. Of the eighty-two children currently enrolled in the program, 57.3% are black and 29.3% are white. The remaining children are Hispanic (6.1%), Asian (3.6%), and mixed-race (3.6%). The households are largely headed by single mothers.

## Opportunities

**Stability and Support at School and at Home.** Affordable housing has the potential to stabilize families, and adding high expectations and coordinated support may prove transformative for both parents and children. While it is too early for definitive results, the program has demonstrated a number of positive effects during its three years of operation. Turnover among participants is low. During the 2011-2012 academic year, only 4.5% of the program's students left McCarver. The following year, 13.3% of the program's students transferred out. Taken as a whole, McCarver's aggregate turnover declined from 97% in 2011-2012 to 75% in 2012-2013.

Early results indicate that the program has increased literacy for student participants. Results on the national DIBELS (Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills) assessment suggest the program's students are significantly outperforming other homeless and low-income students in Tacoma's public elementary schools. In the spring of 2013, 61.1% of the program's students read at grade-level, compared with less than half of homeless students in the city.

**Helping Children by Helping Parents.** The program's parental supports may improve families' stability over the long term. Of fifty-five parents, twenty have attained educational certifications, such as a GED. The number of working parents rose from just seven in 2011 to twenty-nine in August 2013, and average monthly earned income for working households increased from \$806 to \$1,211. Across all participating households, average monthly income rose from \$436 in 2011 to \$836 in 2013.

The program's structure helps parents support their children's educational needs. When families need assistance beyond the classroom, case managers connect parents with appropriate services. The case managers also assess families' progress and actively counsel families who are having difficulty meeting the program's expectations. According to THA's executive director Michael Mirra, case managers play an integral role by developing relationships with families who may not perceive schools as welcoming and positive. Beyond service coordination, case managers assume the roles of "third-base coach, cheerleader, nag, and inspiration."

**Housing authorities can improve children's educational outcomes by offering stable, affordable housing and partnering with schools to strengthen quality.**

**The program's students are significantly outperforming other homeless and low-income students in Tacoma's public elementary schools.**

**Future Program Replication.** By the end of 2014, the program will have three years of data. If the outcomes continue to be promising, THA and TPS will expand the program to cover three other Tacoma elementary schools with high degrees of housing instability and student turnover. THA is also creating a similar program for homeless students at Tacoma Community College, the region's largest post-secondary educational institution.

**Moving To Work Program.** To enact modified program rules and the tiered rent structure, THA needed waivers of standard voucher program rules through the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's Moving to Work (MTW) program. Currently, just thirty-nine of the nation's approximately 4,000 housing authorities have MTW authorization. This status increases local autonomy but does not provide more financial resources. MTW status also encourages local innovation and partnerships. While housing authorities have other opportunities to support education without MTW status, THA's two-generation support program requires it.



A group of students work around a table at McCarver Elementary School. © Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation/Michael Hanson.

## Challenges

**Rent Increases and Families' Complex Needs.** The program's stepped rent increases start at \$25 per month in the first year and shift to 20%, 40%, 60%, and finally 80% of Fair Market Rent in the last year. The sharp rent increases require substantial supportive services to help parents make economic progress. Michael Power, THA's education program manager, is investigating how to best screen future participants to ensure that parents are capable of participating in the job training and educational services that will make the rent structure feasible. Families with needs that fall beyond the scope of the program would instead receive referrals to more appropriate services.

**Teacher Turnover.** Teacher turnover, both midyear and over the summer, is common at low-income or underperforming schools, and can disrupt school progress and weaken families' ties to the school. At McCarver, teacher turnover was initially an obstacle to children's success because families had to develop new relationships with teachers. Over the summer of 2014, McCarver will have its lowest teacher turnover in years – losing only two teachers. Mirra and school administrators believe that improved teacher retention may be due to declines in student turnover and the adoption of the IB program.

## Contact

**Michael Mirra**, executive director, Tacoma Housing Authority, 902 South L St., Tacoma, WA 98405, **Phone:** 253.207.4429, **Email:** mmirra@tacomahousing.org, **Website:** www.tacomahousing.org

**This case study was prepared by the Center for Housing Policy**, the research division of the National Housing Conference (NHC) that specializes in developing solutions through research. Through evidence-based advocacy for the continuum of housing, NHC develops ideas, resources, and policy solutions to shape an improved housing landscape. For more information, see [www.nhc.org](http://www.nhc.org).



COVER IMAGE: A mother and son exiting McCarver Elementary School. © Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation/Michael Hanson