

The Capital

A Capital-Gazette Newspaper — Annapolis, MD

Published September 29, 2008

After four years, homeless family's children back in school

By ELISABETH HULETTE, Staff Writer

For the four years the three Kinzer boys have been homeless, they didn't attend school.

It was illegal: By law, children in Maryland have to stay in school through age 16.

But somehow, although their parents repeatedly tried to re-enroll them, they slipped through the cracks until about a month ago when their situation came to the attention of The Capital and then to some Anne Arundel school officials.

School officials said they couldn't comment on how it happened, but said such stories are rare and families who become homeless are given help under a system designed to make sure children stay in school.

But if the Kinzer children could be out of school for about four years it could certainly happen to other families.

And as the economy worsens and the number of homeless children in the county continues to rise, their story is a warning bell to families who need to know their children have the right to a public education.

As Chris Kinzer said, "Somebody needs to educate my children. If they don't educate my kids, who can?"

Losing home

Mr. Kinzer cuts down trees for a living. He's been with the same company for 28 years, but the work slows down sometimes and there's not much to be had in the winter.

That's how Mr. Kinzer began having trouble making the rent about four years ago. Prices went up and finally he moved the boys and their mother, Annie Walls, out of their home in Prince George's County and into a series of motels.

When that happened, they withdrew their oldest son, Christian, then about age 7, from Marlton Elementary School in Upper Marlboro. Because Ms. Walls works as a caregiver in Davidsonville, Mr. Kinzer tried to re-enroll the boys in Anne Arundel schools. But officials there wouldn't let him, he said.

"I said, 'On the front of the building it says no child should be left behind,'" he said. "What does it mean if it doesn't mean that?"

Anne Arundel school officials said they cannot discuss individual cases. But a day after being contacted by The Capital in late August, officials enrolled the Kinzer children in Davidsonville Elementary, the school closest to their mother's job.

Under the federal McKinney-Vento Homeless Education Act of 2001, school officials in Prince George's County should have told Mr. Kinzer his sons had two options: Switch to a school in their new geographic area or keep attending Marlton Elementary with transportation provided by the schools.

That second option is a tall order for school districts. Most families that become homeless move in with relatives elsewhere, and Anne Arundel spends hundreds of thousands of dollars a year on taxicabs to ferry homeless students back to their old schools. Last month the county Board of Education approved \$1.2 million to cover the cost of cabs for the next five years.

John White, a spokesman for Prince George's schools, said like Anne Arundel, his county also follows the law: If a family withdraws their children because they have become homeless, officials there make sure the parents know their rights. When asked about the Kinzer family, Mr. White said he couldn't comment on individual cases.

Back to school

Over four years out of school, the Kinzer boys slipped behind in their studies. Their parents read to them, but they said it wasn't the same.

Anne Arundel officials said that what happened to the Kinzer family is rare and they're making efforts to ensure it never happens again.

For example, the growing number of homeless students in county schools - there were 655 last year, 150 more than the 505 the year before - compelled the district to hire a full-time homeless liaison this year.

Charlene Thomas, who took the position, is now sorting out the challenges that come with those students. The biggest is transportation, said Suzanne Zukauskas, head pupil personnel worker for county schools.

Another challenge is learning which families have become homeless - sometimes parents won't tell anyone - and then figuring out which are telling the truth. Some parents will claim they're homeless just to get their children into a particular school, Ms. Thomas said.

David Ladd, director of child protective services for the county, said the departments of education and social services work together to get services to homeless families, a collaboration that's helping more people all the time. And Ms. Thomas's office has grants and other initiatives they said they hope will help, including contacting people at each school who keep an eye out for families who become homeless.

But for now, what matters to the Kinzer boys - Christian, 11; Jacob, 8; and Matthew, 5 - is that they're back in class. They have a lot of catching up to do, but their parents said they are confident they can do it.

"They're excited," Ms. Walls said. "But it's going to be real hard. I tell them hang in there, you'll get it right."