Students on the Move: Keeping Uprooted Kids in School

APM Reports Transcript

Billboard

Stephen Smith: From American Public Media, this is an APM Reports documentary. I'm Stephen Smith. Millions of kids in the United States change schools because their families don't have stable housing.

> **Savannah:** I was kind of everywhere. Sleeping in cars.
>
> **Liza Burrell:** Every time a student moves schools they lose four to six months of academic learning.

Smith: Kids whose parents are migrant farmworkers move a lot, too. And those kids also have a hard time staying in school and graduating.

> **Edward Murrow:** There is no case upon the record of the child of a migrant laborer ever receiving a college diploma.
>
> **Aracely Benavides:** As soon as I finished sixth grade, that was it.

Smith: The paradox is schools are a good place to turn if you want to help kids whose families are regularly uprooted.

> **Alexandra Pavlakis:** You have them there. And research shows that school can be really a source of stability.
>
> **Girl:** I'm going to school!
> **Joe Ader:** That is awesome.

Smith: Coming up: Students on the Move: Keeping Uprooted Kids in School from APM Reports. First, this news.

Part 1

Smith: From American Public Media, this is an APM Reports documentary.

> **Leslie Camden-Goold:** You can have a seat if you want.
> **Makaila:** Thank you.

Smith: This is University High School in Spokane Valley, Washington. A student named Makaila has stopped in to talk with a school social worker. Makaila was just in court. She's asking a judge to emancipate her. She wants to be declared independent so she can live on her own, even though she's 16.

> **Makaila:** And the judge said that my maturity level is definitely that of an older adult, and he said that he can't grant the emancipation that day only because I wasn't currently working.

Smith: Makaila wants to live on her own because she's having a lot of trouble at home with her stepmom. She's fallen behind in school, and she wants to get back on track because she's hoping to go to college.

> **Makaila:** I wanna go to a two-year and then I wanna switch to a four-year and then after that I want to go to med school and become an anesthesiologist.

Smith: But before she goes to college, she needs to finish high school. And if she moves out on her own, she'll need a place to live and a way to pay for it. That's why she's talking with a school social worker.

> **Camden-Goold:** Um, how many hours you gonna have to work?
> **Makaila:** At this point …

Smith: The social worker is Leslie Camden-Goold. She keeps tabs on about 400 kids here in the Central Valley School District who've been identified as homeless. When Makaila moves out, she'll be an "unaccompanied minor" — and she'll be officially homeless. Most homeless kids are still with their families, but Leslie sees all sorts of circumstances.

> **Camden-Goold:** These students could be living in emergency shelters. They could be living in transitional housing programs. They could be living in hotels. They could be couchsurfing. They could be living in cars. All because they've lost housing and can't find affordable housing.

(Music)

Smith: From APM Reports, this is Students on the Move: Keeping Uprooted Kids in School. I'm Stephen Smith.

It's hard to even know how many homeless kids there are in the United States — but the number's large. The Department of Education's most recent count found 1.3 million public school students were homeless. That's the largest that number has ever been. And some researchers say it might really be much larger because homeless kids and families are difficult to count.

Being homeless is hard on kids. They're less likely to graduate from high school, and they're more likely to be homeless as adults.

When kids are uprooted, it's schools that end up on the front lines trying to help them — for an obvious reason: Schools are where the kids are. For kids with tumultuous lives, school can be something they count on — something that's consistent.

And school is the best way out of generational poverty. A high school diploma — and a college degree — start with staying in school.

Over the next hour, we'll hear about efforts to help homeless kids do better in school and get to graduation.

And we'll also hear about another group of kids who struggle to stay in school and make it to college because their families are on the move — the children of migrant farmworkers.

APM Reports producer Chris Julin tells the first part of our story.

(Sound)

Chris Julin: It's a weekday morning at the Open Doors family shelter in Spokane, Washington. About 65 people slept here last night. They slept on the floor on pads a few feet apart. Half the people here in the shelter are kids under the age of 12.

Open Doors is in the basement of a church. A couple of walls are lined with couches and stuffed chairs. In one corner, there are piles of kid's games and books. Through the big windows, you can see a fenced-off kennel where families can keep their pets.

(Sound)

Parents crowd into the kitchen to fix breakfast. Then it's time to get the kids off to school.

Many of the families are trying to keep their kids in the same school they were in before they got to the shelter, so the kids are headed all over town. One took a taxi before the sun was up. A couple others will get rides from their parents. A group of kids is about to head outside to catch buses to other parts of town. Another group will walk a few blocks to the neighborhood elementary.

Girl: I'm going to school!
Ader: Those boots are awesome.
Girl: Yeah!

A little girl in shiny red rain boots is talking with Joe Ader. He's the director of the organization that runs the shelter.

Ader: You get to go to school today?
Mom: Stevens.
Girl: Yeah. Stevens Elementary!
Ader: That is awesome. I like Stevens Elementary
Girl: Have you been at Stevens Elementary?
Ader: I have been at Stevens Elementary. It's a great school. They have a neat playground too.
Girl: OOOH! It's probably big!

Ader: Our kids like school. They like that consistency. They like that safe place to be. For our kids, summer breaks are not their favorite. Last summer we had a volunteer. You know the night that school let out, and she came in and was like, “Kids, who's excited about summer?” And it was dead silence.

It's not just the kids at the shelter who like the consistency of school. So do the parents.

(Sound)

Tricia: You guys can play for a little bit, OK?

Tricia's here at the shelter with her two sons. One's in kindergarten. The other's in second grade. The boys are messing around with a dozen other kids who are about to leave for school.

Tricia: I want you to zip up your coat.

Tricia and the boys had to leave behind, what she calls, "an environment that wasn't good." For five months, they bounced around, mostly living with other families. Then Tricia found the shelter. Today she's going to meet with Catholic Charities. She's looking at a place she and the boys might be able to move into. But first she's going to see them off to school.

> **Tricia:** School is number one when it comes to my family because the schools have a really good support system so that they can have that sense of normality, given the situation with all the different families that they are being exposed to.

Spokane has the same problem as a lot of cities around the country. There's not enough housing that families in the lower half of the income bracket can afford.

So, Tricia's story before she got to the shelter is pretty common — doubling up with somebody else. There aren't many family-oriented shelters like this one, so most shelters aren't an option for parents and kids. Besides that, parents are often leery about asking for help if they lose their housing.

> **Barbara Duffield:** They don't know what's going to happen to them if they actually identify themselves. They're afraid their kids are going to be taken away from them.

Barbara Duffield's the executive director of SchoolHouse Connection. That's a national policy and research non-profit that focuses on childhood homelessness.

She says at least three-fourths of kids who've lost their housing are "doubled-up," the way Tricia and her sons were for several months.

> **Duffield:** Most often it looks like staying with somebody temporarily, maybe even someone you don't know, because there's nowhere else to go. Staying with other people is the biggest category of children and youth who are homeless and enrolled in public school.

Some recent research shows that kids who are "doubled-up" are as likely to struggle in school as kids who are in shelters or living in cars.

> **Burell:** Yes, yes.

Liza Burell is the program director at Building Changes. That's a non-profit in Seattle that develops programs focused on families and kids who are homeless.

Burrell: It's mind-boggling that we think that a kid is gonna be like, 'I slept in a sleeping bag at my friend's house last night, and my mom's at her friend's house. But that's OK, I'm here to learn math.'

In 2018, Burrell's organization analyzed data from the state of Washington. They compared kids who are doubled-up with kids who are living in shelters or in cars or in hotels. The analysis found that the two groups of kids faced the same academic challenges. They missed about the same amount of school. They both had an increased chance of being suspended. Both groups lag behind their peers in reading and writing and math.

Duffield: Homelessness is devastating to all aspects of child development.

This is Barbara Duffield again, from SchoolHouse Connection.

Duffield: So, if we look at our littlest ones, even infants — there was a lot of research done this past year on infants who experience homelessness. Low birth weight, more likely to be hospitalized. So they're starting out life in a compromised position.

When homeless kids reach school age, they're already behind their peers academically. And Barbara Duffield says they tend to stay there.

Duffield: As we get into high school, then, we also see impacts on graduation rates and we see health impacts. More bullying, post-traumatic stress disorder, eating disorders, that are over and above children who are poor but have stable housing. Homelessness itself has an impact above and beyond the poverty. Everything from absenteeism to graduation, we see quite a disproportionate impact.

And research says those effects can carry through to adulthood — especially if a student doesn't finish high school.

Duffield: Lack of a high school degree or GED is actually the top ~~r~~isk factor for experiencing homelessness as a young adult. And then for young adults, that then puts them at risk of experiencing homelessness as they become older. So we see a very compelling reason to intervene as early as possible.

(Music)

Homeless kids tend to do better if they keep attending school. But if your family's been evicted and you're sleeping on someone's floor, getting to school on Thursday morning might not be at

the top of the priority list. So, for Leslie Camden-Goold, the social worker, a big part of her job is to find ways to help homeless kids show up for school.

Camden-Goold: All right girls…

This is an alternative high school in Spokane Valley. Leslie Camden-Goold is stopping by to talk with a couple of sisters she works with.

Camden-Goold: Are you OK?
Jordan: I'm tired.

Their names are Jordan and Savannah. About six years ago, their parents split up. Their mom fell behind on the bills, and they lost their place. For several years, they were constantly on the move.

Savannah: I was kind of everywhere. Sleeping in cars. Sleeping kind of wherever I could. Hotel rooms.

That's Savannah, the 9th grader. She was usually with her mom. But sometimes she was with relatives or friends. For a while, she stayed with her older sisters. The oldest was 19 at the time. Savannah even moved to another state for a while.

Savannah: Oh my God. I've been to so many schools I'm just like so used to being the new kid and like not really getting used to the school.

She says she went to about 14 different schools in six years. That's more than two schools each year. And after a while, she just stopped going.

Savannah: Like when I was in middle school, like, I would just never like actually show up.

That got Savannah into trouble. States require children to be educated. The age varies from state to state — but at least until 16. Kids who skip school can end up in the juvenile justice system. That almost happened to Savannah. But now she's going to school.

(Sound)

Leslie helped Savannah and her sister get into an alternative school that has a flexible schedule. Leslie got them passes for city buses so they could get to and from school. She connected them with a program that sends kids home with a sack of food every Friday to help their families get

through the weekend. She set them up with doctors and counselors, and she helped them get legal advice about moving in with their aunt.

Now they're living with their aunt and day-to-day life is more stable. Both girls are showing up at school and passing their classes.

Camden-Goold: All right. Thanks, darlings.

(Music)

The data shows that going to a lot of different schools — like Savannah and Jordan did — that's pretty common with kids who are homeless. And that's a problem because students do best if they not only stay in school but stay in the same school.

Burrell: Every time a student moves schools they lose four to six months of content of academic learning.-

This is Liza Burrell, the program director at Building Changes.

Burrell: It's very hard to recoup that learning being in a new environment and catching, catching up is really, really hard. And we're finding that more and more research is being done with students who had experienced homelessness earlier in their student career and they're still sort of behind their peers that have been housed that whole time.

So people like Leslie Camden-Goold try to keep homeless kids in the same school.

But that's challenging.

Camden-Goold: Hi. How are you? I'm trying to figure out what's going on with…

Leslie Camden-Goold's back in her office.

Camden-Goold: Is he at school?

She's talking on the phone with a school secretary about a kindergartener she works with. Leslie heard from the school transportation department that the boy hasn't been at his bus stop this week. The front office at his school says he's missed a couple days of class.

So Leslie dials a number for the boy's mom.

Camden-Goold: ... see if I can figure out what is going on.

She gets a message that the number can't be reached right now. Probably the phone bill didn't get paid.

Camden-Goold: So I couldn't get a hold of mom. This happens a lot.

Leslie's been working with this family for a while. A mom, the boy in kindergarten, and his brother in 6th grade.

Camden-Goold: They, for a time, were living in their car, doubled up at a relative's house. The last we knew of them, they were doubled up with a friend.

(Keyboard sound)

The boys started the school year here in Spokane Valley, but now they're living in a neighboring school district. Leslie's arranged for the boys to get school bus rides back here to her district so they can finish the school year where they started.

But the family's been moving around, and sometimes wires get crossed about where the kids will catch the bus.

Camden-Goold: Did he come late today? OK.

It's Leslie's job to uncross the wires and keep the boys in school. So she's back on the phone with the school secretary.

Camden-Goold: OK. And you guys are going to excuse it or…? OK.

There's no word from the boy's mom yet, but Leslie has left messages for her everywhere she can.

Camden-Goold: Well, we'll figure it out. Well, thank you. Have a great day. Bye.

With 400 homeless kids in this district, Leslie spends a lot of time arranging transportation. The district has to arrange transportation for homeless kids. It's federal law.

(Music)

That law's called the McKinney-Vento Act and it went into effect back in 1987.

During the 1980s, the Reagan Administration cut way back on building low-income housing — at the same time the number of homeless people was increasing. Throughout the 80s, the "homelessness crisis" was all over the newspaper headlines and the TV news.

> **TV News 1:** Homelessness is one of the pressing problems in American culture today.
> **TV News 2:** Officials say there are some 5,000 homeless people in San Jose.
> **TV News 3:** Today's rally at the nation's capital united the homeless and wage earners struggling to afford a home.
> **TV News 4:** We the homeless of New York will not accept deprival of affordable housing anymore.
> **TV News 5:** We need housing and we need it now! (Sound of cheers)
>
> **David Bley:** It was really the first contemporary wave of homelessness since the Great Depression.

David Bley was a congressional staffer at the time.

> **Bley:** You would be hard-pressed to walk through a city of any size and not notice homelessness. People lying on the streets in doorways or shelters getting filled.

David Bley says there was no federal law aimed specifically at helping people who are homeless. But by the mid-1980s, the pressure to do something was immense. He was instrumental in getting the McKinney-Vento Homelessness Assistance Act passed. And one section of the law dealt specifically with schools.

> **Bley:** Local schools were required to identify and count homeless students, and they were required to transport them from their temporary or shelter housing to the school of origin, the school that they normally attended.
>
> (Music)

That law's still in effect. Kids who are homeless have a legal right to stay in the same school, and they have a legal right to transportation. If a homeless child must change schools, they have a legal right to be enrolled in the new school immediately without having to wait for paperwork or for meetings.

The law provides some money to schools for programs to help homeless kids, but not much. In 2019, that McKinney-Vento money averaged out to about 70 dollars a year for each homeless child in the country. That's a fraction of what schools spend just transporting kids who are

homeless. Case in point: The state of Washington got a bit more than a million dollars in McKinney-Vento money in the 2018 school year. That year, schools in the state spent about 32 million dollars just transporting students who are homeless.

David Bley says, instead of busing homeless kids, it would be cheaper — and more humane — to keep their families housed. These days he's with the Gates Foundation. He oversees grants aimed at homelessness and education in the Pacific Northwest. He says schools can't solve the problem of homelessness — but they can make a dent. Some districts are teaming up with non-profits to experiment with ways to help families hang onto their housing.

That's what a group called Priority Spokane did. They picked three elementary schools to see if they could actually reduce the number of homeless students at those schools.

> **Oelrich:** We gave ourselves three years to carry out a pilot.

Ryan Oelrich is the executive director of Priority Spokane. His group's strategy was to work through the schools to find families on the brink of becoming homeless and keep those families in their homes. Priority Spokane put a community health worker in each of the three schools, and it was that person's job to identify kids whose families were in danger of losing their housing.

> **Oelrich:** So often it's lunch ladies and school secretaries and teachers that are really seeing these are children who need help. This is a child who's worn the same clothes for three days. This is a child who is repeatedly forgetting their lunch. These are all indicators to us that maybe there are some problems at home that our community health workers could help with.

The workers plugged families into existing services, but they also had a fund so they could help families out of tight spots. In one case, a $72 car repair meant a parent could keep commuting to work and keep paying the rent.

> **Oelrich:** In that first year, I think we would have been very happy with just housing and stabilizing 50 percent of the students and families that we were working with. But in that first year, we were just absolutely blown away when we hit 78 percent of the families that we engaged with we were able to stabilize and house.

Ryan Oelrich says — on average — it cost less than a thousand dollars per family to keep them in their homes for a couple of years.

> **Oelrich:** And that's versus if a family becomes homeless. The thousands of dollars that we're paying to rehouse them, the trauma that's being inflicted on the family and

especially on the kids. So we absolutely know that we save money housing folks. There's no doubt.

At the Gates Foundation, David Bley says he's seen a number of success stories like this. Schools that have actually decreased the number of families who fall into homelessness like they did in Spokane, and schools that have boosted the graduation rates for homeless kids.

Bley: But had a very difficult time systematically spreading those kinds of practices and models across all public schools. It's very easy in public education to see a school that just looks like a shining example on a hill, because they're doing the right thing, but it has proven to be very difficult to spread and replicate whatever that secret sauce is across all schools.

Pavlakis: There's districts doing really great things. There's individual schools doing really great things.

Alexandra Pavlakis has seen the same thing. She's a professor at Southern Methodist University, and she studies homeless families and education.

Pavlakis: What I've seen in my research is, it really depends not only what district you're in and what school your student may be attending, but even who the individual social worker is.

(Graduation crowd sound)

Camden-Goold: Brandon! Hi dude. (laughs)

That's Leslie Camden-Goold, the school social worker from Spokane Valley. It's graduation day for University High, so she's at a sports arena in Spokane. The students are decked out in their black caps and gowns, and they're lining up for their big entrance. Leslie's walking through the crowd and she sees some familiar faces.

Camden-Goold: Oh, there's Dejeune. And there's Shelby.

Camden-Goold: I forgot my Kleenex. Dang it. (laughs)

Leslie's been a social worker in the Central Valley School District for 18 years, and she's seen a lot of graduation ceremonies. She goes to all of them because she works with homeless kids in every school.

Camden-Goold: In our three high schools, we ended up with having 40 seniors who stuck with us throughout the year.

Of those 40, 31 are graduating, and six more made plans to finish up in a few months.

Camden-Goold: So they're close.

The kids identified as homeless are lagging a bit behind the district average for graduating.

Camden-Goold: But every single one of them, if they're walking across the stage it's a victory.

Seeing them here today brings back memories.

Camden-Goold: Yeah, yeah. Helping them get to school. Helping them get homework assignments done. Helping them talking to teachers about their situation and kind of having the staff give them some grace for what they're going through. And it's all about that. It's all about lifting these kids up and putting a safety net underneath them and helping them graduate.

So today's she's happy — but she's tired.

Camden-Goold: My mind's kind of mush right now. It's emotionally draining. And I mean I'm so excited to see these students graduate, but I got a whole, a whole group of new students coming up, I know. (laughs)

(Music)

Smith: You're listening to Students on the Move: Keeping Uprooted Kids in School, a documentary from APM Reports. That was producer Chris Julin. I'm Stephen Smith.

We'll take a short break, and then we'll hear about another group of students who struggle to stay in school and get to college because their families keep moving — the children of migrant farmworkers.

Benavides: We work really hard to get what we get, to get our money, but I know I have smart kids, and I know they can do a lot better.

We have more about this story on our web site, apmreports.org. You can also explore our archive of education documentaries. You can subscribe to our podcast about K-12 and Higher Education.

It's called Educate. Support for APM Reports comes from Lumina Foundation and the Spencer Foundation. More in a moment. This is APM, American Public Media.

Part 2

Smith: You're listening to Students on the Move: Keeping Uprooted Kids in School from APM Reports. I'm Stephen Smith. This hour: the stories of kids who are frequently uprooted from school.

Research shows that education is critical to getting ahead. A high school diploma and a college education can be a ticket out of generational poverty.

But what happens when consistently getting to school is a challenge due to forces beyond your control? Like, when you're homeless, and sleeping at a relative's house one night and a shelter the next? Or — as we're about to see — when your family has to move again and again to find work?

That's the case for kids whose parents are migrant farmworkers.

A lot of American agriculture has been mechanized, but many farmers still rely on seasonal workers to plant and harvest crops. When that work is done, the workers move on. As do their kids, which can mean a change in schools. Changing schools can leave kids with gaps in their education that make it tough to get to graduation.

It's a struggle that Edward R. Murrow brought into the public spotlight back in 1960 with his documentary, Harvest of Shame.

> **Murrow:** Approximately one out of every 500 children whose parents are still migrant laborers finishes grade school. Approximately one out of every 5,000 ever finishes high school, and there is no case upon the record of a child of a migrant laborer ever receiving a college diploma.

Murrow documented the low wages, long hours and substandard housing faced by migrant workers, and he pointed to a possible solution.

> **Murrow:** Everyone who knows anything about this situation agrees that the best hope for the future of the migrants lies in the education of their children. But for the children of migrants, education is not easy to come by.

The film beamed into living rooms across the United States as the farmworker movement was gaining momentum. In 1962, Cesar Chavez formed the United Farm Workers in California, and across the country from North Carolina to Maine to Texas workers have continued to organize for better wages and improved working conditions.

And the situation has improved. In the late 1960s, the federal government implemented programs to improve housing and work conditions and to provide the kids of migrant workers some extra support to help them finish school.

Reporter Tennessee Watson of Wyoming Public Radio teamed up with APM Reports to find out what's changed and what hasn't since Murrow's Harvest of Shame — what's helping kids get through school and make it to college. And what's still standing in their way.

She followed one family for a year and brings us this story.

(Sound)

Tennessee Watson: Aracely Benavides is giving me a tour of the farm country where she works in the Red River Valley in North Dakota.

It's late June, and the green tops of sugar beets and potatoes spread across the flat fields on either side of the two-lane country road.

(Turn signal sound)

We pull into a dusty lot with a big windowless beige building.

Watson: So, there's just a bunch of potatoes in there?
Benavides: You'll see.

Inside thousands of potatoes roll past on a conveyor belt. Four women are picking out small potatoes, gross potatoes, and rocks. It's cold and musty, and Aracely says it's hard being on your feet all day.

Benavides: It's a long day. They work long hours. Especially during the harvest.

Aracely's been doing farm work with her family since she was a little girl. She's 47 now.

Benavides: We would do grapes in Arizona. Or cotton. Or different things. But mostly it was either apricot, peaches.
Watson: And what was school like for you as a migrant kid?
Benavides: Not nice. Because I didn't have the fortune to go to school as much I would have liked to. Ya know, my parents decided that as soon as I finished sixth grade that was it. That was my school.

Her parents were struggling to make ends meet, so Aracely left school to help out.

Benavides: Then I started working really young. I was probably like 13…

And she was doing one of the riskiest jobs in America. Farm workers are exposed to pesticides, extreme weather and dangerous equipment. It's more deadly than being a firefighter, a mine machinery operator or a police officer.

On top of that, it's one of the lowest paying jobs. The latest data from US Department of Labor's National Agricultural Workers Survey shows farmworkers' average family income is around 20,000 to 25,000 dollars a year.

But without a high school diploma, Aracely didn't feel like she had many other employment options.

Eventually, she met her husband Juan. He's from a farmworker family too, and like Aracely, he never graduated. They've made a life together moving between Texas and North Dakota.

They had two sons, and Aracely wanted more for them than a job sorting potatoes or driving a tractor like their dad.

Benavides: Not that what we do is bad or it's not right because we work really hard to get what we get, to get our money, but they can do better. I know I have smart kids, and I know they can do a lot better.

But she wasn't sure how she'd get them on a different path. Then one day a friend she worked with told her about the Migrant and Seasonal Head Start Program.

Benavides: And I saw the benefits that the kids could get out of it and my thoughts started to change, you know, my mind started to change.

A bus started picking up her kids early in the morning from her house, and they'd spend the day at a free preschool for farmworker kids. Knowing they had a safe place to learn and play gave her hope that she could give her kids a different future.

(Music)

Benavides: And I started educating them like that. Thinking that way. Dream big. Don't settle with just whatever. No. Dream big.

Aracely wants all farmworker youth to have a chance at their dreams — not just her kids. And that desire landed her in a new seasonal gig.

Aracely is now an outreach worker for the Migrant Education Program.

The federal program was signed into law in 1966. Its mission was to provide migrant kids ages 3 to 21 with extra support as they moved from school to school.

Then in 1969 the Migrant and Seasonal Head Start Program started up to serve kids from birth to 5 years old. In tandem, the two programs work to keep kids out of the fields and in school.

The programs were part of a series of reforms passed in the wake of Edward R. Murrow's Harvest of Shame.

Today the Migrant Education Program funnels federal dollars to states to provide academic support to around 300,000 migratory kids. It helps the kids of seafood workers in Alaska, blueberry harvesters in Maine, and dairy workers in New York. It provides tutoring, counseling and summer programs like the one run out of the school in Manvel, North Dakota where Aracely works.

(Knocking sound)

Today she's looking for a student who didn't show up at the summer program. She peers through the windows of a single-wide trailer nestled amongst farm fields looking for him.

Benavides: Isaac!

When he doesn't come to the door, she pokes around the property a little more and finds his dad working on a piece of farm equipment in a garage across the way.

Benavides: Hi, Como estás?

Aracely has Isaac's school records. She tells his dad that Isaac is missing some credits.

Benavides: He didn't go to school today because he thought he was done with what he needed, but he still needs general science to finish.

That happens a lot to migrant kids. They end up with gaps as they move from harvest to harvest with their parents. The summer program can help those kids get caught up.

Benavides: Tell him and have him go to school so he can finish.
Dad: (in Spanish, referring to the paperwork) Does he bring this?
Benavides: Si. Give it to him and tell him to bring it, uh, tomorrow if he goes to school.
Dad: Yeah, he'll go to school.
Benavides: Thank you.

(Car door slams)

When we get back to the migrant summer program, Aracely spots her 14-year-old son Angel playing basketball in the school's gymnasium.

Watson: That was two points for Angel.
Benavides: Yes. I don't know much about basketball but…
Watson: He scored.
Benavides: I know he did, but I don't know how many points.

Angel is a tall lanky kid with deep brown eyes and a wide smile. He loves basketball, and he loves school. After recess, he invites me to tag along with him to class.

(Sound)

Fifteen high school students are clustered around tables all working on their own thing. They've come to North Dakota from different places and at slightly different times depending on the farm work their parents do, which means their educational needs are all different.

(Classroom sounds)

A couple of boys are working on biology. One girl is working on a drawing project for an art credit she needs. They all get help from their teacher, Ms. Wohlgamuth.

Wohlgamuth: You did pretty good. I do want you to go back though and do the ones that you got wrong.
Angel: OK.
Wohlgamuth: Just so you have a good understanding…

She's walking Angel through the results of an algebra quiz he took this morning.

Wohlgamuth: So, you've got just those few to go through. You can try and do them today otherwise you can wait for tomorrow
Angel: I'll do them today.

Angel is working on Algebra One, not because he didn't pass it the first time, but because he wants to get ahead.

Back in seventh grade, he was signed up for pre-algebra in his Texas school, and that would have put him on track to take advanced math in high school. But he wasn't back from North Dakota in time.

Angel: And they called my name, but since I wasn't there, they took me off the roster so I couldn't take it.

He's hoping that an Algebra One credit from the migrant summer program will get him back into advanced math in Texas. This is all a part of his plan to go to college.

(Angel talking about math in classroom)

But Angel says it's not just academics that migrant students miss out on. He wishes he had the chance to do more extracurricular activities.

Angel: There's a lot of activities that they make but it's in the beginning of the year — like in September, August — and since I'm not there, I can't join late. Because it's already going to be way too late.

He'd like to do something called the University Interscholastic League.

Angel: They're like competitions for mathematics, for science, history, for spelling, reading. There's like a bunch of those. Pretty much every subject I would like to get into.

And Angel really wants to play on the high school basketball team.

Angel: I don't want to leave too early where I don't make the basketball team here or leave too late to where I don't make it over there. And I'm going to get stuck, and I'm not going to be able to play at all.

Tryouts in Texas are in early November, but Angel has no idea when the harvest will wrap up. It depends on the weather so there's no exact date. Could be late October or early November. And his dad is expected to stay till the end.

Angel knows that because his parents don't have high school diplomas it's hard for them to find jobs that are more stable. And he knows that his mom feels bad about that.

Angel: Um, she would tell me before how she wishes she had the opportunity to learn and go to college so we wouldn't have to migrate. She's like, "I'm sorry that you have to do this. I know it hurts."

(Music)

In late October, when Aracely's job at the summer program ends and there's no more work on the farm for her husband Juan in North Dakota, Angel's family makes the 17,000-mile journey back to Rio Grande City. They're in time for him to make the team.

If it were up to Angel, he'd make this south Texas border town his home year-round.

He'd have more time with his extended family, and he wouldn't have to switch schools. Trouble is it's a hard place for his family to make a living.

Rio Grande City is in Starr County, the poorest county in Texas.

Today the median household income is around $27,000 — less than half of what it is for the nation. And the unemployment rate is high.

A lot of families move around to find work, like Angel's. The Rio Grande Valley is home to over half of the migrant families in Texas. And Texas has one of the largest Migrant Education programs in the country with some 31,000 students.

Rio Grande City High School tries to provide a welcoming place for these kids to land as they come and go with a Migrant Student Club. In early February, I drop in on one of their meetings.

MC Lopez: Hi there. How are you doing?
Watson: Hi. I'm Tennessee.

Lopez: Hi, I'm MC Lopez.
Watson: Nice to meet you.
Lopez: Nice to meet you too. And these are my kids.
Watson: Hi.
Kids: Hi.

The students are gathered in a classroom, and Angel is in the back row. He gives me his big smile as the club's faculty sponsor MC Lopez dives back into her announcement about an upcoming college visit.

Lopez: Remember you need to join in so that we can all start going out to see the different schools to see which school that you are going to want to go to once you are a senior. OK? Any questions on that one? Anyone interested in going?

When she's done, Ms. Lopez invites me to explain why I'm here. I tell them about how Edward R Murrow reported in 1960 that no migrant student had gone to college.

Watson: Does that surprise you to hear that? Angel, you're saying it doesn't surprise you.
Angel: No.
Watson: Why not?
Angel: Because back then the school system, they weren't like supportive for migrant students, I think, because no one like knew them back then so…

Ms. Lopez pushes her students to think about their own parents' struggle to get an education.

Lopez: Do your parents have a college degree or just high school degree?

Kids list off the grades their parents dropped out of high school, and no one raises a hand to say their parents had gone to college.

Kid 1: My dad left freshman year to go work.
Kid 2: My mom didn't finish high school.
Kid 3: My dad left sophomore year.

According to a 2016 survey from the US Department of Labor, the average level of formal education completed by farmworkers was eighth grade.

Lopez: They are encouraging you to go to school, correct?
Kid 1: Yes.

Kid 2: Because it was hard for them.
Lopez: Because they tell you what? They don't want you to fall into the same.

To get through high school and go onto college feels like a lot of pressure on kids who have their education interrupted by moves all over the place.

Watson: Where do you go?
Kid 1: Washington, California and Montana.
Kid 2: I've traveled to Mississippi, Nebraska, Louisiana.
Kid 3: Pennsylvania, Louisiana, Mississippi.
Lopez: Wherever there is work, right?
Kids: Yes.

Most states have Migrant Education Programs but that doesn't guarantee that outreach workers will find every migrant student out in the fields or that every school will be clued into the needs of farmworker families.

Lopez: I have a student that just left yesterday, and she was telling me that where she goes, they don't help them out.

(Music)

And that's one of the critiques of the program. Federal dollars are routed through states to local school districts and in some cases non-profits who want to run programs. But migrant education is not like special education where students are guaranteed the support they need.

Rhode Island, Connecticut, and West Virginia have opted out of the program for years. Wyoming dropped out in 2017. The Wyoming Department of Education told me it cancelled the program because changes in agriculture had reduced the number of migrant kids coming to the state.

But in Rio Grande City, the Migrant Education Program has a million-dollar budget to support tutoring, and special workshops on reading, writing and math skills.

There's also a team of counselors that are dedicated to the needs of migrant students.

Erika Pratt is one of them. I found her in her office, with the air conditioner blasting to hold back the Texas heat.

Erika Pratt: Of course, we never belittle their work because it's honest living. And without our migrants we wouldn't be eating. We have our vegetables, our fruit because we have migrant workers. But for the same token, we have those kids that we encourage that way, "OK, your parents are doing this for you to get a better education, for you to become even somebody that doesn't have to work as hard. How nice would it be for you to work in air conditioning, especially here in south Texas, when the weather is 110 degrees? And then you can even probably break that cycle for your parents. Come back and help them." So, we try.

Pratt says that means creating specialized plans for migrant students:

Pratt: It covers anything from needing materials, needing uniforms, going over their schedule.

Pratt's co-worker, Olga Gonzalez, says the staff who run this program have a particular motivation to help these kids succeed.

Olga Gonzalez: Most of us, we're migrants ourselves. Most of the migrant department, we were migrant ourselves. And we see the need of helping these students have some sort of an incentive to go to college.

One incentive they provide is college scholarships. This weekend the Migrant Education Program staff are hosting a chicken BBQ to raise money for a scholarship fund.

(Chicken BBQ sound)

In the parking lot of a grocery store, they've set up big grills and volunteers are boxing up barbecued chicken with Mexican rice, potato salad and a pickled jalapeño.

Benavides: (in Spanish) How many are we going to do?

Aracely is here helping out. Her son Angel is only a freshman, but she's happy to help raise money for this year's seniors.

Watson: How are the sales going?
Benavides: Right now, they are barely going to start, so I don't know.
(in Spanish) But I hope that the money supports several students.

In North Dakota, Aracely used mostly English, but here in the south Texas borderland she freely flows into Spanish.

She tells me she hopes they raise a lot of money, because it's hard for farmworkers to afford to send their kids to college, and any little bit helps.

(Sound)

Gina Gonzalez is helping out, too. She's director of federal programs for the Rio Grande City Schools. She oversees their Migrant Education Program. She says she's glad to see the community pulling together to raise money for higher education. And she's glad the migrant education program exists to help kids get through school. But she says neither one addresses the real problems that these families face.

Gina Gonzalez: The law, the United States child labor laws don't apply to these children and that is a big sore on my back. Because I don't understand how the United States would allow a 10-year-old to work in horrible conditions in some cases and it's OK.

Federal law allows children to start doing farm work at age 12 with parental consent. And in certain short-term harvests they can work as young as 10.

Gonzalez: You know we try to talk to lobbyists to see if they can push child labor laws to protect the migrant students. And I know that the parents they need it, but it's wrong. A 10- and 11-year-old should not be working fields. They should not be doing that.

(Music)

The US Department of Labor issued a report in 2014 looking at the employment characteristics of people hired to work on farms and their families. And what the report says is that 84,000 youth ages 14 to 18 do farm work. That's about six percent of all farmworkers. And the majority of them were teenage boys traveling on their own.

But the report also looked at children living with their parents who reported doing farm work. And 24 percent of them were under the age of 14. The report indicated that most kids who work do continue to attend school, but it also found that 2 percent of kids ages 6 to 15 were not enrolled, and that number jumps to 4 percent for kids ages 16 and 17.

Every state requires kids to be in school until they're at least 16. But Norma Flores Lopez says farmworkers' kids may be overlooked. She works for the Child Labor Coalition — a group working to end child labor. Lopez says farmworkers can be invisible.

Norma Flores Lopez: But if those children were as present as let's say waiting on our tables or vacuuming the floors in our offices, I feel like people would react differently. If they had to confront it and face these children over and over again.

Lopez fights to keep kids off the job and in school, and she also works on Capitol Hill lobbying to keep educational support for farmworker students in place. But she says it's not enough just to help the students.

Flores Lopez: Folks are OK with investing in children and protecting them and providing them with educational opportunities and giving them these opportunities for them to pull themselves up from their bootstraps but turn the other way — turn a blind eye when it comes to doing something for the parents, for the farmworkers.

Lopez grew up in a south Texas farmworker family herself.

With support from the Migrant Education Program she beat the odds, graduated from high school and eventually got a master's degree. But she says that wasn't the case for many of her farmworker peers.

The US Department of Education doesn't track graduation rates for students in the Migrant Education Program, so we don't know how many are leaving farm work behind and moving into better paying jobs.

But what we do know is that kids in the Migrant Education Program score below the national average on state reading and math assessments given in third through eighth grade.

Around 28 percent of migratory kids score proficient, that's compared to 40 percent of other kids from low socio-economic backgrounds.

Lopez says farmworkers and their children will continue to struggle as long as they work in miserable conditions and make so little money.

Flores Lopez: If those issues were addressed then you would have families that would have access to better education, and better outcomes in health, better outcomes and opportunities to be able to gain generational wealth.

(Music)

(Door knocking, dog barks)

Angel and his dog Lucas meet me at the door of his family's small home. They've invited me over for breakfast.

Benavides: (in Spanish) Good morning. Come in. How did you sleep?
Watson: Well.

Aracely is making fresh tortillas. Her husband Juan is cooking up beans and eggs, Angel shows me around.

Angel: All right so this is my front lawn. Right? This is like, we change the oil. We need to do something, that's where we park all the cars. I have my basketball hoop there. That's where I play basketball, if I'm bored and stuff.

(Door sound)

And this is my front door. And we have like the living room and kitchen combined, conjoined together. And this is my room. This is my humble abode.

For most of Angel's life, he's shared a room with his brother.

Angel: And even now, even though I have the whole bed to myself, I only sleep on the left side.

The right side of the bed stays empty because Angel's brother is off at college. He was the first in his family to graduate from high school and now he's in his third year at Texas A&M. His name is Juan Junior, named after his dad. Until Juan got to college he'd never started or ended school in the same place.

(Music)

(Juan studying sound)

When I meet him, he's in a study room at the Texas A&M library reviewing for an exam he has the next morning.

(Sound)

He's studying civil engineering with the dream of building one thing in particular — his own house.

Juan: I was always all over the place. Most of the time I have been traveling a lot all over the place. And I want to take pride in the fact that I have my own house but like designed and built by me.

Juan is a junior; he's been in college for three years — but he says he still has days when he's amazed he's here.

Juan: And so, it's like, wait a second like my grandparents come from this really small town in Mexico, in the middle of Mexico, and it's like what? How did that transfer to my parents and how did that transfer me to me so quickly?

He doesn't know too many other first-generation college students like him.

Juan: A lot of people that come to A&M, since A&M is like a tradition, a lot of people have their great grandfather's ring, like their A&M ring, and it's like they come from a family of like — what's the word for it — academic people…

Juan wants to be the one to start that tradition for his family. He thinks about that every time he prepares for an exam.

Juan: I sit there and I'm like I feel like the entire weight is on my shoulders. All the weight is on my shoulders and everything depends on this exam and it's bad that I do that but I think of it like that.
Watson: For you and your family?
Juan: Yeah. And so I stress myself out so much because I know that I'm expected to be successful.

But he'd take that pressure over a long hot day in the fields. That makes him think of one friend in particular who he's known since kindergarten.

Juan: We were basically brought up through the same system.

They both had good grades. They both won national migrant student awards.

Juan: But as soon as we got out of high school his parents didn't really, I feel like they didn't really, back him up or instill that in him. My parents said, "Get financial aid, get scholarships, we'll figure it out, but you're going to college." His parents basically said "10,000 dollars a year is crazy, right? We're never going to get money for that, we're never going to pay that."

Now that friend is back doing farm work with his family to help make ends meet. Juan grew up doing farm work too but only on the weekends when it wouldn't interfere with school. He knows his parents have sacrificed to make education a priority. They knew that getting Juan out of the fields, and through college was essential. They wanted him to have a more prosperous life than they had.

> **Juan:** Like I do have the single greatest support system ever in my parents. My parents support me all the way.

And to show them how grateful he is:

> **Juan:** My plan is once I get my diploma, I'm planning to make a copy of it and give the original to my parents and the copy can go in my office. Because it is for my parents. Like, I'm doing this for myself but it's for my family. So, I'm the first generation, right. Now it's expected of everyone else after me. You know what I'm saying? I'm kind of setting the example. So now it's like, "OK, Angel."

And his brother Angel is fully on board. Next year he'll be in tenth grade, and he's signed up to take advanced placement courses for college credit.

> (Music)

Smith: That was reporter Tennessee Watson. I'm Stephen Smith. If Juan graduates from college, which he's determined to do, the hope is he'll expand opportunity for his family.

But activist Norma Flores Lopez says the job of lifting farmworkers out of poverty shouldn't be put on kids.

> **Flores Lopez:** If you eat, this falls on you. And so that pretty much is everybody in society.

Kids from migrant worker families. Kids who are homeless. The highly mobile lives of these children are a symptom of larger inequities. A school can't raise wages for migrant farmworkers. A school can't build more affordable housing.

But schools can be safe and consistent — a haven of stability. At least for part of the year or part of the day. And if these kids want their adult lives to be more rooted, finishing school is their most reliable path.

You've been listening to Students on the Move, a documentary from APM Reports. It was produced by Chris Julin and Tennessee Watson. The editor is Catherine Winter. Fact checker, Betsy Towner-Levine. Web editors are Andy Kruse and Dave Mann. Mixing by Craig Thorson. Our theme music is by Gary Meister. Thanks also to Chris Maccini at Spokane Public Radio. The APM Reports team includes Alex Baumhardt, Shelly Langford, John Hernandez, Emily Hanford and Sasha Aslanian. The editor-in-chief of APM Reports is Chris Worthington. I'm Stephen Smith.

We'd like to know what you thought about this program. Send us an email at contact@apmreports.org. Or find us on Facebook and Twitter at Educate Podcast. That's one word. You can find out more about this story on our website: apmreports.org. And you can hear more of our education documentaries on our podcast, Educate.

Support for this program comes from Lumina Foundation and the Spencer Foundation.

This is APM, American Public Media.