



Episode 3 - SchoolHouse Connection Transcript

Melissa Turnpaugh:

Hello and welcome to our new podcast, I Will Be Your Voice: Stories of Homelessness and Hope. I am one of your hosts. Melissa Turnpaugh, Youth Development Coordinator with the Center for Schools and Communities. Our podcast will amplify the voices and stories of students experiencing homelessness across Pennsylvania and beyond.

Matt Butensky:

I'm your co-host, Matt Butensky, Project Manager with the Center for Schools and Communities. We are super excited and honored that you are joining us for this episode of I Will Be Your Voice Podcast. On today's episode, we are speaking with Barbara Duffield, Executive Director of SchoolHouse Connection. SchoolHouse Connection is a national nonprofit organization working to overcome homelessness through education, and so we are now thrilled to introduce Barbara to the podcast. Welcome, Barbara.

Barbara Duffield:

Thank you very much. I'm thrilled to be here.

Matt Butensky:

It's so good to have you here. We are familiar with SchoolHouse's work, but we hope to educate our audiences today more about SchoolHouse Connection and we're so grateful that you are spending time with us for this Pennsylvania podcast. I wanted to give a little bit of an origin story because we actually met back in 2016 when I had just started working in Pennsylvania with the Center for Schools and Communities and on behalf of students experiencing homelessness and in foster care at a Pennsylvania conference, and you were keynoting at the conference and I believe it was also at the very onset and beginning of SchoolHouse Connection too.

Barbara Duffield:

I think that's right. I think I remember crying. Do you remember me crying?

Matt Butensky:

I remember there was a fun amount of energy and synergy going on with the development and the onset of SchoolHouse Connection kind of being born around that time, so it was pretty cool to see and it's kind of neat that you were in Pennsylvania keynoting at our conference while that was happening. I wanted to share my first history and work with you, Barbara. To get us started, Barbara, we wanted to ask you a little bit more about SchoolHouse Connection. Will you share with us a little bit about your organization?

Barbara Duffield:

Sure. SchoolHouse Connection, as you correctly recall, did have its birth at the end of 2016. This was after ... I had worked first as a tutor for children experiencing homelessness back in 1990 in the District of Columbia, then for 10 years at the National Coalition for the Homeless, and then for 13 years as the policy and program director at the National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth. So had many years right at the intersection of early care education and homelessness and SchoolHouse Connection, founded by myself and also by Patricia Julianelle, was really kind of the culmination of all of those experiences, the direct experiences tutoring, and then the work at the other two national organizations, with the vision that if we're going to make sure that children and youth who are experiencing homelessness are successful, we need to be able to think broadly, we need to be able to reach community organizations beyond schools, we need to broaden the choir beyond the McKinney-Vento professionals, but of course serving them first and foremost, and we need to look at the full continuum of learning.

We used to say from birth to higher education, now we say prenatal to post-secondary. To have a national organization that could be nimble, that could be flexible to what was happening on the ground, and that would really hold that full continuum of learning in mind and policy and practice.

Matt Butensky:

Very cool, very good. You shared a little bit about your early work doing tutoring. Can you share a little bit more about your early experiences? We'd love just to hear about some more of your early work and how that got you more involved and invested in this population of students.

Barbara Duffield:

I came to Washington D.C. a recent graduate of the University of Michigan with a degree in political science and an interest in religion and politics, particularly Central America. Nothing to do with U.S. domestic policy, nothing to do with homelessness, but I got an internship interning at Foreign Policy Magazine and I was really kind of a loner there. There are a lot of Ivy League types and the copy editor took me under her wing and she said, "Would you like to volunteer at a project called Project North Star?" That was a project for children experiencing homelessness in the D.C. area, and that really was transformative for me to work with children directly to see their promise and their potential and the role that education could play, but also to see just the incredible barriers that they faced day in and day out.

I started to internship after that at the National Coalition for the Homeless and did a lot of different policy areas. I worked on housing policy, worked on income, health, but really

education was always my passion because of the direct work with children who were experiencing homelessness here. Then throughout the years, having been involved in several scholarship programs, first at the National Coalition and then at Macy, that work too, very influential in terms of the long term, seeing the young person and staying in contact with them over the years, not just when they were in crisis, but then in the future, and then also very much the grassroots aspect of policy change.

As I was thinking about this interview in particular, it's ironic because about a couple days ago, maybe last week, I got an email from our retired coordinator from Bucks County, Pennsylvania, Tom Norland, who reached out because we had worked together back in 1998 and 1999 on the reauthorization, the changes to McKinney-Vento that put in liaisons, transportation, immediate enrollment disputes, and reminiscing, I looked up his testimony that he gave in 1999 and was reflecting about both how far we've come, but also how many things are still the same.

Those were really important experiences and just again, seeing the direct influence that practitioners could have on policy, and thinking about other Pennsylvania coordinators who played a big role, Eileen from Burkes County as well. I can remember going to the hill with her and with Tom and with Rooster from Allentown and one meeting in particular, I can remember where the staffer was so moved, the congressional staff was so moved by their stories that not only did she increase funding for McKinney-Vento, she took out her checkbook and wrote each of their programs at check.

Matt Butensky:

Wow.

Barbara Duffield:

Some of the early experiences that really gives me faith in both our children and communities, but also in the policy advocacy that's so important to move systems forward.

Matt Butensky:

That's amazing. That's an amazing story that ... it's interesting to hear about what SchoolHouse is doing, but when we hear some of those stories about the groundwork and the grassroots work to really make these things happen, it's really cool to hear from you, so thanks for sharing that.

Melissa Turnpaugh:

SchoolHouse Connection really champions education, as we've heard just recently in the past couple minutes that we've spoken, and your website talks about education helping to break the cycle. Why have you and SchoolHouse Connection centered your work around education as a key component to address these issues?

Barbara Duffield:

The research really shows the core role of education in resolving homelessness, not just one time, not just for a night, but a long-term path to never being homeless again. If you look at the

research about youth homelessness, for example, the number one risk factor for a young person experiencing homelessness as a young adult is lack of a high school degree, lack of a GED. The second risk factor is being pregnant or having a child, and the third is having a low income. All of those connect to early care in education, so early care in education is that preventative strategy. We know in early childhood children who would get a quality preschool, who have quality preschool experiences are more likely to own their own homes and have better outcomes and we know on the flip side for post-secondary that young people who have some form of education beyond high school are much more likely to have a job that pays a living wage.

The research is clear. Early care in education is the long-term solution to resolving homelessness. The last thing I'll say is that I don't know how many people realize that when single adults who are experiencing homelessness are surveyed, for example, in the HUD Pitt count, in many communities that ask the question "When did you first experience homelessness?", 20 to 25% say as a child. We know that childhood homelessness can turn into adult homelessness, and we really need to go upstream through early care and education, both for children to have better outcomes and also to have long-term solutions to homelessness, whether we're talking about children or adults.

Melissa Turnpaugh:

Thanks for sharing that research. You mentioned about different preventative strategies, so that's kind of like ... what are some of the different tools and resources that SchoolHouse Connection has been offering when you talk about these preventative strategies and helping them navigate?

Barbara Duffield:

I would say as an organization, we certainly work on the policy advocacy, state policy advocacy, federal policy advocacy, but the bulk of our organization is what we call practical assistance, which is trying to create the tools, resources, and inspiration for educators and providers to implement these federal laws to replicate best practices. So everything from briefs on responding to immigrant and migrant students who are experiencing homelessness or tip sheets for teachers where we can identify some of the best practices and then create easily digestible tip sheets to give strategies.

We also offer webinars where we have guest speakers and, again, prep both practitioners and young people. We have legal summaries. People don't want to read the whole McKinney-Vento Act. They want a two pager. So two pages of McKinney ... I think that's one of our most popular pieces of the website, is that two pager. They also want tools and forms. For example, for financial aid access for unaccompanied youth who are experiencing homelessness, I'd say that's another one of the resources that is the most access. It's a template, it's plug and play to help streamline that process for a young person to get access to financial aid. We've got resources that are around those sort of practical assistance information and then also the policy work as well.

Melissa Turnpaugh:

That's great. Those tools and resources are awesome. It's been great being able to be on your website and see the different tools and resources and people asking about those. Along with

that, you talk about the tools and resources. Are there any that are new that you're excited about? Any projects you guys are working on that are in the days ahead?

Barbara Duffield:

Yes. One of the resources that we offer that I think is perhaps the most useful is we have a part of our website called Q&A from our inbox, and that is where we receive emails, actual emails from people all over the country and we respond to them, but we had the idea that it's much better to have an answer that's case-sensitive about this particular situation than to give hypothetical. Here's a hypothetical situation, here's my hypothetical answer. We thought we would make those available. We take out identifying information and then post on our website, and it's become very, very long. But chances are, if there's a particular situation around eligibility or special ed or unaccompanied youth, maybe somebody else has had it before and you could just type in the search and then bring those up. Of course, we all know there are new situations that come up every single day, so we're still getting questions and there are twists on them, but that's a resource I'm really proud of on our website that I think has been really practical, so I wanted to add that.

Matt Butensky:

Myself, I've used that Q&A several times because a lot of the things are nuanced and there is niche topics, and so I'll search on your website search bar and I'll find often a Q&A that has been already asked and answered by SchoolHouse. I've definitely used your Q&A portion.

Barbara Duffield:

Cool. We do have some new projects that we are excited about. One of them we just launched and we'll redo when we get the new data, but it's data profiles on child and youth homelessness. We worked with the University of Michigan Poverty Solutions to make them searchable. This is data on children and youth experiencing homelessness, including their school experiences, how many were identified, where they were living when they were first identified, chronic absence, graduation. We were able to disaggregate it so you can find out what it is for the nation, for the state, for the school district, for the county, and for the congressional district. I think, to my understanding, this is the first time that the data could be separated up by county and by congressional district. It's really cool and very helpful in educating the public, whether it's community groups or whether it's decision makers, and we're excited when we update it for the 21/22 data nationally comes out sometime in the summer, then we'll be able to then show some of the trend lines as well.

That's one piece we're really excited about. We're working on, again, I mentioned the zero to three, the prenatal to three. We're working on a communications project to try to bridge early childhood and housing and homelessness. That's going to be really cool. One big area of work right now for us is the American Rescue Plan - Homeless Children and Youth Act, and helping states and districts figure out the most effective strategic ways to use those funds, knowing that they are time-limited, and knowing that there's a lot of stressors and layers that schools have, and this at a time of great need for children and youth. One of the things we realized is that you can go to the Department of Education's website and see this list of funds that the department has approved, but there's so many permutations on that.

When the U.S. Department of Education answers a question, it just answers the person who is asking the question and the rest of the world doesn't necessarily hear the answer. So we're excited that starting next month we'll be hosting a monthly office hours with the U.S. Department of Education. People don't want to hear necessarily from SchoolHouse Connection, they want to hear the authority, they want chapter and verse, so we're excited about that ability. People will be able to submit answers in advance that could then be vetted so the department can respond. We're hoping that that will help get word out about what's actually been approved and some of the innovative cool things that have gotten the green light. So super excited about that.

Then the last thing, I'm excited about a lot of things, but one of the last things we're really excited about are the changes to the FAFSA for unaccompanied homeless youth. So many changes that are now in place to streamline and remove the barriers that young people face, both young people who are homeless and young people from foster care. That's a tremendous amount of work to make sure that all the parties are aware of that, so we're excited to move that forward and have more tools and resources on that topic too.

Matt Butensky:

Awesome. That's really cool. We should probably have another podcast about each of those things, or we could talk for longer about them. Regarding ARP-HCY, we are trying to pivot for the remainder of the funding allowability, thinking about sustainable, durable lasting things when the funding is no longer available in September of 2024. I know we've already been working with you, Barbara, and Karen on your team, and you did a webinar for us with a timeline and a tool for planning of that funding obligation and planning of using those funds, so thanks for doing that with us. But those are really exciting new things coming. I'm looking forward to learning more about them and definitely using them and seeing how we can put them into work here in Pennsylvania. Very cool.

With that, we want to talk a little bit more about advocacy. We talked a little bit earlier about that topic, but we know that you complete a lot of advocacy work in SchoolHouse Connection that leads to policy improvements. How can our listeners be advocates for children and youth experiencing homelessness?

Barbara Duffield:

Advocacy is about speaking up and speaking for, so it's actually perfectly titled for the name of the podcast series to be Your Voice, to be the voice of children and youth experiencing homelessness and advocacy can be small and it can be larger on scale. Advocacy at the community level can be talking at a school board meeting. It can be talking to community partners, it can be going to your transportation department. That level of advocacy can pay great dividends. The policy advocacy too, you don't need to be a policy wonk or a professional advocate to be involved in changing systems and changing policies and lives, and right now we're really excited to be working with great partners in Pennsylvania on some state legislation in Pennsylvania. For example, there are three bills that have been introduced and that are moving through.

One is a bill on vital documents, HB 127, which would waive fees for driver's licenses and state IDs for youth experiencing homelessness. Another bill is HB 729, which is in higher education support would provide priority housing, higher ed liaisons, fee waivers, that's the second bill. Then the third one is minor consent to supportive services. So specifically recognizing that

young people who are homeless and on their own, our unaccompanied youth, may face barriers to just accessing shelter or banking or vehicle insurance even when they're essentially supporting themselves and they're quite independent. This third piece of legislation, HB 730, would provide access to those things for minors. The action item here for listeners who want to get involved, we're at the stage where these bills need ... we want them to have a hearing. We're encouraging advocates and people who are curious about this to thank the people who introduce the bills, the representatives who introduce the bills, but really encourage the legislature to hear the bills in order they can be moved along.

We'll provide a link for this podcast so listeners can figure out how to do that and find out more about the bills. Then the other thing too is we do have an advocacy network and that's a way to just stay informed, whether it's state policy or federal policy. We would encourage listeners to sign up for that. We also provide advocacy training. I can think of just another example where very recently we were connected with Senator Casey's office from Pennsylvania and connected with some Pennsylvania organizations and a liaison from the school district. It was the first time they had ARP money and we invited her to be part of that meeting, and nothing I could have said would've been as convincing as hearing her talk about what it means to be able to give a parent a store card or a little bit of support and how that trust then allowed the parent to share more details about what was going on, allowed her to help that family more, to say that they never had the ability to do that before.

That kind of advocacy, she wasn't at lobbying for more money, she was just telling the reality, the impact of it and it was extremely powerful. If you're listening and you want opportunities like that and you want SchoolHouse's help to make the connection to policy makers, that's what we're here for.

Matt Butensky:

Awesome. Awesome. We're going to take action and we're going to see how we can get more resources from SchoolHouse to be better advocates or be advocates. Thank you, Barbara.

Barbara Duffield:

You're welcome.

Matt Butensky:

Yes. Before we close out our podcast today, we wanted to check in with you. Did you have any other messages or anything else you wanted to share with our listeners today about your work or SchoolHouse Connection's work?

Barbara Duffield:

I think there are really two things that I'd like to add to the conversation. Maybe three. One is just to emphasize what I said before about you don't need to be a professional advocate or activist or a policy wonk to be a needed part of change. Our motto at SchoolHouse Connection is listen and learn and then advocate and implement. We can only do that if we're hearing directly and involving people directly in the policy advocacy and in the practice work the things that need to happen. The other thing I'd like to say is that, and maybe you've got a sense of this from how long I've been doing this work, but it's a long game. The systems changes ... there's

an urgency to child and youth homelessness and that's frustrating because children and youth need us now.

They have basic needs that need to be met now. They need access to education now. But sometimes the system work takes a long time and so the persistence really pays off. When you have that long view and you can see the changes that have been made, it can give you faith to keep going on the day to day to day. Those are just two of the messages I thought I'd like to leave in closing.

Matt Butensky:

Listen, learn, advocate, implement, persistence, patience. It's a marathon, not a sprint. All of those things. Right?

Barbara Duffield:

Exactly.

Matt Butensky:

Perfect. Well, Barbara, with that message, we are going to close our episode of I Will Be Your Voice: Stories of Homelessness and Hope. We just wanted to thank you, Melissa and I wanted to thank you for being with us today. That was so much great information. We appreciate all you do and we're so happy you could be a part of our story here in Pennsylvania.

Barbara Duffield:

Thank you so much for inviting me. It was great to be with you.

Matt Butensky:

Thank you.

Melissa Turnpaugh:

Thank you.

Matt Butensky:

To learn more about SchoolHouse Connection, please visit schoolhouseconnection.org. Thank you for listening to I Will Be Your Voice: Stories of Homelessness and Hope. We hope you enjoyed the episode. Please check back again.