



Chandler Unified helps hundreds of homeless students

BY KEN SAIN
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At least 256 families with students attending Chandler Unified School District are facing homelessness – and that’s probably not all of them.

“We’ll probably end up anywhere from about 450 to 485 kids on average because we are qualifying throughout the year,” said Valerie Gyory, CUSD’s academic Families in Transition advocate.

She said students in that situation are not eager to let people know they are struggling.

That’s one of the reasons they are at high risk of dropping out.

Destination Diploma is a program the district runs with community partners to try and keep that from happening.

Last year, 20 homeless students were able to graduate because of the support they received, Gyory said.

Students can get food from Matthew’s Crossing Food Bank and from the district through the federal meals program; they get essentials such as school and hygiene supplies from Child Crisis Arizona.

And the Chandler Education Foundation is always ready to help when there’s an emergency situation.

Of the 20 Destination Diploma graduates last May, 10 planned on attending a community college, five are attending universities (four of them on full-ride scholarships) and one is training to be a certified nursing assistant.

The students can also earn a monthly allowance if they uphold their grades, keep

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attending school and have good behavior reports from their teachers.

But identifying the students who need help when they are doing everything they can to keep that information from going public is not always easy.

“Everybody’s trained in our district,” Gyory said. “If they’re noticing something about a kid, they usually email me and say, ‘Hey, can you do a little bit of investigation?’”

There are 25 students in Destination Diploma this year. While homeless students can be any age, the program is designed to specifically help juniors and seniors who are close to graduating. They are the ones most at risk of dropping out, Gyory said.

Another 10 students are eligible to join the program, but so far have decided not to.

“They’ve got to build a trust with us,” Gyory said. “Especially with changes and things that are going on in our world, they don’t always trust, so they have to kind of wait, let me think about this. And it might be a month.”

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high cost of housing in Chandler, Queen Creek and Gilbert.

The pandemic had an impact as well.

“We have seen an increase in need, especially in Chandler,” Gyory said. “Housing has been a huge indicator, people have been evicted and rent prices are going up.

“Many of the food banks are not as full as they used to be because more people are using the food banks. We want to remove the barriers, we want to keep kids in schools.”



Valerie Gyory, left, an academic coach for Chandler Unified’s Families in Transition program, and Caitlin Sageng, director of special projects and family resources for Child Crisis Arizona take a break in the FANS Across America Locker Room, where plastic bins filled with clothing, household supplies and hygiene items are stocked for distribution to homeless students. (David Minton/Staff Photographer)

Some of the students are couch surfing, moving from a friend or a family to another. Some sleep in their cars. Many, however, get help and Gyory tries to arrange emergency shelter for them.

“We try to get them in emergency shelters, some of them are domestic violence situations, and they use our clearing houses,” Gyory said.

“We also have doubled up where maybe they’ve had to move in with family members, or found friends that they can move in to. There are other things, some are living in hotels or staying in extended stays.”

She said the number of homeless students is at a record high thanks to the

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Alison Hurtado, the content communication specialist at Child Crisis Arizona, said the nonprofit has the funds to help up to 45 students.

It provides a lot more than basic necessities.

“They’ve supported our students at Christmas,” Gyory said. “If we have a student who can’t get to school, or they need a bike ... I can’t tell you how many

bikes they’ve provided.”

Hurtado said if Gyory asks, her agency will do everything it can to help out.

“I think part of it is connecting them to those resources,” Hurtado said. “They’ve kind of operated where, ‘I got to figure things out on my own, or I don’t want people to know about my situation.’ Building that trust, and then teaching them how to find those resources.”

Need help?

Any CUSD student who needs help and thinks they may qualify for Destination Diploma should talk to a trusted teacher or counselor at their school.

Want to help?

Visit the Child Crisis Arizona website to make a donation to help support homeless students in Chandler:

childcrisisaz.org