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Mentors can help at-risk youngsters succeed

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The numbers are daunting: a stadium -- a city, really -- full of students who already have the odds stacked against them.

Facing economic disadvantages, 82,385 students in Marion County often need additional support to overcome homelessness, hunger, foster care or other crisis situations.

Many local organizations extend the safety net to catch them. But for at-risk students to really succeed -- academically and personally -- those who work with the city's children say their best hope is you.

"To make a difference in this community for the low-income population of kids," said Joyce Johnson, executive director of the Starfish Initiative, "we're going to need thousands of mentors

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coming alongside these kids.

"It really is the missing piece."

17,668 students not reading at grade level

Through third grade, students are learning how to read. In fourth grade, they're reading to learn. And by fifth grade, they may have already fallen behind.

The United Way's ReadUP program works with 550 elementary-school children whose reading skills teeter on the edge between passing and failing. With 30 minutes of one-on-one workshops during the school day, students develop strategies for learning new vocabulary, understanding plots and inferring what could happen in books.

Fluency in reading is not the same as comprehension, said Alan Withey, ReadUP's volunteer center director.

"We're teaching the students to go into the process already open-minded and questioning," he said.

Like any mentorship, part of the process is establishing role models who can encourage frustrated students to push through challenging tasks.

"It may be the most important role they have isn't the tutoring part," Withey said, "but showing the kids that someone cares about them and encouraging them to be better than they are."

Get involved: Help children read by volunteering in schools through ReadUP. Go to www.readupindy.org or call (317) 925-READ (925-7323).



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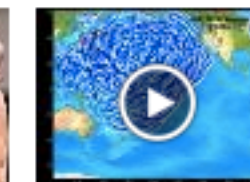
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4,133 students in juvenile corrections

Bad decisions, bad situations, bad histories: There's a lot that troubled teens have to overcome.

Peace Learning Center teaches preventative coping strategies in small-group sessions at Indianapolis schools, in hopes of keeping students out of jail. It also works with youths and staff members at Pendleton Juvenile Correctional Facility in Madison County.

Deep breathing and meditation address aggressive and assaultive behaviors, said Kirsten Eamon-Shine, director of youth services.

"It's about getting over things that have happened previously in their lives," she said, "and seeing a different path in front of them."

By talking about relationships, conflict resolution and problem solving, incarcerated teens build self-esteem and start planning for careers or further education.

Get involved: Volunteer with the Peace Coaches program in local schools. Call Lisa Jones, human resources director, at (317) 327-7144.

3,687 students who are homeless

The shuffle of constantly sleeping somewhere different can turn a child's life upside down.

Homeless children lose a sense of consistency, and often their attention at school as families struggle to get back on their feet. But tutors can bring a regular support system into their lives, said Carrie Murphy, volunteer manager at School on Wheels.

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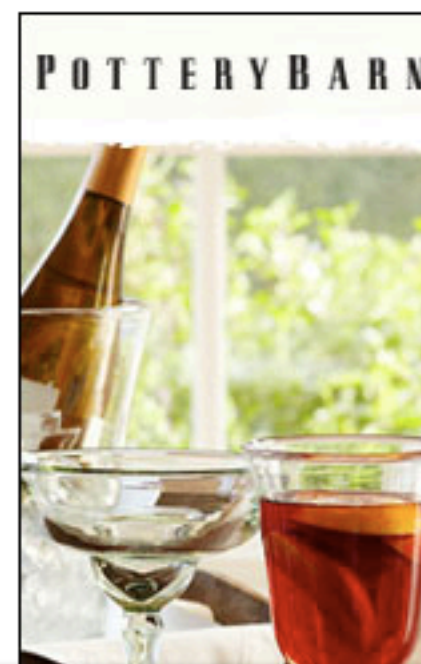
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School on Wheels trains volunteers to visit about 400 children in 10 local shelters and one elementary school for an hour per day, four days per week.

Mentors ask about school, spend a few minutes on a writing prompt, help with homework and read with children. To ease the burdens of displacement, School on Wheels also provides school supplies and uniforms. The organization sends advocates to attend parent-teacher conferences and keeps kids on track to pursue successful careers.

School on Wheels is fighting the numbers: About three-quarters of homeless children repeat grades, Murphy said. The average education of a homeless person in Indianapolis is equivalent to a seventh-grade level.

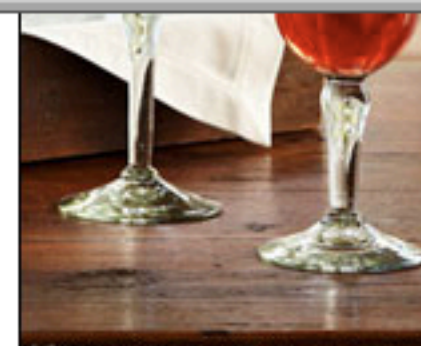
"Education is the great equalizer," Murphy said. "The further you go in your education, the less likely you are to become homeless."

Get involved: Tutor at shelters through School on Wheels. Call (317) 202-9100, e-mail carrie@indysow.org or visit www.indysow.org for more information.

2,265 students in foster care

Education isn't limited to textbooks studied at desks in classrooms. Lessons on how to change a tire, balance a checkbook or cook from a recipe can give foster children a foundation of independent living skills.

"Oftentimes when they're emancipated, they don't have those resources to fall back on," said Karlene Edgemon, regional director for The Villages, an Indiana family services agency.



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"There are things that foster children may not have learned along the way," she said, "but things that they would probably need to know when they're out on their own."

The Villages reaches more than 300 youths throughout the state, a mix of those receiving services through the organization and others referred through the Department of Child Services.

In groups or with caseworkers, teens in foster care learn how to pay bills, create a resume and navigate public transportation. It's just one support program available through The Villages, which also provides tutoring for struggling students and trains parents to advocate for their children's education.

Get involved: Play to your strengths in volunteering for The Villages -- read to children, make blankets or staff a special event. Call (317) 273-7575.

1,536 students in alternative schools

When school includes recording and producing a CD, learning about business resonates loudly with some students.

Alternative schools, such as the Decatur Enrichment Center, tailor classes to a student's needs. Science might take the form of testing water samples from White River. Physical education might involve a membership at the local Curves gym.

"Our kids have a little bit more freedom than most kids," said center Director John Pietrzak, "because our kids can come to school around work schedules or parenting schedules."

There are still academic and attendance requirements that students

must meet, and progress reports are sent home every two weeks. But for students who may be falling behind in credits or juggling a pregnancy, Pietrzak said alternative programs can connect more effectively with students by treating them like adults.

"They are in charge of their education," he said. "We act as cheerleaders for them and motivators to make sure we get them through all the rougher spots."

Get involved: Become a tutor or a mentor to Decatur Enrichment Center students. Call John Pietrzak at (317) 856-2204 or (317) 491-4006.

1,000 students likely to drop out

If their parents dropped out of high school or never went on to college, students have to forge new paths to education.

The Starfish Initiative partners with about 250 students entering high school in Marion County to raise their enthusiasm for learning. With a C average, students can become eligible for the state's Twenty-first Century Scholars Program, which gives financial assistance to make college more affordable.

By matching mentors with students, the Starfish Initiative opens social and cultural experiences to economically disadvantaged teens -- "the kinds of things they need to know to become successful," said Executive Director Joyce Johnson.

Mentors introduce additional supports for at-risk students, she said, without being another parent or teacher.

"The idea is to get them through high school prepared to get through post-secondary education," Johnson said. "This is more

than just being a friend. This is being a friend with a purpose."

Get involved: Mentor a high school freshman. Find the application at www.starfishinitiative.org.

Call Star reporter Stephanie Wang at (317) 444-6914.

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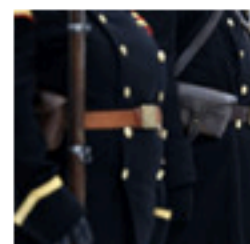
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