



Pennsylvania Migrant Education Program: Effectively Assisting At-Risk Children and Youths

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One of my memorable experiences as interim dean of the then School of Education at Millersville University (MU) was attending the annual statewide ceremony held in

Harrisburg for migrant youths graduating from high school. These students represented numerous ethnic backgrounds each with their native tongue, including Chin, Burmese, Nepali, and Spanish to name a few. What they had in common was that each one of them had received services provided by the Pennsylvania Migrant Education Program (PA-MEP). In this article, I will describe the program, highlight the benefits to students and their families, and suggest how aspects of this model might inform our work in education.

The following is a definition of the term “migrant child”: “A migrant child is defined as a child age 3–21 who has moved across a school district line with/ or to join a migrant parent or guardian, or on their own, within the preceding 36 months, in order to obtain temporary or seasonal employment in qualifying agricultural or fishing work including agri-related businesses such as meat or vegetable processing” (Pennsylvania Department of Education [PDE], 2015, p. 2). As might be gleaned from the definition, this group of children is at risk for poor educational outcomes due to instruction interruption and other factors that often include low socioeconomic status as well as language differences and cultural barriers. In 1966, the U.S. Congress recognized the special needs of this population and established the MEP program as part of the Elementary

and Secondary Education Act in order to assure that “all migrant students achieve challenging academic standards and graduate with at high school diploma (or complete a GED), and upon graduation are prepared for responsible citizenship, further learning, and productive employment” (U.S. Department of Education, 2015).

According to 2013–2014 Pennsylvania Department of Education data, Pennsylvania is home to 2,874 migrant families and 5,343 migrant children. Of the children enrolled in the PA-MEP, 100% receive free or reduced lunch and 16% are considered homeless, moving on average 5–10 times a year. Of migrant families being served, 75%–90% have a combined income of \$10,000 or less and 80%–97% of migrant parents do not have a high school diploma (PDE, 2016a).

Children and youths enrolled in this program come from nine project areas of Pennsylvania. These areas are further organized into five service areas. MU houses the area that serves children and families from Lancaster, Berks, Northampton, and Lehigh counties. The director, Mr. Damaso Albino, is a retired urban high school principal with a passion for serving migrant children and youths. Under his leadership, his service area has seen substantial growth, meaning more children having access to services that include tutorial programs, after-school extended hours, summer programs, in-home programs, health and social support services, language arts, and enrichment.

As Mr. Albino’s university supervisor, I learned of the extensive efforts made by PA-MEP staff to serve migrant children. Eligible children have access to preschool programs and arrangements are made with local schools and churches to find space for the programs. Most recently,

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MU has allocated space within the education building that not only serves the children but supports interaction with MU faculty and students. School-aged children have access to after-school programs, summer camps, and leadership institutes. I was impressed with Mr. Albino’s advocacy and commitment to using evidenced-based curricula. At the secondary level, youths participate in the Diploma Toolkit Project, where program staff works with students and their families to educate them about what is needed to graduate from high school and to help plan for postsecondary education (PDE, 2013).

Recently, PA-MEP has collaborated with MU to bring the College Assistance Migrant Program (CAMP) to the institution through a 5-year grant from the Office of Elementary and Secondary Education (U.S. Department of Education, 2017a). This program provides financial aid, academic services, and family support to migrant children who received MEP services at some point in their pre-K to 12 experience and are accepted to the institution. Both the Millersville CAMP director and a future recruiter are former MEP students and graduates from CAMP programs. An essential component of the MEP program is family involvement. Parents and



caregivers are included in every phase of student delivery. MEP counselors go directly to the homes to provide services and to connect families with community-based organizations. Each project area has an elected Parent Advisory Council whose members participate in capacity building activities to enable them to represent parent concerns, attend state-wide meetings, and evaluate the program (PDE, 2016b).

The keys functions of MEP staff are to identify, recruit, and serve. Identifying and recruiting eligible children requires building relationships with employers who hire migrant workers. Staffers go the employment sites, often out to the fields or on the factory floor, to find migrant workers with children (U.S. Department of Education, 2017b). These migrant workers are not asked about U.S. citizenship as the services that are being provided through the PA-MEP are educational and directed to children. Mr. Albino did report, however, for certain pockets of workers geographically closer to the Washington, DC, area who are undocumented, there has been a scattering of workers as Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) has targeted this group. He also indicated that Lehigh County status as a sanctuary county may be challenged with recent Executive Office decisions.

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The MEP fills the gaps of educational needs that often outstrip the resources of school districts. Not only are families invited to participate in their children's education; they are actively recruited in this endeavor through at home visits and the PACs. I wonder how such focused service delivery would work with other at-risk students such as English Language Learners whose parents' employment status would not make them eligible. This brings me back to the graduation ceremonies. A student from each service area is selected to tell his or her story. Their experiences often include refugee camps, challenging relocation experiences in Pennsylvania, and the importance of the PA-MEP and their public school educators to support their future aspirations of postsecondary education. The resilience and potential for future excellence exemplified by these students is inspiring, despite overwhelming odds.

I am a strong advocate of the MEP and am paying close attention to future federal budget allocations. We cannot afford to lose a program that provides such benefit to some of our most vulnerable constituents. NV

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