

Professor Creates Comic Book for Educators to Address Student Homelessness in K-12

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Professor Kessa Roberts

Professor Kessa Roberts from the Emma Eccles Jones College of Education and Human Services (CEHS) collaborated with researchers at Southern Methodist University (SMU) in a unique way to communicate with educators about a serious topic—student homelessness.

The research team developed the project with funding from a grant from the Spencer Foundation that asked researchers to communicate research findings to educational stakeholders via non-traditional methods. The research team felt strongly that their data should be presented through a communication tool outside of the normal research papers and journals. They determined that a comic book has the ability to capture the reader's attention in small, concise vignettes, which helps the message be readily absorbed.

After conducting numerous interviews with families about their experiences with homelessness as well as with school personnel and community service providers, the stories needed to be presented in a way that depicted the messages from the voice of the student. *Uprooted: Voices of Student Homelessness* is the result of these researchers' efforts to best present the stories to K-12 educators.

For many, homelessness may evoke images of single, adult men living on the streets. However, just beneath the surface of this stereotype is the plight of over a million K-12 students whose lives have been uprooted

by homelessness—like *Uprooted* characters Jackie, Angel, Ben, and Kayla. In reality, these students' lived experiences are diverse, and they spend their days and nights in many different settings. The stories told in *Uprooted* describe the realities of many students who experience homelessness and how their lives are impacted in U.S. schools.



Dr. Kessa Roberts discuss student homelessness with faculty and staff of the Edith Bowen Laboratory School in Logan, Utah.

"The purpose of *Uprooted* is to provide an awareness of students experiencing homelessness as well as to dispel some of the myths around the experience of homelessness itself," shared Roberts. "*Uprooted* is the result of several years of research with a collaborative research team. I personally interviewed 19 parents currently experiencing homelessness about their experiences. We also interviewed school leaders and other school personnel responsible for supporting students and families as well as community service providers such as food pantry workers, shelter staff, and domestic violence prevention personnel."

With the rest of the research team based in Dallas and the data collected in the Houston area, the project began in Texas, but *Uprooted* has already had a nationwide impact with a wide distribution of physical and digital copies of the comic. Serving as co-principal investigator on the Spencer Foundation grant, Roberts works collaboratively with two SMU researchers on the project.

Roberts, who joined the USU faculty in the School of Teacher Education and Leadership in 2022, is now working to bring the research and comic book to Utah. A 2024 report from the National Center for Homelessness Education shows that during the 2022–23 school year more than 13,000 Utah students had experienced some level of homelessness.

"The comic book is a professional development tool for educators," says Roberts. "Our goal is to get as many comic books as possible into the hands of teachers and other school personnel who support students. To

support use of the comic as a training tool, we are creating professional development modules, which will help to facilitate training with a wide range of educators.”

In March, Roberts met with teachers and Principal Nate Justis at the Edith Bowen Laboratory School, a K-6 public charter school located on the USU Logan campus. Teachers were able to share their experiences of working with students who were or had experienced homelessness and then provide feedback on *Uprooted* to Roberts.

For additional information on *Uprooted: Voices of Student Homelessness* or to request a comic book, visit the Uprooted [webpage](#).