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## Bootstrap Blues

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# Bootstrap Blues

## Abstract

Meet David\*. In mid-January, he came to the small town Iowa elementary school where I work. David has attended more schools in the two years since he started school than I have in my lifetime. In fact, the school he just moved from only has four days of attendance listed on his record. David moves so often because he's homeless. His situation is not what we may stereotypically think of as "homeless"—you wouldn't see him on the streets or even in soup kitchens. Instead, David stays with his mother, and they couch surf from one home to another from week to week. David and his mother are part of a mounting statistic that tells us that [41 percent of the homeless population includes families](#).

## Keywords

Surge, Surge Gettysburg, Gettysburg College, Center for Public Service, homeless, poverty, school, education

## Disciplines

Education | Educational Sociology | Gifted Education | Home Economics | Income Distribution | Inequality and Stratification | Social Welfare

## Comments

Surge is a student blog at [Gettysburg College](#) where systemic issues of justice matter. Posts are originally published at [surgegettysburg.wordpress.com](#) Through stories and reflection, these blog entries relate personal experiences to larger issues of equity, demonstrating that -isms are structural problems, not actions defined by individual prejudice. We intend to popularize justice, helping each other to recognize our biases and unlearn the untruths.

# SURGE

[ VERB ] : to move suddenly or powerfully forward or upward

## BOOTSTRAP BLUES

March 3, 2014

Meet David\*. In mid-January, he came to the small town Iowa elementary school where I work. David has attended more schools in the two years since he started school than I have in my lifetime. In fact, the school he just moved from only has four days of attendance listed on his record. David moves so often because he's homeless. His situation is not what we may stereotypically think of as "homeless"—you wouldn't see him on the streets or even in soup kitchens. Instead, David stays with his mother, and they couch surf from one home to another from week to week. David and his mother are part of a mounting statistic that tells us that [41 percent of the homeless population includes families](#).

I've never seen David turn in his homework. But when you consider that David, by first grade, never learned to write his words on a line or how to add properly, can you really blame him? His homelessness has hindered his learning, and both he and I have noticed. On Martin Luther King Jr. Day, David's class shared their dreams for the world. David's read, "My dream is for everyone to have a home because I haven't always had one and I know that it's really important."

Two days ago, David told me that he and his mother had moved into a new house. While it doesn't yet have heat or beds, he was bursting with excitement over having a home that he could call his. But his home is in a new school district, so he'll be switching schools again by the end of the week. And so, the struggle continues.

The U.S. is the "land of opportunity," right? This country is the foundation for the "American Dream." We believe that every individual can make it on her or his own with enough hard work. But I ask you this: How can we expect someone like David to "pull himself up by his bootstraps" and "tough it out"? He's just a kid—one stuck with a set of challenges that exceed the possibility of being overcome by almost anyone, no less a seven year old. Our emphasis in this country has for so long been on individual achievement, but it simply isn't realistic to place that kind of pressure on a person like David who lacks systematic support. The problem with our system, in the [words of Allan G. Johnson](#), is that "...antipoverty programs are not organized around a sociological understanding of how systems produce poverty in the first place." If the system is what has failed David and his mother, then whose responsibility is it to give them the opportunities to succeed but our own?



Much of the solution lies within our schools. We've all heard the old phrase "it takes a village," but I believe that holds true now more than ever. It takes a community to come together and support its children, and schools are at the very core of our communities. Schools have the unique privilege of molding the minds of the future generations and have the responsibility to ensure that our children have the opportunity to succeed.

Yet, I've watched David's teacher scold him and keep him in from recess to get his work done. I've watched his classmates roll their eyes in frustration when his confusion about a subject keeps them from moving on to the next unit. It's easy to become frustrated and I've caught myself falling into the trap of considering him a "bad kid." But, I've never had to learn on an empty stomach, and I've never had to return to a "home" after school that was unfamiliar and constantly in flux. But if educators and policy makers can look beyond an individual's behavior, they can begin to shape educational institutions to foster greater success for students just like David.

Schools often have [an enormous capacity](#) to stabilize the tumultuous lifestyles of many students. A singular classroom, a set of familiar faces, at least two guaranteed meals, and a consistent schedule can make all of the difference for a student who can rely on none of those things in his or her home life. Temporary housing paired with the social anxieties that switching schools creates for kids—not to mention the ["challenge of completing homework and class assignments in such an uncertain environment,"](#)—prove to us that perhaps receiving a meaningful education isn't as simple to achieve as those of us with privilege have experienced.

David is part the 10 to 20 percent of public school students who [switch school districts at least once](#) during the academic year. If those numbers are so high, shouldn't the resources available to these students match their demand? The reality is that they don't. Instead, these children's stories only color the finely plotted bar graphs that represent our schools' "underachieving" test scores. Their stories are lost in a blur of impersonal policy and political discussion.

But, schools systems can step in to create stability and a positive environment for all. Imagine if schools were a major partner of national anti-poverty programs. Parents, like David's, are often challenged by having to navigate multiple bureaucratic systems to seek support for housing, food, transportation or financial support. Dealing with multiple agencies in different locations and requiring different application processes can be [overwhelming](#). Streamlining the process by allowing schools to be a central connection point can support families, and therefore children and classrooms.

On countless occasions I've heard educators claim, "It's out of my hands; I've done all that I can do." Well, I'm calling their bluff. There are infinite possibilities for what we can do. We should be focused on the student and know that the smallest actions such as providing a clean set of clothes or a granola bar can make a difference in a child's school day. Yet, we should also educate ourselves and think strategically to develop comprehensive strategies to affect change. Use that sense of individual duty instilled by our nation to make change in our communities rather than to simply achieve personal success.

Know that David is out there, with thousands just like him, and we should use our education and privilege to ensure that he doesn't have to pull himself up by his bootstraps. Because at seven years old, he's only got Velcro to work with.

***\*Name has been changed.***

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<http://surgegettysburg.wordpress.com/2014/03/03/bootstrap-blues/>