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Teacher, My Dad Lost His Job. Do We Have to Move?



Andrew Spear for The New York Times

Trinity Frank and other second graders at Wilson Hill Elementary in Worthington, Ohio, a town where the number of children getting subsidized lunches has risen.

By MICHAEL WINERIP
Published: January 30, 2011

WORTHINGTON, Ohio — Diane and Eric Kehler tried not to talk about it in front of the children, but as Jen Hegerty, the guidance counselor at Wilson Hill Elementary School, says, "Children have eagle ears."

Enlarge This Image



Andrew Spear for The New York Times

"I was worried and scared and very worried," recalls Leah Kehler, a fourth grader who told a teacher her second-worst fear.

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Mr. Kehler lost his \$90,000-a-year job as an information technology manager. And though he and his wife discussed their problems in whispers, eagle ears don't miss much. Their son Mathias, 12, a quiet, cerebral sixth grader at Wilson Hill, got quieter. "Our house was sort of in a state of despair. We weren't as happy as usual," Mathias said. "I stopped having good ideas to talk about with my friends."

Mrs. Kehler has a college degree but had chosen to be a stay-at-home mother. That ended. She took a job at

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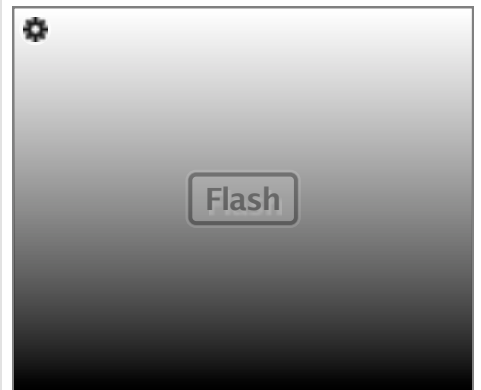
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Andrew Spear for The New York Times

Eliot Frank, in his kindergarten class in Ohio, had some trouble with his behavior, but he has recently made a comeback

McDonald's to cover the cost of groceries. At school, Mathias and his sister, Leah, a fourth grader, qualified for reduced-price lunches.

Keeping all that worry bottled up hurt. While Leah would not tell anyone her worst fear, she told her speech teacher, Shelley Smith, the second worst: that her family would have to move away and Leah would lose her friends. "I was worried and scared and very worried," recalled Leah, who's 10.

She chose Mrs. Smith to tell because the two have the same, exact birthday and every year they celebrate by

eating Mrs. Smith's homemade cupcakes. "She was just the right person," Leah said. "She's very calm."

The Kehlers have lots of company. While Wall Street is pumping, Main Street bleeds. This middle- to upper-middle-class suburban town of 14,000 bordering Columbus has 22 percent of its students getting subsidized lunches. That's up from 6 percent in 2005, when the economy was booming.

Statewide, 43 percent of Ohio public school students are disadvantaged, as measured by free and reduced lunches, compared with 33 percent in 2005, according to a recent survey by KidsOhio, a nonprofit educational organization based in Columbus. A sign of how deep this recession has reached into the middle class: here in Franklin County, 44 percent of the disadvantaged attend suburban schools, compared with 32 percent five years ago.

There may be other factors involved, including an increase of poorer families moving out of Columbus to the suburbs. But many here — the KidsOhio researchers; the superintendent of Worthington schools, Melissa Conrath; the principal of Wilson Hill, Jamie Lusher — agree that the recession's impact has played a large part.

A few houses down from the Kehlers on Deer Creek Drive, Bill Cameron, who has three children in high school, has been out of work for two years since losing his \$119,000-a-year job as a manager at American Electric Power.

Over on Eastland Court, Grace Koo and her now ex-husband, who have two children at Wilson Hill, were both laid off and went from making about \$160,000 a year to zero. Ms. Koo, who had been a store design and construction director for Limited Brands, attributed the divorce to many things gone wrong, including their sinking economic status. "For months, both of us were home together, unemployed," she said. "We'd fight over money."

On Buck Trail Lane, the Hymers went from \$150,000 a year to zero. Their son, Zachary, a second grader, and their daughter, Kennedy, who's in fourth, qualified for reduced-priced lunches. The Hislopes on Friend Street also qualified for reduced-priced lunches, but as things worsened — the father, Mike, a shop foreman, has been out of work two years — they qualified for free lunches.

Recently Worthington got its first soup kitchen.

The emotional strain on children is plain from the names of the support groups the guidance counselor, Ms. Hegerty, has created: the Chicken Little group; the Volcano Management group; the Family Change group.

Even as the district's budget gets cut and class sizes in the school's fourth and fifth grades creep up to 30, the staff at Wilson Hill works to make a difference. While Washington measures a school's worth by test scores, here, on Northland Street, there's more to it.

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A few weeks before Christmas, a girl in Mrs. Smith's class went to school with broken eyeglasses patched together with tape. Each time the girl looked down to read, the glasses fell off. This is a small town, and Mrs. Smith knew the girl's family was struggling. At 9 a.m., Mrs. Smith asked to borrow the glasses; during her lunch period she drove to her eye doctor; by 12:30 the girl had new pink and green frames.

Because the guidance counselor position is split between two schools, Ms. Hegerty gets overloaded and has found two unpaid interns from nearby universities to help with the caseload.

Most children this age can't verbalize what's wrong, and Ms. Hegerty watches their worries seep out in the guise of other problems. "Separation anxiety, nightmares, bed wetting," she rattles them off, "Obsessive behavior, won't stay in own bed, acting out at school, acting out at home."

Ms. Koo's daughter, Trinity, a second grader, scratched her arms so much they bled. Trinity's brother, Eliot, was misbehaving in kindergarten.

Ms. Hegerty showed them how to make worry envelopes to store their fears. She gave them a buckeye to carry in their pockets. "If you're feeling bad, you hold it," said Trinity, who's stopped scratching. "You think about stuff, and then 'O.K., this is over now, I'm fine.'"

Every day, Eliot's teacher, Regina Malley, starts off each kindergartner with five cubes. If you're bad, she takes away a cube. But if you hold on to all five cubes for the day, you get one prize ticket. After 10 tickets, you get to turn on the classroom computer and sit in the big chair ("It elevates them above everybody," Mrs. Malley said). Thirty tickets and you get the grand prize, lunch alone with Mrs. Malley.

For a few days, Eliot was stuck on nine tickets. "Poor Eliot lost a cube today," Mrs. Malley reported. "He banged a kid on the back of the head."

And then Eliot made a comeback, earning two tickets in two days. As Mrs. Malley promised, he got to sit in the big chair and was loudly applauded.

Mrs. Malley has taught kindergarten in the same room for 31 years, and in that time she's learned a thing or two about little boys. She predicts good things for Eliot. "Eliot's very bright," she said. "Even if he listens 50 percent of the time, he's getting 75 percent more than other kids."

While several parents interviewed for this column eventually got jobs, no one was making anything near their old salaries. The Hislopes, Hymers and Kehlrs are making half. Ms. Koo is making a third. Mrs. Hislope's two daughters have been able to continue playing sports because their schools waived participation fees and the sports booster clubs helped. The Hislopes were one of 10 families that the middle school picked to give \$300 toward Christmas.

It was only during a visit from a reporter that Mrs. Kehler heard Leah tell her worst fear. "I instantly thought we'd be homeless," Leah said. Every fall the school takes part in the Penny Harvest, collecting for the homeless, and Leah feared that the next harvest would be for her family.

"Really?" Mrs. Kehler said. Like mother like daughter. This was Mrs. Kehler's worst fear, too.

"I didn't know how we'd survive," she said. "I was afraid we'd be homeless under an underpass in Columbus and the kids would go into [foster care](#)."

When, after many months, Mr. Kehler could not find work, they bought a print cartridge recycling business. It's off to a promising start. The first year, the Kehlrs outperformed the previous owner. "We're up 18 percent," Mrs. Kehler said.

Eagle ears still hear almost everything, but thankfully, for the last several months, what they hear has not sounded so dire. “When Dad and Mom talked, they were getting calmer,” Mathias said. “We’re definitely higher than we were.”

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A version of this article appeared in print on January 31, 2011, on page A9 of the New York edition.

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