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Third-grade teacher Jill Belch works with student Gwyndolynn Wagner at W.T. Cooke Elementary, where about 15 percent of students don't have permanent homes.

Stability, support make these four walls more than a school

By Lauren Roth
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VIRGINIA BEACH

Jill Belch, a third-grade teacher at W.T. Cooke Elementary School, doesn't know what her roster will look like when classes begin in a few weeks. But she knows it will change.

"You're always whiting someone out, or crossing someone out of the grade book," Belch said.

About 15 percent of Cooke's students don't have permanent homes, and as much as 50 to 60 percent of the student body turns over in a sin-

gle year, more than double the rate at most Beach schools, even those with large military populations.

Located four blocks from the ocean, Cooke draws many students whose families are taking advantage of low, offseason motel rates. Many are forced to move during the school year as rates rise with demand.

Before school opened last year, Belch was surprised to find Gwyndolynn Wagner on her roster. She knew the Wagner family must have been

the school

W.T. Cooke Elementary School provides food, clothing, book bags and school supplies for students in need, and it sends free taxis to pick up children who move out of its zone midyear. It also has an after-school club.

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SCHOOL AIMS TO LEVEL THE PLAYING FIELD

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paying summer rates at their Oceanfront motel, and she knew Cooke had the resources to help the third-grader.

Patricia Popp, Virginia's coordinator for the education of homeless children and youth, said Virginia Beach and Cooke have programs that are among the best in the state for transient students.

The school provides food, clothing, book bags and school supplies for students in need. Of the 583 students in the school, nearly half qualify for free or reduced-price lunches. Decades before the school lunch program, the PTA offered free soup lunches to children who needed them.

The school sends free taxis to pick up children who have moved out of its zone mid-year. And after school, Cooke has something it calls Anchor Club, which for the past seven years has provided activities and support for students who live in shared or temporary housing.

"What's our address?" second-grader Dillon Wagner called to his big sister across a classroom set aside for Anchor Club.

"MacThrift, that's all I know," said Gwyndolynn, naming a 22nd Street motel popular with families.

Their father, Rodney Wagner, called Cooke a "fantastic" place for his two youngest children.

For two years, the Wagner family shared a room at the motel just west of Pacific Avenue. The parents paid weekly rates of \$375 during the summer to avoid disrupting the lives of their three children with a move.

Without an oven, it was hard for the youngsters to get home-cooked meals, he said. Study space was scarce, and there was no place to play.

Anchor Club provided homework help, dinner and enough time at the recreational center for a few games of Duck, Duck, Goose and some tosses with a basketball.

The program will run twice a week again this fall, and for the second year, a parallel program will run two other days at Virginia Beach United Methodist Church on 19th Street. The partnership gives students four days a week of after-school programs.

Belch said the club helps level the playing field.

"I have to do a lot individually with these kids," she said. "I don't know what they're going home to, so I want to make it as pleasant as I can when they're here."

Energy pulsed through Belch's sunny third-grade classroom.

On each wood-grain desk in her room near the library, an apple-size Tupperware container held bunches of arcade-style red tickets.

The students' ticket piles were hard won. Clean desks, quick bathroom trips and timely homework assignments earned tickets. Talking out of turn or forgetting a parent's signature meant losing a ticket. Stacks could be turned in for small prizes.

Belch said new students easily learned the expectations of the classroom through the ticket system.

Since at least 2004, Cooke's third-graders have performed well on state tests.

Their pass rates on state Standards of Learning tests were above state and city averages in 2006, when more than 83 percent of Cooke's homeless third-



Teacher Jill Belch won an award from the National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth for work with students such as Gwyndolynn Wagner, above.



A bus from Anchor Club, a Cooke Elementary after-school program, takes students to the Beach motels where their families rent rooms. The club provides dinner and homework help, as well as fun.

state tests

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More than 83 percent of Cooke's homeless third-graders passed state reading and math tests that year.

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When city schools hired B.J. McGrath as a social worker for homeless students 10 years ago, the Oceanfront was one of her first stops.

"I saw kids at the hotels playing on the roof, in the staircases or sitting in front of the TV," McGrath said. That observation helped spur the start of Anchor Club seven years ago.

Belch became involved a year later. For her work with Anchor Club, she won an award last year from the National Association



Catherine Ennis, a Cooke Elementary teacher, helps Connor Drollinger during Anchor Club. The program will run twice a week this fall.

for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth.

Under the federal definition, "homeless" is a broad term that encompasses students living in shared housing, motels, cars and shelters.

At Cooke, that includes about 90 youngsters.

"I feel like the rest of the kids at this school from the middle- and upper-class backgrounds have a solid foundation," Belch said. "My job is to be supportive of these kids who don't necessarily have it all the time."

Belch provides stability amidst the constant change.

ember. Daylene didn't know it yet, but she would move again in a few days, leaving Cooke and Belch behind once more.

Belch called the constant stream of departures "heart-breaking."

"You don't know where they're going," she said. "You don't get to say goodbye to them. You hope that their new teacher is able to give them the attention they got at Anchor Club or in the classroom."

Belch's classroom roster changes from month to month.

Some years, "it always seemed like I was ordering new books," she said. New students would arrive through February.

Belch, 30, has taught for six years, all at Cooke. A product of Virginia Beach schools, she graduated from Ocean Lakes High School in 1995.

Last year, her first as a third-grade teacher, the pattern was different. She started the fall with 20 students. Her class dropped to 14 by June. One boy stayed only a few days.

So many students leave the school unexpectedly that the librarians halt circulation over holiday breaks.

One of three who left Belch's class in the spring was Gwyndolynn Wagner.

Her dad had found a three-bedroom trailer for the family in North Carolina. "It has some land and a creek behind it," Rodney Wagner said. "I can teach them how to fish."

He said he regretted the timing but had no choice.

On Gwyndolynn's last day, classmates gathered around to sign the back of her T-shirt.

She was excited about the move but said she would miss "everything" about Cooke. "The people, the teachers."

That's why she had them write all over her shirt.

"I wanted to remember them," Gwyndolynn said.

Belch also wants her students to remember Cooke.

At the end of the school year, Belch sent each remaining child

home with a laminated yellow card. At the bottom of the page, she had printed a picture of herself with that child.

Above it was an anonymous poem:

"I give you back your child, the same child you confidently entrusted to my care last fall. I give him back pounds heavier, inches taller, months wiser, more responsible, and more mature than he was then.

"Although he would have attained his growth in spite of me, it has been my pleasure and privilege to watch his personality unfold day by day and marvel at this splendid miracle of development."

The poem ends: "I shall always be his friend."

As Cooke gears up for fall, faces also are changing in the school office. Greg Anderson, who was assistant principal at Cooke for four years and principal for 14 years, has been transferred to Landstown Elementary.

The new principal, Barbara Sessoms, has headed five Beach schools. "I kind of can relate," she said.

Meeting the needs of transient students will be among her top priorities at Cooke. One change will be making all kindergarten classes full day, she said. In the past, many transient students arrived in October after room rates dropped and full-day classes were filled.

Sessoms' previous school was Birdneck Elementary, about a mile southwest of Cooke.

In one of the past three years, Birdneck's transiency rate surpassed Cooke's. That school faces turnover from military deployments, evictions and homelessness.

"It's tough on kids when they go and come and they're uprooted and need to make new friends," Sessoms said. "You do the best for children when you have them."

