



Empowerment Academies:

How to Host a Back-to-School Event that Educates Homeless Students and Families on Available Support

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Executive Summary

Empowerment Academies – a cornerstone of CapCityKids' programming – are day-long events that focus on back-to-school readiness for homeless students while providing their families with information about community resources. At the core of an Empowerment Academy's mission is to connect with people in a safe, fun and informative environment.

CapCityKids (CCK), formally known as the Capital City Fund for Education, is a non-profit 501(c)3, co-founded by Joslyn Dobson, that provides children facing homelessness with tool they need to receive a quality education.

Empowerment Academies started by fulfilling a need to provide homeless students with a quality backpack and grade-appropriate school supplies. The event has since expanded to encourage homeless families to engage with helpful programs in their community – all in a lively, carnival-like atmosphere that doubles as a place for people to relax, see friends from school and take care of items on the back-to-school checklist.

CapCityKids has expanded its Empowerment Academy model to fit the needs of the community at other key dates throughout the year. The purpose of this white paper is to document the growth and success of Empowerment Academies so that other organizations and corporations can replicate the events in their own communities.



Outline

1. Overview

2. Keys to a Successful Empowerment Academy

3. How to Engage the Community

4. Conclusion



1. Overview

Hurricane Katrina and the influx of homeless youth into Austin was the catalyst for founding CapCityKids. But it also highlighted a very specific need in the greater Austin community – for homeless youth to have backpacks filled with quality school supplies.

“Katrina planted the seed that kids always need backpacks,” shared Cathy Requejo, the former homeless school liaison for the Austin Independent School District. From this small but important need, CapCityKids and Requejo started brainstorming how to best serve the community. Thus, Empowerment Academies – day-long events that served the homeless population by providing backpacks, school supplies, community resources, information about social services, food and games – were born.

Empowerment Academies were established as a partnership between CapCityKids and the homeless school liaison – a federally mandated position in every school district. Liaisons are responsible for ensuring that their district identifies and supports students experiencing homelessness.

Both the homeless school liaison and CapCityKids work to ensure that the event meets the specific needs of the target population. When replicating this model, a corporation should take on the role of CapCityKids, working in partnership with the homeless school liaison to host a successful Empowerment Academy.

The following breakdown of responsibilities has proven to most effectively maximize each organization’s resources.

RESPONSIBILITIES OF THE HOMELESS SCHOOL LIAISON:

- Identifying homeless students and families
- Site selection and resource for relevant contacts
- Marketing the event to families who would most benefit to encourage attendance

RESPONSIBILITIES OF CAPCITYKIDS:

- Outreach to local businesses to encourage participation through sponsorships
- Coordination of volunteers
- Putting together backpacks with back-to-school supplies

Although the back-to-school event is the flagship Empowerment Academy program, CapCityKids has expanded the model to help families in need throughout the year. Most recently, they’ve hosted a holiday-themed event where kids receive warm coats and toys; and they enjoy winter-themed treats and programming. An important part of the winter events is giving gift cards to older teens, who are often overlooked during the holiday season.

Visit nche.ed.gov/data and click on your preferred state to identify your local homeless school liaison.

CAP CITY *kids*

How to host an EMPOWERMENT ACADEMY

STEP 1:

Connect with the local
homeless school liaison

STEP 2:

Identify homeless students
and families in need

STEP 3:

Select an easily accessible
site for the event

STEP 4:

Determine event needs
and useful programming

STEP 5:

Outreach to the
community! Find
volunteers, donations
and resources

STEP 6:

Market the event to
people who would most
benefit

STEP 7:

Host the event!

STEP 8:

Thank volunteers and
local businesses

STEP 9:

Regroup and plan
for next year's
Empowerment Academy





2. Keys to a Successful Empowerment Academy

A successful Empowerment Academy helps to even the playing field for homeless students as they embark on their new school year.

“The quality of these events is important,” says Perla Carranza, Joslyn Dobson’s former executive assistant who helped organize the Empowerment Academies for CapCityKids for six years. **“We’re providing quality to a marginalized population that doesn’t get to experience that often.”**

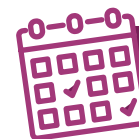
CapCityKids’ Empowerment Academies cost about \$4,000 per year, with the majority of the budget going toward school supplies. However, this number can fluctuate based on the number of donated goods and services. Securing event partnerships and taking advantage of seasonal sales are both ways to keep costs low without sacrificing quality.

There is no official programming, although it’s important to have a balance of helpful information and fun entertainment. Homeless school liaisons can help determine community needs; as well as items and events to include as a part of the day. People can come and go at leisure, as well as focus on the activities and resources that are most useful to them. The overall keys to a successful Empowerment Academy are:

BACKPACKS AND GRADE-APPROPRIATE SCHOOL SUPPLIES

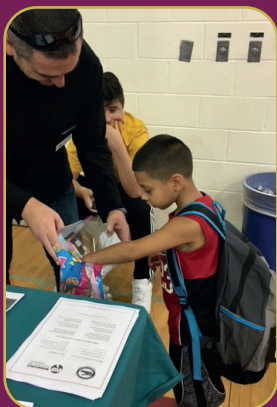
A cornerstone of an Empowerment Academy is providing students with quality backpacks that contain grade-appropriate items for the school year. This was the biggest spend, shares Perla; and an area that would benefit from multiple volunteers before the event to ensure that the budget goes as far as possible. Perla would research each item on the back-to-school lists for each grade to find the best deal, mindful that they could be in-store instead of online. Volunteers would then pack the backpacks with the school supplies. If the event is sponsored by a business, preparing the backpacks has the added benefit of encouraging corporate bonding.

Carranza ordered backpacks in a variety of colors and styles so that kids could have choices; and so that no one backpack style could identify a child as homeless. **“Getting to choose something when you don’t often have a choice is a big thing,”** shares Carranza.



COORDINATION WITH OTHER EVENTS IN THE COMMUNITY

Empowerment Academies should not be held on the same date as other back-to-school events in the city. This allows homeless families to have multiple opportunities to attend events. It’s important to note that an Empowerment Academy is essential even if there are similar events in the community. **“There’s always a need,”** says Carranza..





IDENTIFY HOMELESS STUDENTS AND FAMILIES



MARKET TO THOSE WHO WOULD MOST BENEFIT

TARGETED MARKETING

Homeless school liaisons are responsible for ensuring that their district identifies and supports students experiencing homelessness. They are integral in recognizing families who would most benefit from attending an Empowerment Academy. Working together with the school district, the homeless school liaison can help create communications to send to specific families, while being mindful of a student's privacy and confidentiality. Outreach also included posting flyers in homeless shelters.

COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT, ACCESS TO SOCIAL SERVICES AND CONSISTENCY

Empowerment Academies help homeless students and their families feel engaged with their community while fulfilling unmet needs and helping to connect them with local resources including available social services like places where they can get food, childcare and medical assistance. Empowerment Academies also allowed these families to have a fun day, with kid-focused activities from local businesses that include face painting, sports clinics, arts and crafts, and more. In Austin, organizations that set up booths to share information about available resources include Workforce Solutions, Goodwill Industries, Region 13 Homeless Services, Mis Cuentas, Foundation Communities and the YMCA.

It's also important to maintain as much consistency as possible year-over-year, as this will help to establish Empowerment Academies in the community and lead to increased attendance. For example, it could be helpful to have the Empowerment Academies at the same site each year; to have it around the same time each year; and to have the same core resources and goods available.



ARTS & CRAFTS



SPORTS CLINICS





VOLUNTEER TRAINING

VOLUNTEERS

At the core of an Empowerment Academy is connecting with people, and it takes a village of volunteers to make that happen. **“The more smiling faces we can have, the better,”** says Perla, who also emphasized that volunteers should not focus on feeling sorry for the attendees, but rather to celebrate that they’re here to get ready for school.

“There are a lot of tired parents who attend these events – they’re struggling with financial issues, maybe they’re exhausted after an entire summer working several jobs and tending to their kids – it’s important to connect with them, to send a message that we’re happy to see them there and to build these relationships,” says Carranza.

Volunteers are helpful in event setup, including packing the backpacks, and with on-site assistance. All-in, each CCK Empowerment Academy averages 40-50 volunteers, but this can be scaled based on the size of the event.

Volunteer training would also be ideal in order to educate the volunteers about why they’re there and what an Empowerment Academy seeks to accomplish. It could be useful to share information about words to say and not to say; how to react if someone tells you a personal story; and how to direct people to available resources. **“Volunteers take on a lot at these events, and it would be helpful to have training on how to respond empathetically while still maintaining boundaries,”** says Carranza.

SPACE AND TRANSPORTATION

As a school employee, the homeless school liaison has access to school buildings as a space to host an Empowerment Academy. **“Schools are great because you could use the classrooms, the cafeteria and the hallways for various setups and resources,”** says Requejo. Schools are also set up to host large-scale events, as they have custodial staff, security, etc...; and a school venue can help to drive home the idea that schools are a positive place for both fun and learning. Of course, Empowerment Academies can be held in other spaces, including libraries, community centers and private event venues. In general CapCityKids was responsible for the day-of set up, but choosing a space that has resources like tables and chairs is helpful. Organizations were welcome to bring a tablecloth, giveaways and any other decor or information.

A key component when selecting a venue is ensuring that it’s accessible to the majority of the population that will attend. This could mean making sure it’s on a local public transportation line; or even providing transportation. **“One year we worked with the Austin Independent School District to provide school buses for the day,”** says Carranza. **“We had 2-3 pickup sites throughout the city that the liaison identified as key areas where transportation was a barrier.”**



SCHOOL BUILDINGS
ARE GREAT TO HOST



PROVIDE TRANSPORT
FOR THE DAY



SUPPORT THEIR
COMMUNITY



FUN



EDUCATIONAL



3. How to Engage the Community

In organizing the events and gathering community resources, Carranza abided by two guiding principles:

1. Listen to the community in order to provide them with activities and programming that they need and enjoy; and
2. “Ask and you shall receive.”

“If you don’t ask, you’re never going to know,” says Carranza. **“If a business is unable to give you something for free, pivot your strategy and ask if they’d be willing to share their services at a discount. The return for them is they get to serve their community, which is usually important to them – that’s always the heart of my conversation. Generally, businesses are happy to help however they can.”**

In addition, CapCityKids helped to encourage local business participation by providing such resources as: Taking photos of the event and providing the business with a certificate of appreciation; providing tax identification information, so that businesses are able to document their donations; and offering to promote the business on CapCityKids’ social media.

With help from the homeless school liaisons, Carranza and her team of volunteers brainstormed ways to make the events fun and educational for families.



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TAKING PHOTOS
OF THE EVENT



CERTIFICATE OF
APPRECIATION



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4. Impact and Expansion

Since launching in Austin, CapCityKids has brought Empowerment Academies to Phoenix, Chandler, Atlanta, Tampa and Bastrop.

In 2024, CCK packed a total of 1,783 backpacks, with 1,281 going to kids in upper school and 502 for students in lower school; as well as 1,302 hygiene kits with items such as shampoo, conditioner and deodorant. All extra supplies were donated to Bastrop County Cares, a nonprofit organization that brings people together to solve community challenges, including supporting children in underserved, rural communities.

Abby Ogan currently runs the Empowerment Academies from Austin. As the program has grown, she requests a head volunteer at each of the Amherst offices to coordinate the on-site activities. This person is in charge of checking deliveries, taking inventory of what has arrived, and setting it aside for when the larger team of volunteers can pack the backpacks. Ogan has created a playbook to assist with satellite support – this includes everything from Excel sheets to track deliveries to detailed instructions on how to most effectively build a backpack.

For the past few years, Ogan and her lead intern have sourced school supplies from seasonal sales, as well as corporate partnerships. She works with the homeless school liaisons to determine needs and the best time to host the event; and then builds out the event calendar for all the sites about two months before they occur.

“We go above and beyond with the Empowerment Academies,” shares Ogan. **“Let’s not just make sure that kids have a backpack, but that it’s a nice backpack. The program is very thoughtfully designed.”**



1,783
BACKPACKS



1,303
HYGIENE KITS





**IDEAS FOR A SUCCESSFUL
EMPOWERMENT ACADEMY INCLUDE
BUT ARE NOT LIMITED TO:**

- **Quality backpacks and back to school items**
- **Hygiene kits with items such as shampoo, conditioner and deodorant**
- **Translators to help bridge any language barriers**
- **On-site haircuts or haircut vouchers**
- **Glasses vouchers**
- **On-site physicians to provide back-to-school physicals and/or vaccinations**
- **Community entertainment, like a school band or dance performances**
- **Arts and crafts**
- **On-site sports clinics**
- **Music**
- **Food and food vouchers**
- **Photo booths**
- **Items to take away. Examples include t-shirts and vouchers for services after the event**
- **Community resources and connecting to social services:**
 - Places where families can get food
 - Information about local library programming and how to get a library card
 - Childcare resources
 - Health insurance information, including about Medicaid and Child Health Insurance Program (CHIP)
 - Domestic abuse resources
 - Support for job training
 - College readiness and financial aid programs





Conclusion

The CapCityKids Empowerment Academies focus on quality over quantity. Name-brand backpacks and school supplies. Individualized attention to a community's needs. Fun activities that foster connections. And, they let homeless students and their families know that they are seen.

A successful Empowerment Academy opens up communities and is driven by the ability to listen to what homeless students and families need. They give people access to goods and services that they otherwise would not be able to enjoy in a fun, low-pressure environment. A hallmark of an Empowerment Academy is its ability to connect people: homeless families, community members and volunteers come together to help drive understanding, empathy and assistance.



