



Sam and Kathy Doak with their son Sammy are now farming in Bernville. They found the federally-funded Migrant Education Program of tremendous help to their children when they moved to several different locations.

Agricultural Families On The Move Find Help For Their Children

BY LOU ANN GOOD

BERNVILLE (Berks) — Sam Doak is a herdsman. When he and his family moved from Montgomery to Tioga and later to Berks County, the children needed to adjust to new school districts.

His wife Kathy recalls, "In Montgomery County Sammy was in first grade where he was just learning the alphabet, but Tioga County first graders were already sounding out words. Sammy was lost."

Many families who move can identify with the stress their children face as they adjust to different school programs. For those families who move because their parent or guardian is employed in agriculture work, a government program offers tutorial help. The federally-funded Migrant Education Program assists children with their home work and with areas of difficulty.

Kathy said, "When a recruit first mentioned this to us, we were appalled. My husband said, 'We're not migrants.'" The Doaks thought migrants referred to people who come from other countries and travel from state to state to pick fruit or vegetables.

They found out that those people are only a small percentage. The federal program defines migrants as any family who moves for agricultural-related purposes. Examples of agricultural employment include work in mushroom houses, greenhouses, nurseries, seed factories, dairy farms, vineyards, picking fruit or vegetables, planting or pruning, processing of poultry, beef or vegetables. There are also many transient people among agriculture hired hands, herdsman and tenant farmers.

And when they move and take their student-aged children with them, it's a whole different school to adjust to. The adjustments often leave children floundering in school work. To meet this deficit, the government legislated help. In Lancaster, Gary Johnson oversees the program.

He said, "The need is not based on economics but on child need." It does not matter how much income a family makes, if the family has moved within the past six years for agriculture employment their children are eligible for the program. However, the program puts priority on those who moved within the last year.

Instructors use non-traditional

methods to spark students interest in education. For example an instructor may use a field trip to encourage using oral language skills, learned mathematics, reading and writing.

This year, for the first time, computers will be placed in many of the homes of children who have moved because their parents took agricultural jobs. Children from kindergarten through ninth grade will have a library of software to choose from. Depending on the child's needs, programs building certain skills will be emphasized. Administrators of the program hope computers will spark parents' interest in helping their children.

A new service is being provided in the Lancaster area by Millersville University students who will man a homework hotline. Children involved in the program can call for help with their homework. Those who answer the phones will have access to the same books that the student has.

Most instructors for the Lancaster program are bilingual since many eligible children in the area are Spanish speaking and have a deficit in speaking English.

After accessing a child's needs, if the child needs more than what the local school program provides, teachers will meet with children one hour after school from one to five times weekly depending upon the need. Summertime tutorials are also available.

Part of the purpose of the program is designed to help students become more educated to attain so they can get higher paid jobs. Johnson reports that several of their students have continued their education after high school by entering Millersville University. College funds are not available through the migrant program but through programs such as Upward Bound.

Johnson said, "We staff up to 75 people annually and help an average 350 pupils in the four county district." Currently there are 1,100 identified as migrant students but not all need additional help in adjusting.

Often hispanic homes do not spend as much time reading with their children since the parents can not read English; yet, they want their children to learn English so they do not read to them in Spanish. Statistics estimate that 23 to

27 million adults are illiterate. Educators believe that children who see their parents reading will make a better reader. To foster reading development the program experiments with doing unusual projects. Last year, they developed a big book with letters and picturing. That generated a lot of enthusiasm.

Migrant parents are hard workers like other farmers. But they run into many difficulties such as the crop not being ready for harvesting and weather difficulties and, in order to work, some must travel from harvest to harvest. Johnson said, "It's a respectful industry and should be held in respect. The U.S. economy depends upon hardy manual labor workers to keep food costs down."

In the mid '60s, studies showed that many families moved as many as ten times a year for agricultural work. Students of these families are enrolled into the Migrant Student Record Transfer System, a computerized nationwide service that maintains and transmits current educational and health information on some 600,000 migrant children. Rapid access to educational and health data prevents costly duplication of services and when the child moves all the necessary information is available at the new school.

The Doaks found the program extremely effective in helping their three children adjust. Kathy said, "In the beginning we were ashamed to say we were part of the migrant program, but we learned more about it and when we saw how much it helped our kids, we were very proud to be in the program."

Kathy was so impressed with the program that she later became a recruiter. Her ability to relate to agriculture migrants enabled her to be extremely effective. She said, "I really enjoyed it, but after one and a half years, I found it took to much time away from my family to keep working fulltime." But it's a program that has proved beneficial and for that reason she encourages those who think that might be eligible to apply.

If you or someone you know qualifies for this program, call 717 872-3458 or write to the PA Migrant Education Program, 1315 Walnut Street, Suite 98; Philadelphia, PA 19107.

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