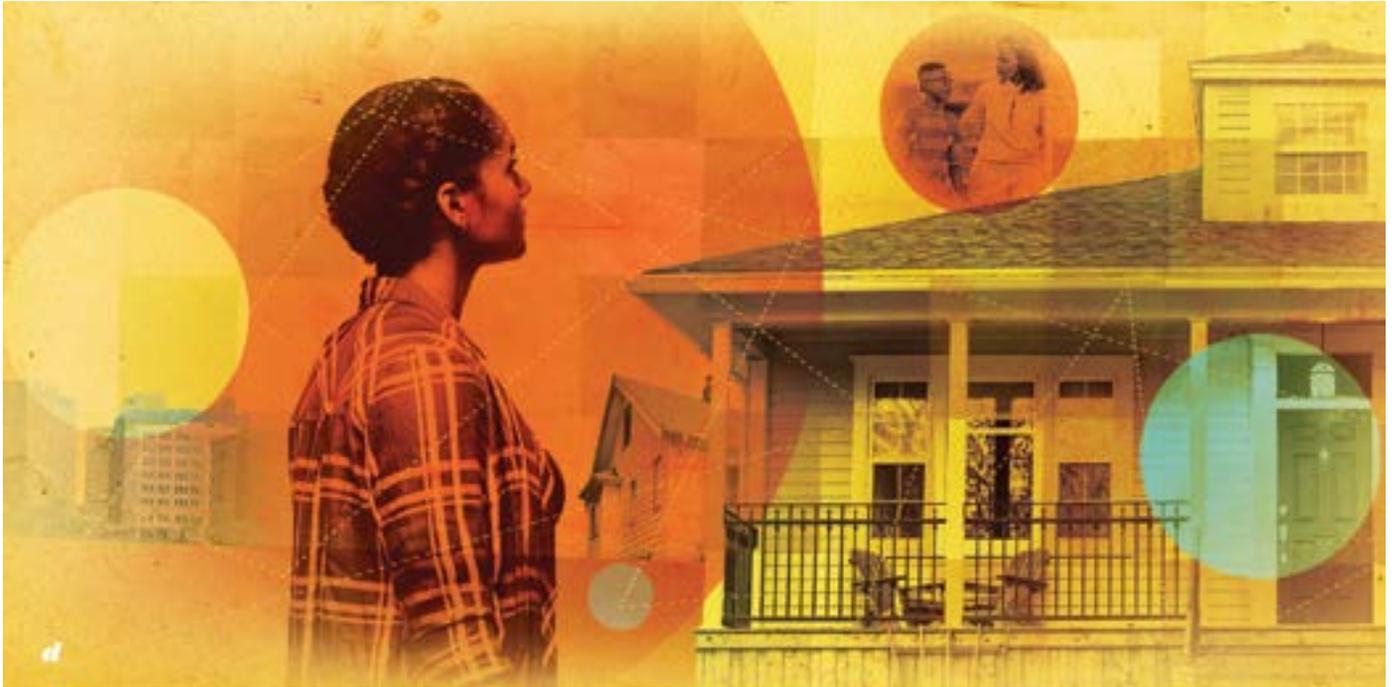


Supporting Students Who Are Experiencing Homelessness

A Brief Guide for Teachers and Schools



BY RONALD E. HALLETT AND LINDA SKRLA

Anastasia sleeps on her friend's couch and borrows her friend's clothes to wear to school. Her dad kicked her and her mom out of the house after a fight that turned physical. She's unsure where her mom is staying, but her mom assures Anastasia that she's fine.

Diego lives with his parents and his dog in a bedroom illegally subleased to them by other renters after his parents lost their suburban home due to a job layoff and illness. He hides his dog when the landlord comes around because pets are not allowed.

*Fredrick lives with his two brothers, one sister, and mom in a motel room after a bad storm three months ago made their old house unlivable. He attends high school in a different school district because the storm also destroyed his old school. Fredrick worries about what will happen to his family because his mom's place of work has not reopened following the storm.**

*Although we have used pseudonyms, these three examples of young people experiencing homelessness are recent and real. Among the myriad families we have worked with, we selected these because their experiences in urban and small-town settings in three different states are common, but are not typically thought of as homelessness.

These young people, though their circumstances differ, have one thing in common—they all meet the federal definition of *homeless youth* under guidelines spelled out by the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act.¹ Although this act has been in place since 1987, the act and its implications for schools are not as widely known as they should be among educators and administrators. The McKinney-Vento Act, including revisions made during its reauthorization in Title IX, Part A, of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA, 2015),² defines youth experiencing homelessness in a far more expansive way than traditional conceptualizations. We offer details below, but in brief, the act defines homelessness as any student without “a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence.”³ It also provides legal guidelines

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and funding that can be used to help improve schooling experiences for youth who are homeless. Although McKinney-Vento primarily focuses on protections related to students in preschool through high school, the revisions as part of ESSA also lay the foundations for college access, and higher education practitioners have begun to build similar protections.⁴ Since the federal protections are more clearly outlined for students in high school or lower grades, we focus primarily on summarizing that information in this article. However, our sidebar on page 8 includes more information for higher education practitioners.

We believe that educators, administrators, and staff members play important roles in the lives of students experiencing homelessness. Our goal is to provide educators with information and tools[†] as they continue their essential work of educating all students. In this article, we give an overview of student homelessness and examine the federal guidelines that frame how schools and postsecondary institutions serve students experiencing homelessness. Federal law outlines legal rights for students, but these mandates should only be considered a minimum standard when providing support. Additionally, we discuss the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and resulting economic strife on students and families experiencing homelessness. Finally, we provide promising practices that encourage academic engagement and success for students who are homeless.

National Statistics on Student Homelessness

Identifying the exact number of students experiencing homelessness is difficult. These students tend to be highly mobile and experience a significant amount of shame that reduces the likelihood of reporting their housing status.⁵ Schools and districts have increasingly created processes that allow for gathering more accurate information from students. However, available estimates likely underestimate the reality of student homelessness.

Before the pandemic, families with children constituted 30 percent of the homeless population in the United States.⁶ At the start of the 2017–2018 school year, 1.5 million students in the US reported experiencing homelessness. This is a 15 percent increase since the 2015–2016 school year and more than double the number of students who were homeless (590,000) in 2004–2005.⁷ In large cities, the percentages of student populations experiencing homelessness are even larger than the national averages. In New York City, for example, one in ten (114,085) youth experienced homelessness during the 2018–2019 school year.⁸ In addition, researchers at the University of Chicago who gathered data in 2016 and 2017 estimate that 700,000 young people between ages 13 and 17 experience some form of homelessness annually, including running away and being kicked out of their homes.⁹ That's one out of every 35 people in this age group experiencing homelessness in recent years. Young people of color, LGBTQ youth, students in special education, and pregnant/parenting teens all disproportionately experience homelessness. Many urban schools and districts we have worked with report rates of student homelessness between 10 and 20 percent.

Seventy-five percent of children experiencing homelessness live doubled-up with other families. Living doubled-up means

that multiple households are living in a space designed for one family as a result of economic crises and out of necessity; these living arrangements are not considered stable or adequate housing.¹⁰ For example, we have worked with three families—involving a total of 10 people—who lived in a small two-bedroom apartment. The next highest percentage of students experiencing homelessness live in shelters (15 percent); these children are disproportionately young, with 10 percent under age 1.¹¹

Experiencing homelessness negatively impacts students' schooling outcomes. Compared with traditionally housed peers, attendance and graduation rates are lower, as are academic achievement rates in reading and math. Also, special education placement rates are higher, and incidences of multifaceted trauma are much higher.¹² Even after students regain stable housing, their academic outcomes may continue to lag behind those of their peers who are consistently housed.¹³

Estimates likely underestimate student homelessness, which includes students without “a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence.”

McKinney-Vento Act

Research on the impact of homelessness on educational access and outcomes, as well as advocacy on behalf of students experiencing homelessness, prompted the federal government to broaden its definition of student homelessness. The emphasis on *any student without “a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence”* includes children and youth who:

- share the housing of other persons due to loss of housing, economic hardship, or similar reason (doubled-up);
- live in motels, hotels, and campgrounds;
- reside in emergency or transitional shelters;
- have been left in hospitals by parents (many young and homeless themselves) who see no alternatives;
- live in public or private spaces not typically used as housing;
- reside in cars, parks, abandoned buildings, train stations, or similar settings; and
- are migrants who experience the above housing situations.¹⁴

This expansive and inclusive definition of homelessness affords legal protections for children and youth who are without stable and adequate housing. Importantly, states, school districts, and schools are required to meet certain obligations, including:

- allowing students to remain at their school of origin even when they move outside of the school boundaries;
- reviewing policies at all levels (e.g., state, district, and school) to ensure that children and youth in homeless situations are not denied access to school;

[†]For additional resources on supporting students who are homeless, visit the National Center for Homeless Education at nche.ed.gov, the National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth at naehcy.org, and the National Center on Family Homelessness at air.org/center/national-center-family-homelessness.



Precarious living situations can undermine students' development—but with supports, students can reach their full potential.

- designating a homeless liaison in each school district who receives professional development and trains the school-site point of contact;
- supporting district efforts at the state level by gathering and posting data, providing professional development for liaisons, and responding to inquiries;
- allowing children and youth who are homeless to enroll immediately, regardless of health records, transcripts, proof of residency, dress codes, fees and fines, application deadlines, or other paperwork;
- allowing unaccompanied youth to enroll without a parent or guardian;
- having homeless liaisons inform unaccompanied youth of their rights and independent status in relation to the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA);
- using district and state funds for outreach and emergency/extraordinary assistance; and
- subjecting living arrangements and records to Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) protections.¹⁵

Most of these requirements have been in place for more than 30 years, yet too many districts and schools continue to be unaware of their existence or how to fully implement them.

Thus, many children and youth experiencing homelessness continue to face barriers and challenges accessing educational services. This is especially true in districts and schools that do not have homeless shelters within their attendance zones and do not have many of the traditional, visible signs of a homeless population. And most importantly, this is an opportunity for better-informed educators to strengthen their advocacy for their students.

What Teachers and Schools Can Do

Homelessness for children and youth in the US is, of course, embedded in larger societal structures over which educators have limited direct control. We do not assume that educational shifts will resolve challenges involving adequate access to housing, consistent employment with living wages, and the many social issues related to housing insecurity (e.g., foster care, immigration status, domestic violence, mental health issues, and discrimination associated with race, sex, religion, and LGBTQ identities).

Even though we recognize these constraints, research consistently shows that many districts, schools, and teachers could do more to meet the needs of students and families experiencing homelessness. Increasing educational access and success has the potential to improve the long-term economic and housing stability of students as they transition into adulthood and start their own families. In this section, we provide an overview of promising practices emerging from our research.

Educate yourself and others about homelessness in your school community. An essential first step toward addressing the needs of students experiencing homelessness is to learn—about law, policy, populations, needs, resources, and best practices. What does student homelessness look like in your community? How many students experience homelessness in your school? How did COVID-19 change the economic context of the community your school serves? Did more students become housing insecure? In particular, are more families living doubled-up than in previous years?

This information is essential. Educators should be highly skeptical if current data suggest that no students experience homelessness at their school; consider seeking another source, such as the local branch of the United Way or a food pantry that may have insights into homelessness in the community. In conjunction with gathering accurate data, pursue systematic professional development—ideally this should be done with the entire school site so the response can be coherent and sustained. A one-stop, generic professional development session is unlikely to result in any lasting improvement to the school experience for students in homeless situations.

Integrate improved responsiveness to homelessness into school plans. School and district administrators typically make decisions about resources based upon explicit goals written in school plans. The reality is that we focus on what we measure and report. Just like goals for improving student achievement, the likelihood of accomplishing goals for homelessness responsiveness greatly increases when they are written into formal plans for school improvement. Including goals to improve outcomes for students experiencing homelessness also allows for tracking growth in this area. We also encourage teachers and administrators to advocate for students to receive the resources guaranteed by federal protections because these supports will be necessary to achieve the goals outlined in school plans.

Secure resources. States receive modest funding from the federal government that is authorized by the McKinney-Vento Act. Most states divide this money into subgrants that are distributed to school districts. Find out if your district has a McKinney-Vento subgrant. If so, learn where resources are currently being directed and work with the school improvement team to see if these expenditures match current needs. If the district does not receive the grant, find out why not and if there is a possibility of applying for

one in the future. Even if there is not a subgrant, students are guaranteed the protections under McKinney-Vento, and the district is mandated to cover these costs (e.g., supplies, transportation, uniforms, etc.).

Collaborate and form partnerships. What resources are available in your local community? Many schools and districts collaborate with community agencies to help implement and expand the supports covered under McKinney-Vento. For example, a local service agency or church may provide backpacks with supplies at the beginning of the school year, or the uniform company may be willing to set aside a certain number of free uniforms for students experiencing homelessness. Some of these programs may already exist in the community.

Investigate trauma-sensitive school practices. We strongly encourage schools to explore trauma-informed approaches* to support students experiencing homelessness. To that end, we created a practitioner-focused book on how to navigate this process.¹⁶ Interestingly, a trauma-informed approach has been linked with improving outcomes for *all* students. Basically, this approach recognizes that what occurs in students' lives outside of school influences how they participate in class, and it is beneficial for the culture of the school to be sensitive to the realities of students' lives. Many elementary school teachers engage in practices like a morning check-in to begin each day by connecting with these realities. It is important to emphasize here that the type of trauma-sensitive school culture we advocate for is assets-based. This work is not about labeling students; it is about forming authentic relationships in order to develop trust, build on strengths, and better respond to needs.¹⁷

Provide academic and psychological support in addition to support for basic needs. In recognizing the trauma associated with housing insecurity, students will likely benefit from counseling and other related supports. The consistent movement inherent in precarious living situations can undermine students' academic and psychological development—but with supports, students can reach their full potential. Although most educators are not trained counselors and many do not have the capacity to offer academic interventions like intensive tutoring, seeking academic and psychological supports can be another opportunity to coordinate with your school district and community-based organizations to identify resources available for students.

Prepare students for the transition to life after high school. Graduating from high school can be a challenge for students who experience housing insecurity; however, earning a diploma alone will likely not be enough for students to achieve financial security as they move into adulthood.¹⁸ McKinney-Vento requires schools and districts to provide priority access to college preparation programming for students experiencing homelessness. We encourage schools to work with students to explore how to find postsecondary opportunities and funding. In particular, students will need support in figuring out housing issues as they make decisions about higher education. For example, if the community college does not have housing, how does the student find a stable place to live? Does the four-year institution have year-round housing? If not, where will the student spend breaks?

*For more on trauma-informed practices, see "Supporting Students with Adverse Childhood Experiences" in the Summer 2019 issue of *American Educator*: aft.org/aef/summer2019/murphey_sacks.

Conclusion

The three young people whose stories we shared at the beginning of this article are positive examples of what can happen when schools recognize and respond to student homelessness. We return to them here.

A professor at the university Anastasia's mom attended noticed something was amiss with her mom and found out that she had been sleeping in her car on campus while Anastasia stayed with her friend. He connected Anastasia's mom to a women's shelter, which, in turn, provided legal assistance and help with housing. Anastasia and her mom are now on the path to residential stability.

Provide priority access to college preparation for students experiencing homelessness and work with them to find postsecondary housing.

COVID-19 and Student Homelessness

The COVID-19 pandemic is affecting all aspects of schooling. Students experiencing homelessness are one of the groups disproportionately hurt. Many of the resources such students depend on were completely unavailable when schools were closed, and some of these resources have not returned while schools are in distance or hybrid mode.¹ Furthermore, educational decision makers operating in completely unfamiliar circumstances when developing pandemic school plans have sometimes denied services to students in homeless situations, likely in violation of McKinney-Vento and other federal and state laws.²

It is vitally important that educators and administrators understand that the extraordinary situation the pandemic created for schools did not suspend requirements to serve students

experiencing homelessness. For example, if a student living in a shelter does not have adequate access to technology that would allow full participation in online learning, then it is the responsibility of the school district to provide appropriate technology or to make other provisions (such as in-person learning, if it can be offered safely, or paper packets with the necessary learning materials) to satisfy legal requirements for immediate enrollment and removal of barriers to school access for students in homeless circumstances.³

—R. E. H. and L. S.

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Diego graduated from high school while living with his family in a single room and, with assistance from his school, enrolled in a college where he is in his second semester and participating in athletics.

Fredrick's community continues to slowly recover from the widespread natural disaster it experienced. His neighboring community's schools, under the leadership of their superintendent, learned about McKinney-Vento and launched an integrated response to serving the students and families displaced by the storm that hit Fredrick's town. He and his family are cur-

rently on the waiting list for a subsidized apartment, and his school year is going well.

Homelessness is one of the most life-altering experiences young people can have during their school years. It is, however, an experience that can be addressed and overcome. Responsive schools with caring and informed teachers are essential parts of the support infrastructure and process. Schools and districts that are educated about child and youth homelessness, have plans and procedures in place to respond, and are staffed with caring

Being Part of the Solution

Educators tend to develop close relationships with students. Learning that a student is experiencing homelessness or housing insecurity may lead an educator to feel a personal responsibility to resolve the issue. The size of the issue can be overwhelming. While some educators may choose to spend a portion of their hard-earned money to support students, we do not believe this is the solution. In addition to the potential hardship this creates for educators, there is no way that all students could be served by siphoning money from educators' salaries.

Being aware that homelessness and housing insecurity exist in the communities you serve is the first step. The next step is to consider what you can do to support students, families, and communities. We begin with some overarching ideas and then identify additional strategies that are specific for pre-K to 12 and higher education. In what follows, we provide some guidance for educators to improve the educational opportunities for students experiencing homelessness and housing insecurity.

General Approaches

- *Choose words carefully.* Avoid using the term "homeless" when developing resources and programming. Students and families experience significant social shame associated with lacking stable housing. Many students will avoid using resources that are targeted for "homeless" because they do not want to be associated with that term. Using "housing insecurity" can be a more amenable term. Similarly, we recommend using person-first language—for example, *students experiencing homelessness or students with housing insecurity*. This allows for prioritizing the identity of being a student and also recognizes that homelessness is (hope-

fully) a temporary situation, instead of being a permanent aspect of the student's identity.

- *Increase access to counseling.* Housing insecurity is a form of trauma. Even when students gain access to stable housing, most will benefit from processing their experiences with a trained professional. Students often need assistance and encouragement to access these forms of support. You can leverage your relationship with students to build connections with counselors in your school system or on your campus.
- *Spread the word.* Learning more about homelessness and housing insecurity can make you a more effective and empathic education professional. However, students have many relationships and experiences as they navigate the educational system. Feeling supported in one class and then discouraged in another class will undermine their ability to succeed. Students are far more likely to remain enrolled in school and graduate when they experience consistent support from educators.

Early Childhood, Elementary, and Secondary Education Professionals

- *Be informed of federal, state, and district policies related to student homelessness.* In the main article, we provide an overview of federal education policy. However, states and districts may layer on additional protections and resources to support students and families. The National Center for Homeless Education (nche.ed.gov) and the National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth (naehcy.org) are two organizations that summarize policy developments, create resources for teachers and families, and announce advocacy opportunities. Each state has a coordinator who manages federal funding related to homelessness and often creates resources related to the state context.

- *Know the point of contact.* All school districts are required to have a homeless liaison. The liaison is responsible for providing direct support to schools, teachers, and students. Some school districts also require each school to have a point of contact, which is often a counselor or assistant principal. This person receives training related to homelessness and connecting students with resources. Having current contact information at the beginning of each year will enable you to assist students and families when they experience an issue.
- *Inform students and families of their rights.* Federal and state laws exist to protect the educational rights of students in preschool through high school. We encourage leveraging these laws as a resource to meet the needs of students. Students and their guardians often do not know they qualify for support. The aforementioned organizations (NCHC and NAEHCY) have multiple family resources available; consider beginning with this brochure for parents and guardians, which is available in English (nche.ed.gov/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/parent_brochure_eng.pdf) and Spanish (nche.ed.gov/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/parentbrochure_sp.pdf).
- *Collaborate with social service and community agencies.* Some schools have developed food pantries, clothing closets, and other resources on campus by partnering with other agencies. Bringing the resources to your school site often makes it easier for students and families to access support, especially in emergency situations. Working with local agencies and organizations, your school can also create a comprehensive list of local resources available.
- *Keep track of and in contact with every child.* With schools operating in a variety of modes (in-person, remote, hybrid), it is easier for vulnerable children to fall through the cracks and miss out on instructional and support services. Individual educators can help by making

professionals can better support students and families experiencing this profound life challenge. □

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extra efforts to check on the whereabouts and participation levels of all students frequently.

Higher Education Professionals

- *Stay informed of state and federal policies.* At present, the federal government has not developed comprehensive guidelines related to homelessness and housing insecurity among college students. As a result, some states have created policies (e.g., California, Colorado, Florida, and Louisiana). In addition to being aware of the current opportunities in your state, we encourage advocacy for continued policy development at both the state and federal levels.



- *Develop a single point of contact on campus.* Some campuses have started developing a single-point-of-contact approach to providing services. One office exists where students can meet with someone who has information about all the resources both on and off campus. The professionals in this office meet with the student to learn about their unique needs and then coordinate connections to the available supports, including meeting with financial aid officers to review available funding, accessing the food pantry for emergency assistance, getting information about housing support, and setting up a meeting to apply for federal or state supplemental aid. In addition to

providing direct support for students, the single-point-of-contact approach allows for someone to consistently be looking at the holistic needs of students as well as the potential gaps that exist in service.

- *Provide access to emergency shelter on campus.* Many of the students who experience homelessness begin college with stable housing. When a financial or personal crisis emerges, they end up housing insecure. Without emergency support, most of these students will drop out of college. Among institutions that have housing, a few rooms may be set aside for short-term housing while a social worker coordinates a long-term plan for the student. Some campuses have also turned one of their parking lots into a safe space where students can sleep in their cars, if needed. Another option is to coordinate with local hotels to obtain housing vouchers for students as an emergency option.
- *Provide access to showers on campus.* Most postsecondary institutions have showers in the gyms or other places on campus. We recommend having these showers open to all students even if they cannot afford the fees associated with the gyms. In addition, the showers should be open before the earliest class time in order for students to be able to address personal care needs prior to class. If possible, distribute hygiene and personal care items to any student who requests them.
- *Collaborate with public spaces on campus, including the library and student union.* Students experiencing homelessness often spend considerable time in public spaces on campus, including the library and student union. Individuals who work in these spaces may have a sense of which students are in need of support. In addition, understanding where students spend time on campus can allow for more effective dissemination of information. This is especially important during the pandemic, as closures, reduced hours, and increased reliance on technology for service

delivery have disproportional impacts on students experiencing homelessness.

- *Inform all students of their rights.* All students on campus should be given information about how to access food and housing support. In addition to avoiding false assumptions about what homelessness looks like, you also want to leverage the social relationships of students. Having all students with information not only normalizes utilizing the support (similar to how students use financial aid) but also enables students to share information with friends who may be experiencing challenges. Information about food and housing support could be placed on all course syllabi, and financial aid offices could include a list of resources with all financial aid offers.
- *Do not hide resources.* Sometimes, resources related to food and housing insecurity are placed on the corner of campus or in spaces that are out of general view. Many times, this is done because professionals want to protect the privacy of students who use the services. While we appreciate this sentiment, the message sent to students is that they should be ashamed to need the services. In addition, having the resources hidden results in few students being aware that services exist and/or finding them when they need assistance. Centering these resources on campus helps to normalize the services, just as financial aid is a common aspect of the college experience for most students.
- *Create resources for the diversity of students you serve.* Students experiencing homelessness come from a variety of backgrounds. Avoid creating supports designed only for single, white, 18- to 24-year-old students. For example, food pantries should have baby food for parenting students and foods representing different cultures. Housing options should also be provided for those in relationships and with children and/or pets.

—R. E. H. and L. S.

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