



# Supporting Students Experiencing Homelessness

## District Approaches to Supports and Funding

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### Abstract

This brief summarizes a study of five school districts that have been recognized for their efforts to provide high-quality services to students experiencing homelessness. The districts worked hard to identify students experiencing homelessness and supplemented modest federal funds with private funding, district funding, community-based resources, and other school services to provide transportation, essential items such as food and clothing, health services, academic supports, and housing supports, wherever possible. Districts identified inadequate, unreliable, and restrictive funding streams as particular challenges that limited their efforts. This brief outlines federal, state, and local policy changes to address these obstacles and ensure that students have access to a web of school- and district-based supports. The report on which this brief is based can be found at <https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/supporting-students-homelessness-report>.

## Introduction

Approximately 1.3 million k–12 public school students across the United States were identified as experiencing homelessness in 2019–20.<sup>1</sup> Given that identifying students experiencing homelessness is a significant challenge for many districts, this is likely an undercount. Students experiencing homelessness endure a range of unstable and inadequate living arrangements and face multiple challenges related to health, well-being, and education. Some live with their families in motels, in hotels, or doubled or tripled up with family or friends. Others live on the streets or in shelters. Students living unaccompanied after being kicked out of their homes can face especially harmful circumstances. In all cases, the stress, instability, trauma, and school mobility created by homelessness increase risks to physical, social, and emotional health and to educational engagement and achievement.

Despite the obstacles students experiencing homelessness face, many display resilience and achieve academic and life success. Districts play an important role in creating environments and coordinating a set of supports that help these students engage in their education and overcome the challenges they face. Under the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act (signed into law in 1987 and reauthorized in 2015), districts are required to identify students experiencing homelessness and must ensure that they have the same access to appropriate education as their housing-secure peers.

In a recent Learning Policy Institute (LPI) study, we examined the work of five districts that have been recognized for their efforts to provide high-quality services to students experiencing homelessness: Browning Public Schools (Montana), Cincinnati Public Schools (Ohio), Polk County Public Schools (Florida), Santa Fe Public Schools (New Mexico), and Spokane Public Schools (Washington). To explore district homeless programs, we gathered and reviewed public documents, including financial and staffing data, and conducted interviews with homeless program staff. Our study was designed to help us better understand the assets and needs of students experiencing homelessness and what districts are able to do to address these needs. We also explored how districts fund and staff their programs and how they respond to, and try to overcome, the complex challenges of identifying and meeting the needs of students experiencing homelessness. This brief describes the study, summarizes its key findings, and offers recommendations to policymakers.

## Who Are Students Experiencing Homelessness?

Under the federal McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, students experiencing homelessness are defined as “individuals who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence.”<sup>2</sup> They can have a variety of temporary living arrangements, including staying doubled up with others; staying in a motel, shelter, or substandard housing; or being unsheltered, all of which may change during the school year. About 9% of students experiencing homelessness are unaccompanied, defined as “not in the physical custody of a parent or guardian.”<sup>3</sup>

The most common reason for student homelessness is family poverty. Overwhelmingly, families experiencing homelessness are headed by women, and a disproportionate number of them are families with young children. However, there are additional reasons and risks for youth being unaccompanied. The death of a parent and family conflict are also prevalent risk factors. Teenage parents and LGBTQ+ students are at higher risk for being unaccompanied youth when they experience a lack of support in their homes or communities.

Students experiencing homelessness are not homogeneous; they represent different racial and ethnic backgrounds, ages, and locales across the country. However, the likelihood of homelessness tends to be higher among students of color due to inequitable access to housing and historical barriers to economic opportunity. For example, Black students are 80% more likely to experience homelessness than would be expected based on their numbers among all students. Similarly, Latino/a students are 36% more likely and Native American students are 60% more likely to experience homelessness than their representation among students overall would suggest. English learners and students receiving special education services are also overrepresented among students experiencing homelessness, by 70% and 25%, respectively.

Homelessness increases risks to physical, social, and emotional health as well as to educational engagement and achievement. Housing instability can separate children from family, schools, neighborhood friends, and belongings, and the acute poverty that frequently precedes homelessness can lead to food insecurity. High mobility among families experiencing homelessness can also complicate efforts to receive needed health services. Students facing these challenges often feel a loss of safety, stability, and control over their lives.

The school mobility that often accompanies housing instability poses an additional set of challenges. It disrupts routines and relationships and requires students to adapt to new environments, curricula, teachers, and classmates. Graduation requirements and course offerings that vary from school to school can be barriers to high school graduation. The stress and trauma experienced during the period of homelessness can ignite a cycle of increased behavioral issues and increased disengagement in school, exacerbated by exclusionary disciplinary measures that result in school removals (i.e., suspensions and expulsions). This can lead to further increases in negative behaviors and weaker educational outcomes. Multiple studies have found significantly poorer outcomes for students experiencing homelessness, including lower test scores and graduation rates.

## **Identifying Students Experiencing Homelessness**

Students experiencing homelessness face multiple, intersecting challenges that can interfere with their opportunities to learn. Therefore, it is important for districts to know which students are experiencing homelessness, so that students can receive the supports they need, including access to education. However, districts face challenges in identifying these students. It is not always obvious which students or families are experiencing homelessness. People may not divulge their homeless status to others due to a lack of knowledge about available rights and services, fear, or embarrassment. Furthermore, the population of students experiencing homelessness is constantly changing due to the impermanence of their living arrangements. Students and families can also face language barriers if they are English learners, and some students, especially unaccompanied youth, might be isolated from adults or other potential supports.

To overcome these challenges, districts in our study took a multipronged approach to identify students experiencing homelessness. To identify students upon school entry, all districts in our study distribute disclosure of homelessness forms; however, because housing status changes over the course of the year, this is an insufficient method for identifying all students who will experience homelessness during the school year. To increase self-referrals, district staff in our study:

- advertised available services to the public through posters, social media, podcasts, and radio ads; and
- shared information about available services through district- and school-run programs serving vulnerable populations, such as food pantries.

To increase referrals, district staff in our study:

- engaged in ongoing education of school staff through periodic trainings and dissemination of information to help them recognize signs that a student may be experiencing homelessness (e.g., being regularly late for school, being frequently absent, falling asleep during class, exhibiting changes in behavior, or grooming inconsistently) and understand the rights of and services available to these students; and
- developed relationships with other organizations serving vulnerable families. This included collaborating with utility companies, motels and hotels, and shelters.

Despite their efforts, program staff in every study district believed that they had not been able to identify every student experiencing homelessness. As one individual noted: “Our numbers don’t reflect the scope of the issue of students experiencing homelessness. We know that for a fact.”

## Providing Services to Students Experiencing Homelessness

As mandated by the McKinney-Vento Act, districts are required to ensure that students experiencing homelessness have the same access to appropriate education as their housing-secure peers. Districts must also ensure that these students attend school and participate fully in school activities, stay in the same school (if in the student’s best interest), receive transportation to their school, receive credit accrual and help with completing FAFSA forms, and have access to pre-k administered by the district.

Across all districts in our study, program staff worked to support students experiencing homelessness by coordinating necessary services provided by the district homeless program, schools, and community-based organizations. Study districts leveraged partnerships to provide:

- **Essential items.** District homeless programs in our study prioritized providing students and their families with basic necessities, including food, hygiene products, clothing, shoes, and school supplies.
- **Transportation.** As required by the McKinney-Vento Act, all districts in our study provided students experiencing homelessness with transportation to and from their school and, in many cases, to extracurricular activities. Some districts in the study also provided transportation services to families. Program staff consistently described transportation as a large cost for their programs.

- **Academic services.** All of the district programs in the study provided students experiencing homelessness with some sort of additional academic support, such as tutoring, summer programs, or assistance with post-high-school planning.
- **Physical and mental health services.** Services mentioned by homeless program staff in our study included physicals; vision and hearing screenings; mobile medical services; counseling; and classes on safety, safe sexual behaviors, and recognizing teen dating abuse.
- **Specialized support for unaccompanied youth.** District staff in our study identified unaccompanied youth as having distinct and acute needs. Additional efforts to support these students included embedding staff at a local youth shelter, training youth shelter staff on educational options for students, and providing prepaid cell phones to youth.
- **Support for families.** Homeless program staff in our study described linking families to child care, counseling, transportation, and other supports. They also reported that when they had the resources and knew of the need, they provided families with emergency funding for medical bills, housing deposits, overdue utility bills, or car repairs to prevent families from losing their homes.

Program staff in all districts in our study discussed prioritizing students' most basic needs, such as access to clothing, food, and school supplies, and securing short-term shelter, before addressing other needs.

## Staffing and Funding District Homeless Programs

Information on the full complement of staffing and expenditures that supported districts' homeless programs was not readily available because many of the services for students experiencing homelessness are provided by community nonprofit organizations or through school and district programs serving a range of vulnerable students. As a result, we were unable to represent the full set of resources that are needed to support students experiencing homelessness. Instead, our study focused on the staffing and funding that are directly allocated to the study districts' homeless programs.

### Staffing Homeless Programs

All the districts in this study employed staff for the specific purpose of identifying and serving students experiencing homelessness. These homeless program staff were responsible for a large slate of wide-ranging services and activities—including

identifying student and family assets and needs, building relationships with community organizations and schools, connecting students to services, training school staff, and developing transportation plans—regardless of the number of staff employed.

All districts in our study had applied for and won McKinney-Vento Act grants, which funded liaisons with dedicated time to provide and coordinate support for students experiencing homelessness. Other dedicated homeless program staff positions in our study districts included transportation coordinator, counselor, grant writer, school-level coordinator, and shelter-based coordinator. Between 2 and 11 members of staff were employed in these dedicated roles in each study district, in a combination of full- and part-time positions. Beyond these staff, study districts identified a variety of additional positions, from district-level administrators to counselors and school bus drivers, as supporting their homeless programs. Homeless program staff also described school teams as critical for identifying and supporting students.

To further expand their reach, staff in all district programs in our study partnered with a wide array of community-based organizations, like shelters, food banks, and medical and mental health providers, and with other governmental agencies, such as local housing authorities, child welfare agencies, and city and county government, to identify eligible students and provide services for students and families. As one program coordinator stated, “We’re well connected in that way that we don’t have to do everything; we just have to know who does.”

## **Funding for Study District Homeless Programs**

Our research team acquired homeless program financial data from four of the study districts. As shown in Table 1, each of these districts reported blending a mix of federal, state, district, and private funding streams to support their homeless program operations, but the mix of funds varied considerably by district. Across the four districts, total funding ranged from \$128 to \$556 per student.

Each of these districts also relied on additional services provided by schools and nonprofits beyond those reflected in these budgets. As a result, the data presented should be considered illustrative of the methods and level of funding for the operation of district homeless programs but not descriptive of the amount of money spent supporting students experiencing homelessness. The districts in our study described these additional supports as essential to their programs.

**Table 1. Sources of Funding for District-Level Homeless Program Operations**

Funding Source	Cincinnati (OH)	Polk County (FL)	Santa Fe (NM)	Spokane (WA)
Number of students experiencing homelessness	2,014	3,669	936	1,085
McKinney-Vento grant	\$672,352	\$125,000	\$68,003	\$51,782
Title I funding	\$250,043	\$276,846	\$125,515	\$165,511
State funding	-	-	\$175,648	\$156,910
District funding	\$37,693	-	-	-
Private grants	-	\$25,000	\$150,969	\$5,000
Other grants/donations	\$20,153	\$41,404	-	-
<b>Total</b>	<b>\$980,241</b>	<b>\$468,250</b>	<b>\$520,135</b>	<b>\$379,203</b>
Total expenditure per student experiencing homelessness	\$487	\$128	\$556	\$349
McKinney-Vento grant per student experiencing homelessness	\$334	\$34	\$73	\$48

Sources: District staff in Polk County Public Schools and Santa Fe Public Schools responded to an LPI follow-up survey. Spokane Public Schools provided LPI with financial data for the 2020–21 school year. LPI was able to retrieve detailed financial data for Cincinnati Public Schools from its website, <https://cincinnati-schools.org/oh.opengov.com/transparency>.

As Table 1 shows, McKinney-Vento grants were not proportional to the number of students served, nor were they adequate to meet the needs of those students. Even with additional revenue from Title I funding, private sources of funding, and, sometimes, state or district funding, there is considerable variation across districts in the total expenditure per student experiencing homelessness.

## Challenges Confronting Study Districts

Districts in our study faced multiple challenges in supporting students experiencing homelessness, including inadequate funding to support efforts to identify and address students’ needs, constraints on how available funds are spent, insufficient staffing due to lack of funds, and the lack of stable housing.



**Funding for the homeless programs in our study is unstable and perceived as inadequate to meet student needs.** All districts in our study received McKinney-Vento funds but still found it necessary to seek additional funding given insufficient public education support and constraints on expenditures. However, obtaining additional funds from community groups and other philanthropic organizations requires staff time, and these funds are not consistent. Provision of supports (services and programs) is limited by access to resources, not determined by need.

**Restrictions on the uses of McKinney-Vento and Title I funds limit districts' ability to address certain needs related to students' housing instability.** Each federal education funding stream has a set of allowable uses and funding restrictions. McKinney-Vento allowable uses include tutoring, referral to medical and mental health services, summer programs, and school supplies. Title I funds can be used to purchase glasses, food, immunizations, and college entrance exam test fees, among other services. However, restrictions on the funding limited study districts' ability to address many pressing needs of students and families. For example, McKinney-Vento funds cannot be used to help families of students experiencing homelessness pay a past-due utility bill or cover a medical expense.

**In all study districts, insufficient staffing is a key constraint to identifying and serving students experiencing homelessness.** Staff in all programs in our study believed they could identify and serve a higher proportion of students experiencing homelessness with additional time for outreach activities. When staff were asked how they would spend additional dollars if available, the most frequent response was to hire additional liaisons and counselors.

**District staff in our study were unable to address the root cause of students' challenges: lack of stable housing.** Restrictions on how federal and state education funds are spent meant that district staff in our study could not use that funding to pay a utility bill or supplement rent to prevent students from experiencing homelessness. Even in cases in which programs developed partnerships with local housing authorities or shelters to provide rehousing services, the lack of availability of affordable housing could prolong families' periods of homelessness. As one coordinator in Santa Fe noted: "My dream is that every family who needs housing has access to affordable, stable housing.... There have been times when I have money to help families become housed, and I have no place for them to go to."

## Efforts to Address Challenges

Study districts used multiple strategies to mitigate the challenges they faced in identifying and serving students experiencing homelessness. The homeless programs in the study districts acquired additional funding and expanded their provision of resources and services. For example, study districts:

- Sought funding for dedicated homeless program staff who can focus on coordinating partners and resources to meet student needs. All of the districts in our study had applied for and won McKinney-Vento grants, which funded liaisons with dedicated time to support students experiencing homelessness.
- Sought private funding to supplement insufficient public education support and funding restrictions. By increasing private funding, study district programs were able to expand the services they could provide—from necessities such as food and clothing to physical and mental health services—allowing them to address a wider array of student needs.
- Partnered with a wide array of community-based organizations, like shelters, food banks, medical providers, and mental health providers, and with other governmental agencies, such as local housing authorities, child welfare agencies, and city and county government, to identify eligible students and provide services for students and families experiencing homelessness.
- Tapped into available school-based services to support students experiencing homelessness. Study districts' ability to meet the needs of students experiencing homelessness depended upon the availability of school and community resources. In study districts in which school resources were limited or were not accessible to students and families experiencing homelessness, service gaps occurred.

These efforts have helped augment districts' capacity to serve students, but they have depended on state policy regarding the disbursement of McKinney-Vento funds, support from many external stakeholders, availability of often-limited district and school resources, and the extraordinary persistence of homeless program staff.

## Policy Recommendations

Students experiencing homelessness face a complex set of issues that challenge their health, emotional well-being, and access to educational opportunities. Federal, state, and district policymakers can consider the following recommendations to improve outcomes for this vulnerable student group.

**Federal and state policymakers could adopt policies that help eliminate child poverty and keep families housed.** The most effective way to mitigate the effects of experiencing homelessness is to prevent it. Federal and state policymakers can help prevent students from experiencing homelessness by adopting policies that reduce child poverty, such as the 15% increase in household SNAP benefits and expansion of the child tax credit included in the American Rescue Plan Act, and policies that support affordable housing, such as a renter’s tax credit and an expansion of the Section 8 Housing Choice Voucher program.

In addition to adopting policies that help students avoid experiencing homelessness, policymakers can consider the following recommendations.

**Federal policymakers could ensure that financial resources are available to cover the cost of staffing and supports for district homeless programs as well as students’ and families’ needs.** The McKinney-Vento Act recognizes the multiple needs children experiencing homelessness have and requires districts to identify and serve those students. However, the federal government does not provide the necessary funding to support identification and services to all local education agencies serving students experiencing homelessness, nor does it provide resources in proportion to the number of students to be served. The McKinney-Vento program was funded at \$106.5 million in 2020–21, which equates to less than \$82 per student identified as experiencing homelessness, and only a fraction of districts with such students received funding.

The Education for Homeless Children and Youth program should be funded adequately to enable districts to meet its mandate. Funds should be sufficient, proportional to need, and stable, to allow the hiring of staff to help identify students experiencing homelessness and coordinate supports. The one-time funding provided under the emergency American Rescue Plan Act to support students experiencing homelessness totaled \$800 million, approximately \$530 per student experiencing homelessness, based on 2017–18 counts. This level of funding likely comes much closer to the amount needed for district homeless programs to support their students who are experiencing homelessness. Such funding needs to be provided on an annual basis to be effective in meeting the ongoing and acute needs of this student population.

Restrictions on the use of McKinney-Vento funds limit the ability of homeless program staff to keep families and unaccompanied youth housed. To better support students outside schoolhouse doors, federal policymakers could also expand the allowable use

of McKinney-Vento funds to include families' and students' expenses for emergency needs, such as utilities or rent, medical expenses that compete with rent, or hotel stays when no shelter is available.

**Congress could revise the McKinney-Vento funding formula to target funds based on the enrollment of students experiencing homelessness.** To promote better identification of students experiencing homelessness, the McKinney-Vento allocation formula could take into account the enrollment of students experiencing homelessness.

However, given that some districts do not have the resources to identify all of their students experiencing homelessness, a new funding system may need to be based initially on both the actual count of students experiencing homelessness and a count of the number of students from low-income families in the district. Policymakers might consider students who are eligible for free or reduced-price meals. Because this program relies on a single measure of self-reported income at a point in time and because it extends to 185% of the federal poverty line, representing a wide range of family circumstances, other measures might also be considered. For example, many states consider "direct certification" measures that are based on a student's family participation in a broad universe of public programs, such as SNAP. The funding should be consistent from one year to the next, allowing local education agencies to hire needed staff on a long-term basis.

Over time, more reliable counts of students experiencing homelessness would allow policymakers and educators to monitor districts and redress programs or services that are not adequately supporting students.

**State policymakers could allocate resources so that students who are most vulnerable, such as those experiencing homelessness, are prioritized in funding allocations.** At the state level, policymakers have a number of potential vehicles for funding assistance for students experiencing homelessness. One option is to include a weight for students experiencing homelessness in the state's primary funding formula, although currently no state does so. Another option is to include an additional annual allotment specifically targeted toward supporting students experiencing homelessness, as Massachusetts and New York have done. A third option, which Washington has employed, is to provide grants to communities to coordinate services across local agencies that serve students and families experiencing homelessness. California provides an additional example, with a one-time allocation outside of the school funding formula based on the number of enrolled students experiencing homelessness.

As students experiencing homelessness are more likely to be enrolled in high-poverty schools, states can help support programs for students experiencing homelessness by targeting additional funding to districts with a high concentration of low-income families. There are currently 16 states that allocate additional funding to districts with high concentrations of students from low-income families.

**Federal, state, and district policymakers can ensure that students have access to a readily available web of school-based supports by increasing investments in community schools.** Districts can support the success of these students by developing a school-based web of support. For instance, community schools are a site-based strategy for provisioning students with a wide range of in- and out-of-school supports by coordinating partnerships between the education system, nonprofit sector, and local government agencies and promoting strong family and community engagement.

Federal policymakers could build on the American Rescue Plan Act's one-time support for community schools by increasing funding for the federal Full-Service Community Schools program and investing in specialized instructional support personnel, including social workers, school counselors, and psychologists. States also can look to investments made in California, New Mexico, and New York for examples of how they can structure their own community school investments.

## Conclusion

Approximately 1.3 million public school students in the United States were identified as experiencing homelessness in the 2019–20 school year, and the actual number of students experiencing homelessness is likely much higher. Homelessness negatively impacts students; it can increase risks to physical, social, and emotional health and lead to diminished educational engagement. To mitigate this negative impact, districts engage in a range of practices to meet students' needs. However, even with multipronged approaches to identifying and supporting students, districts confront obstacles in meeting their objective of ensuring that all students experiencing homelessness have the same academic and social opportunities as students who are housing secure. Federal, state, and local policymakers could address these obstacles by enhancing funding and implementing a whole child approach to education that includes integrated student supports.

## Acknowledgments

This research was supported by the Raikes Foundation. Core operating support for the Learning Policy Institute is provided by the Heising-Simons Foundation, William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, Raikes Foundation, Sandler Foundation, and MacKenzie Scott. We are grateful to them for their generous support. The ideas voiced here are those of the authors and not those of our funders.

## Endnotes

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Suggested citation: Levin, S., Espinoza, D., & Griffith, M. (2023). *Supporting students experiencing homelessness: District approaches to supports and funding* [Brief]. Learning Policy Institute. <https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/supporting-students-homelessness-brief>

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