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# Policy Brief

## Children and Youth Experiencing Homelessness

### Introduction and Background

Pupils who qualify to receive free and reduced-price meals—along with foster youth and English learners—are the three groups identified by the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) as “high need.” Students in all three groups generate extra funds to help school districts meet their extra needs. California’s 220,000 K-12 students experiencing homelessness are among these high need pupils. As boards and governance teams begin their work to implement LCFF, this brief offers information to help them understand and address the challenges that homeless students face every day in California schools. Boards should use this information during their board study sessions and in preparation for community input meetings related to their district local control accountability plans (LCAPs) to help guide decisions about how to best target resources in order to meet the needs of students experiencing homelessness.

### What is homelessness?

The word “homeless” often brings to mind images of people on the streets with substance abuse and/or mental health issues, but as a result of the ongoing challenges of the economic downturn, the homeless no longer fit this stereotype. Increasingly, families and youth are the face of homelessness.<sup>1</sup>

The federal McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act defines the homeless as:

- individuals who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence including:
  - » children and youths who are sharing the housing of other persons due to loss of housing, economic hardship, or a similar reason; are living in motels, hotels, trailer parks, or camping grounds due to

the lack of alternative adequate accommodations; are living in emergency or transitional shelters; are abandoned in hospitals; or are awaiting foster care placement;

- » children and youths who have a primary nighttime residence that is a public or private place not designed for or ordinarily used as a regular sleeping accommodation for human beings;
- » children and youths who are living in cars, parks, public spaces, abandoned buildings, substandard housing, bus or train stations, or similar settings; and
- » migratory children (as defined by the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965) who qualify as homeless because their living circumstances.<sup>2</sup>

Homelessness is not limited to economically challenged regions. As noted above, the definition of homelessness includes “children and youths who are sharing the housing of other persons due to loss of housing, economic hardship, or a similar reason.”<sup>3</sup> These young people who are often referred to as “doubled-up” or “couch surfers” are found in high wealth districts as well as less affluent regions. Though the stereotype of homelessness may linger, there is no longer a simple answer to the question, “what is homelessness?” Developing and implementing the best ways to serve the vulnerable population of young people who are experiencing homelessness requires an understanding that these youth have diverse backgrounds, circumstances, and needs.

### How do we identify homeless youth?

Currently, schools are dependent upon the self-disclosure of families and/or students to determine which students are experiencing homelessness. This method has limited effectiveness because there are many who

choose not to disclose their circumstances due to the stigma attached to homelessness and others who do not disclose this information because they do not know that they are technically homeless.

Identifying individual students as well as patterns among students who are experiencing homelessness is an important first step toward providing services. Homelessness transcends age, racial, and ethnic lines. There are a variety of reasons these young people become homeless. Although homelessness impacts those from all demographic backgrounds, populations of young people who identify as lesbian; gay; bisexual; transgender; queer; and gender non-conforming (LGBTQ), young people living in poverty, and those who identify as African American; Native American; and Latino, disproportionately experience homelessness.

### The effect of homelessness on student learning outcomes

There are over 220,000 children in grades pre-K through 12 who experience homelessness in California.<sup>4</sup> Data indicate that students who experience homelessness often suffer negative education consequences. Children who are homeless are more likely to repeat a grade, score lower on both math and language arts assessments, have a higher number of suspensions and expulsions, and drop out of school at higher rates.<sup>5</sup> In addition, students who are homeless, even for a short period of time, are more likely than their peers who do not experience homelessness to experience poverty as adults.<sup>6</sup>

The realities of homelessness present a range of barriers for young people. Unfortunately, school systems can exacerbate barriers for students who are experiencing homelessness through restrictive homework policies, under-identification and misidentification of the needs of this population, and insufficient staffing for school counselors and other support staff. Nonetheless, school staff are in a unique position to partner with these students, their adult support system, and the community to offer both the academic and social support that students need to successfully navigate the education system.

Due to the instability of homelessness, these students are more likely to be dependent upon school settings for their basic needs – food, shelter, safety, health, materials, tutoring, and other care. Unfortunately, school and district policies often have the unintended consequence of presenting particular barriers to students experiencing homelessness. Homework policies that require assignments to be completed on a computer,

school projects that require students to purchase materials, and rules that prohibit hungry students from eating during recess or in class, all unwittingly put the onus of overcoming the challenges of homelessness on the student. The challenge of homelessness does not begin with the young person, nor is it their “fault.” In order to mitigate the negative educational outcomes associated with homelessness, school districts need to rethink how they work with this population.

### What is the responsibility of the district?

The education section of the McKinney-Vento Act was reauthorized under the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. The provisions of this reauthorization require that each school district designate a liaison for students experiencing homelessness. The McKinney-Vento Act is an unfunded federal mandate that provides the following rights for students:

- Equal access to the same free, appropriate public education, including a public preschool education, as provided to other children and youths.
- Continued enrollment at school of attendance prior to experiencing homelessness, even if the student is no longer in the attendance area.
- Transportation services from where the student currently resides back to school of origin. (For additional information on transportation requirements see the CSBA brief on Special Education Transportation)
- Automatic approval of free/reduced priced meals and other services of food program without an application.
- Enrollment in school without proof of residency, prior school records, immunization records, etc.
- Full participation in all school activities and programs for which they are eligible including sports, clubs, and other special programs.<sup>7</sup>

Understanding all student subgroups in each district is important in order to provide the most appropriate services for every student. Additionally, an accurate count of all high needs students (low income, foster youth and English learners) is necessary to generate funding that can help districts provide appropriate services to these students under the Local Control Funding Formula.

## Research

### What does the research say about children and youth who experience homelessness?

School age children who experience homelessness are disproportionately those who are: classified as economically disadvantaged, members of a racial and/or ethnic minority, children from female-led single parent homes, and increasingly young people who identify as LGBTQ.<sup>8,9</sup> Homelessness impacts individuals differently depending on various factors including age, race, gender identification, sexual orientation, and the circumstances surrounding the onset of homelessness.

Research on preschool and school-age children experiencing homelessness has found that these students are not a monolithic group.<sup>10</sup> While some children and youth experiencing homelessness have academic challenges, others are high-performing. Districts should communicate high expectations for the academic achievement of students experiencing homelessness, while providing the appropriate supports to help them deal with the challenges of being homeless.

In addition to academic needs, social-emotional needs related to homelessness can also be a challenge for these young people. The social stigma of homelessness varies among different racial and ethnic groups.<sup>11</sup> Youth of color have the added challenge that comes from their experiences with racial prejudice and stereotypes. As one subject in a study stated, “People aren’t afraid of me because I am homeless. People are afraid of me because I am Black.” These differences in how individuals experience homelessness impact how young people access support, as well as how they self-identify. White youth are more likely to self-identify as homeless and to seek assistance from programs at a greater rate than their African-American peers. When students do not disclose their homelessness, it affects how schools design support services and can lead to misunderstandings about certain behaviors such as failure to complete homework.<sup>13,14</sup>

In summary, the research points to the need for school districts to review:

- How their local policies may disadvantage students experiencing homelessness;
- How they implement federal and state policies;
- How they identify the population of students experiencing homelessness; and

- How they provide supports that are appropriate for students from different racial, ethnic, gender, and sexual orientation backgrounds.

## Legislation

### Is there pending legislation addressing the issue of student homelessness?

The 2013 legislative cycle produced several bills related to homelessness. As a result, there are likely to be changes in the law with regard to the education of homeless youth at both the national and state levels.

The following two statutes directly impact school districts:

#### **SB 177 – Homeless Youth Education Success Act**

- Upon enrollment, youth who are experiencing homelessness can immediately participate in interscholastic athletics or other extra-curricular activities.
- Ensures immediate enrollment in school, including charters, unless enrollment in the charter school is in conflict with the admission policies,
- Improves communication between California Department of Education, Department of Social Services, and other identified agencies,
- Requires the district “homeless liaison” to publicize the education rights of youth experiencing homelessness.

#### **AB 652 – Child Abuse and Neglect Reporting Act: Homeless Children**

- Clarifies that the condition of a young person being homeless or an “unaccompanied minor” does not in and of itself equate to a reportable incident under mandatory child abuse or neglect laws.

## District Policy Implications

### How can my district better serve our students who are experiencing homelessness?

Understanding 1) the demographic characteristics of homeless youth, 2) the circumstances that contribute to conditions of homelessness, and 3) best practices in identifying students experiencing homelessness in a school district is critical in order to best serve students who are experiencing homelessness. To do this, districts

need to gather data, develop partnerships, and find the best ways to provide assistance to young people. Specifically districts should:

1. Assess, and if necessary change, how youth experiencing homelessness are identified. School models that rely solely on self-identification of these young people often do not have an accurate and complete understanding of the needs of students on their campuses.
2. Develop partnerships with students who are experiencing homelessness, these students' adult support system, and community organizations that serve this population. Students experiencing homelessness often have challenges meeting the basic needs of food, shelter, and clothing. Schools cannot meet all of these needs; however, working in partnership with others can help schools identify those who can provide resources and how.
3. Assist young people in developing a plan for transitioning between grade levels and—when necessary—between schools. Developing individual plans in collaboration with the young people builds their self-advocacy skills and helps with their healthy transition into adulthood.

Monarch School is a K-12 school serving students impacted by the effects of homelessness in San Diego, California. The school is an example of a public-private partnership between San Diego County Office of Education and the Monarch School Project. In addition to educational services and school supplies, the students are provided food, hygiene items, clothing, transportation, and counseling.

Supporters of the school highlight the positive aspects of the extensive services students receive in the educational environment. Detractors note the potential downside that placing students on a single campus may lead to isolating and marginalizing young people who are experiencing homelessness.

Guidance for serving the educational needs of children and youth experiencing homelessness can be found in the following policies:

- EC 39807.5 (d) – Transportation Fees
- AR 6173 – Education for Homeless Children
- BP 6173 – Education for Homeless Children
- BP 3553 – Free and Reduced Price Meals

## Questions school boards should ask

1. How many students experiencing homelessness are in or district and where are they?
  - a. What are their demographic characteristics?
  - b. Have their numbers grown or decreased over time?
2. How does our district identify students who are classified as experiencing homelessness?
3. Do we have a central office or site staff person to whom we refer these children and/or their families?
  - a. Is our staff aware of this person and his or her role?
  - b. Who is our district liaison?
4. What community partners do we have on these issues?
5. Do we have specific programs to address the needs of these children? If so, what are these and how successful have they been in serving this population?
6. Are there ways that we could serve them better? Do other districts in our region have exemplary programs that can help inform what we do?
7. How do we fund transportation for these children to attend school?
8. How do our district core values and mission inform how we serve homeless students?

## Additional Resources

The California Department of Education has information on the most current legislation regarding students experiencing homelessness. Additionally, the CDE maintains a list of all homeless liaisons for the state.

<http://www.cde.ca.gov/sp/hs/cy/>

The California Homeless Youth Project is a policy and research initiative by the California Research Bureau. They provide information on youth experiencing homelessness, especially unaccompanied youth.

<http://cahomelessyouth.library.ca.gov/>

The National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth is a professional membership and advocacy organization with the focus on meeting the educational needs of children experiencing homelessness. They provide professional development, resources, and training support. They also engage in federal and state policy advocacy.

<http://www.naehcy.org/>

## References

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