



# Supporting Students Experiencing Homelessness

## District Approaches to Supports and Funding

Stephanie Levin, Daniel Espinoza, and Michael Griffith



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## Executive Summary

Approximately 1.3 million k–12 public school students across the United States were identified as experiencing homelessness in 2019–20. However, given that identifying students experiencing homelessness is a significant challenge for many districts, this estimate is likely an undercount. Students experiencing homelessness endure a range of living arrangements. Some live with their families in a shelter, in a motel, doubled up with another family, or unsheltered. Others live unaccompanied after being kicked out of their homes. 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 overcome the challenges they face. Under the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, the primary federal law defining protections and providing funding for students experiencing homelessness, districts are required to ensure that students experiencing homelessness have the same access to appropriate education as other students. However, districts face a number of challenges in identifying and serving students experiencing homelessness. The result is under-identification of students and insufficient support provided to students.

This study examines how five school districts—Browning Public Schools, Cincinnati Public Schools, Polk County Public Schools, Santa Fe Public Schools, and Spokane Public Schools—work to serve students experiencing homelessness. Each of these districts has been recognized for its commitment to addressing the needs of students experiencing homelessness. We draw on interview data with homeless program staff, including coordinators, liaisons, and social workers, and budget data to describe how the districts identify and address the needs of students experiencing homelessness, how districts fund and staff their programs, and the challenges that districts confront in meeting the needs of students experiencing homelessness. This study builds on an existing Learning Policy Institute report, *The Need for Increased Federal and State Resources for Students Experiencing Homelessness*, which examines current state and federal policies and funding mechanisms that address students experiencing homelessness in pre-kindergarten through grade 12.

### Findings

**Districts in our study used many creative strategies to identify students experiencing homelessness, but all were certain that they had not reached all eligible students.**

Identifying students experiencing homelessness is challenging. The population of students experiencing homelessness is constantly changing, and families or students may not self-identify due to a lack of knowledge about available rights and services, fear, or embarrassment. To identify students eligible for support and services, program staff in our study used multiple strategies. They educated school personnel and staff from community-based organizations that serve vulnerable populations, conducted public information campaigns, and conducted outreach to families at risk of homelessness through district and school-run programs, such as food pantries. Program staff in our study also developed relationships with organizations serving families experiencing homelessness

to increase referrals. Even with multiple approaches to identifying students, homeless program staff in all districts in our study stated that having additional staff capacity to conduct community outreach would allow them to identify more students experiencing homelessness.

**Districts in our study strived to provide a wide range of services to students experiencing homelessness to safeguard their educational rights.**

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 transportation to students experiencing homelessness to and from their schools 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 some sort of additional academic support, such as tutoring, summer programs, or assistance with post-high school planning.
- **Physical and mental health supports.** Services mentioned by homeless program staff in our study included physicals; visual 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 in order to prevent families from losing their homes.

**Staffing of homeless programs and the availability of school-based services for vulnerable students were essential for study districts' ability to support students experiencing homelessness.**

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. Additional homeless program staff positions in our study districts included transportation coordinator, counselor, grant writer, school-level coordinator, and shelter-based coordinator. Beyond the homeless program staff, study districts utilized school and district staffing to extend



the reach of the homeless program. In study districts in which schools provided many supports for vulnerable students, homeless program staff were able to make referrals, and students experiencing homelessness were folded into existing programs.

**The available funds for homeless programs in our study varied considerably across study districts, with spending between \$128 and \$556 per student.**

Funding sources included federal funds (i.e., McKinney-Vento funding and Title I, Part A), private funding, and grants in all districts in our study; state funds for Santa Fe and Spokane Public Schools; and district funds in Cincinnati Public Schools. Districts in our study were dependent on grants and donations from community groups and other philanthropic organizations to supplement funding provided by the districts' homeless programs. It is important to note that the per-student spending amount does not represent the full cost of the support provided by the districts. When possible, homeless program staff in our study connected students and families to available resources in schools and in the community that do not rely on their districts' homeless program funding.

**Federal and state funds are inadequate, so districts in our study needed to raise funds and blend and braid public and private funding to support their homeless programs.**

While multiple sources of federal and state funding can be used to support these students, there are few funding sources that are required to be spent on students experiencing homelessness. The McKinney-Vento Act is the primary federal funding source to support eliminating barriers to educational access for students experiencing homelessness. However, these funds are not allocated to states based on the number of students experiencing homelessness. Instead, states are allocated funds based on the percentage of Title I funding they receive. States then use a competitive grant process to distribute funds to districts. This leads to a large variation in funding per student experiencing homelessness across states, with many districts receiving no McKinney-Vento funds despite serving eligible students. Further, restrictions on the uses of McKinney-Vento and Title I funds limit districts' ability to address certain needs related to students' housing instability.

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. Private funding, often provided by district nonprofit organizations and philanthropies, expanded the amount of resources and enabled programs to meet students' nonacademic needs, as it did not come with the funding restrictions of federal education funding streams.

## **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 strengthen support and learning 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, federal, state, and district 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 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 fully funded to enable districts to meet its mandate. Funds should be sufficient, proportional to need, and stable to allow 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 may provide Congress with a guide to what would be needed to fully fund this program each year. The funding for students experiencing homelessness under the American Rescue Plan totaled \$800 million, approximately \$530 per student experiencing homelessness based on 2017–18 counts. This level of funding likely comes closer to providing districts what is required to fund their homeless programs; 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 limited the ability of homeless program staff in our study to support families and unaccompanied youth by keeping them 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 on 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 high concentrations 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 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’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.



## 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> However, given that identifying students experiencing homelessness is a significant challenge for many districts, this estimate is likely an undercount.<sup>2</sup> Students experiencing homelessness endure a range of living arrangements. Some live with their families in motels, hotels, or doubled or tripled up with family or friends. Others live on the streets or in shelters. In all these situations, students can lose a sense of security and stability. They may also struggle to find a quiet place to complete homework, to attend school regularly, and to remain engaged in school. Students living unaccompanied after being kicked out 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. Further, housing instability can have negative impacts on students even after the period of homelessness ends.<sup>3</sup>

Children experiencing homelessness may receive support from multiple public agencies addressing housing, human services, health care, and education. School districts in particular are responsible for ensuring that students receive the support they need to engage in their education. Many districts have developed robust services and supports for students experiencing homelessness. However, districts face a number of challenges, including difficulty identifying all students experiencing homelessness and being unable to reliably provide access to needed services. These challenges are associated with a lack of adequate funds.<sup>4</sup>

In this report, we examine the work of five districts that have been identified for their efforts to provide high-quality services to students experiencing homelessness. Our review was designed to better understand the assets and needs of students experiencing homelessness, what districts are able to do to address these needs, how districts fund and staff their programs, and the challenges districts confront in meeting the needs of students experiencing homelessness.

## Background and Context

### Who Are Students Experiencing Homelessness?

Students experiencing homelessness are defined under the federal McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act as “individuals who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence.”<sup>5</sup> The federal law requires that all local education agencies (LEAs)—public school districts, charter schools, and county offices of education—ensure that students experiencing homelessness “have access to the same free, appropriate public education” as other children.<sup>6</sup>

In the 2019–20 school year, districts identified approximately 1.3 million students experiencing homelessness.<sup>7</sup> Given that the identification of students experiencing homelessness is a significant challenge,<sup>8</sup> these numbers are generally assumed to be an undercount.<sup>9</sup> This total reflects a decline of nearly 8% from the previous year and a drop of 15% since 2017–18.<sup>10</sup> The decline in the number of students identified in 2019–20 may be a result of various factors, including the difficulty identifying students experiencing homelessness during the COVID-19 pandemic. The federal policy response during the pandemic may also have temporarily reduced the number of students experiencing homelessness. There may have been greater housing stability due to the moratorium on evictions that was enacted in March 2020 and expanded in September 2020. The expanded child tax credit that passed in 2021 likely reduced the number of students experiencing homelessness, as it cut child poverty by 50%, though the expanded child tax credit ended in December 2021 and the protections against evictions began to be eliminated in August 2021.<sup>11</sup> Eliminating these two policies likely has increased the number of children experiencing homelessness in 2022.<sup>12</sup>

Students experiencing homelessness 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. They may also be unaccompanied youth—students experiencing homelessness who are “not in the physical custody of a parent or guardian.”<sup>13</sup> Based on reports of housing at the initial point of identification, 78% of all students experiencing homelessness were staying doubled up. The next most frequent living situation was staying at a shelter (11%), followed by hotels or motels (7%), and unsheltered (4%).<sup>14</sup> Across living situations, about 9% of students experiencing homelessness are unaccompanied.<sup>15</sup>

Students experiencing homelessness are not a homogeneous group. They are from different racial and ethnic backgrounds, ages, and locales across the country.<sup>16</sup> However, some student groups are disproportionately impacted by homelessness. The likelihood of homelessness tends to be higher among students of color due to factors such as inequitable access to housing and economic opportunity.<sup>17</sup> For example, Black students are 80% more likely to be experiencing homelessness than would be expected based on their numbers among all students. Similarly, Latino/a students are 36% overrepresented and Native American students are 60% overrepresented among students experiencing homelessness.<sup>18</sup>

The underlying reasons for these racial disproportionalities are multiple and systemic. They include discriminatory federal, state, and local government policies enforcing residential racial segregation that excluded Black Americans from wealth accumulation.<sup>19</sup> Racial disproportionalities among students experiencing homelessness are also affected by a higher incidence of child poverty and lower wealth among people who are Black, Latino/a, and Native American.<sup>20</sup> For Native Americans,

in particular, the history of genocide, forced relocation, and compulsory cultural assimilation coupled with substandard and overcrowded housing on tribal lands are part of the structural disparities driving inequitable homelessness rates.<sup>21</sup> Although beyond the scope of this report, addressing these underlying factors will be critical to closing racial disparities.

English learners and students receiving special education services are also overrepresented among students experiencing homelessness.<sup>22</sup> For example, English learners are 70% overrepresented among students experiencing homelessness. That percentage is 25% for students receiving special education services. Ongoing engagement in school can provide these students with access to specialized school services that can be instrumental to their success.

The most common reason for student homelessness is family poverty.<sup>23</sup> However, there are additional reasons and risks for youth being unaccompanied. 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.<sup>24</sup> Another risk factor is the death of a parent or caregiver and challenges in the foster care and social welfare systems. One study found that one third of unaccompanied youth experienced the death of a parent, which contributed to their pathway to homelessness.<sup>25</sup> Youth homelessness can also be rooted in family conflict (including domestic violence, substance abuse, and alcoholism).<sup>26</sup>

Research has identified some factors that are prevalent among families experiencing homelessness. Overwhelmingly, these families are headed by women, and a disproportionate number of them are families with young children.<sup>27</sup> The risk for homelessness is highest among families with children under the age of 6.<sup>28</sup>

At the community level, research points to additional factors that are related to the number of students experiencing homelessness. These include higher levels of opioid use, higher rates of eviction, and higher median rent, as well as lower levels of educational attainment and median income.<sup>29</sup>

## What Are the Needs of Students Experiencing Homelessness?

Homelessness impacts students in many ways. The stress, instability, trauma, and school mobility created by homelessness increase risks to physical, social, and emotional health as well as educational engagement and achievement.

**Physical and mental health.** The experience of homelessness increases risks to students' physical health.<sup>30</sup>

Housing instability, and the acute poverty that frequently precedes homelessness, can lead to food insecurity, an increased reliance on low-quality or fast foods, and an increased likelihood of experiencing hunger.<sup>31</sup> High mobility among families experiencing homelessness can complicate efforts to receive needed health services.<sup>32</sup> Moreover, acute poverty can force students and families to choose between paying for medical services and other necessities, such as food.

The stress, instability, trauma, and school mobility created by homelessness increase risks to physical, social, and emotional health as well as educational engagement and achievement.

Housing instability can separate children from family, school, neighborhood friends, and belongings. This separation disrupts the sense of control over one's life, including feelings of safety and stability,<sup>33</sup> and negatively affects students' social and emotional well-being.<sup>34</sup> Students and family members experiencing homelessness have high rates of depression, anxiety, and symptoms associated with post-traumatic stress disorder, which may emerge from conditions and trauma experienced both before and during the period of homelessness.<sup>35</sup>

**Educational engagement and attainment.** Absent appropriate support, the challenges of experiencing homelessness can negatively affect a student's educational engagement and attainment through several mechanisms.<sup>36</sup> First, the stress and trauma experienced during the period of homelessness can result in increased behavioral issues in the classroom.<sup>37</sup> Research finds that students experiencing homelessness are more likely to be referred for discipline than their peers.<sup>38</sup> A study of students experiencing homelessness in California found that students experiencing homelessness were 50% more likely to receive an out-of-school suspension than other economically disadvantaged students and twice as likely as students not experiencing homelessness. Discipline that leads to school removal (i.e., suspensions and expulsions) can lead to increased disengagement, which may further result in negative behaviors and lower educational outcomes.<sup>39</sup> Studies find that preventive disciplinary and restorative justice approaches focused on repairing relationships and addressing the underlying causes of behavior are more successful at preventing minor behavioral issues from escalating into crises and can support a positive school climate.<sup>40</sup>

School mobility (i.e., changing schools) is a key challenge facing students experiencing homelessness.<sup>41</sup> Homelessness and high mobility are risk factors for lower achievement beyond that of poverty alone.<sup>42</sup> School mobility disrupts routines and relationships and requires students to adapt to a new environment, curricula, teachers, and classmates. School transfers require arranging for credit transfers; when these are denied, it means students have to make up course credits or be retained. Differing graduation requirements and course offerings among sending and receiving schools can be an additional barrier to high school graduation.<sup>43</sup>

The experience of homelessness is associated with lower educational achievement and attainment.<sup>44</sup> For instance, a study of student homelessness in New York City found that fewer than a quarter of students experiencing homelessness met grade-level standards in English language arts (23%) and mathematics (20%) in the 2016–17 school year, while approximately twice as many housed students met grade-level standards in English language arts (43%) and mathematics (40%). Also, over half of students who experienced homelessness at some point during high school (56%) graduated within 4 years compared to 77% of students who were consistently housed.<sup>45</sup> Studies also suggest that highly mobile students and students experiencing homelessness have lower initial reading and mathematics scores, as well as slower rates of growth in the year experiencing homelessness, even when compared with peers who are from families earning low incomes but more residentially stable.<sup>46</sup> In one study, mathematics achievement was slowed for both the year in which homelessness occurred and the following year.<sup>47</sup>

Students experiencing homelessness have a range of physical, emotional, and academic needs, which signal a need for a whole child approach to supporting them.<sup>48</sup> Such an approach is consistent with the science of learning and development, which shows that stability, consistency, trust, and belonging are foundational to effective learning.<sup>49</sup>



## What Role Do Educators Play in Supporting Students Experiencing Homelessness?

The federal McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act requires that all LEAs—public school districts, charter schools, and county offices of education—ensure that students experiencing homelessness “have access to the same free, appropriate public education” as other children.<sup>50</sup> In addition, the McKinney-Vento Act includes requirements for all LEAs, regardless of whether they receive McKinney-Vento funding, to support students experiencing homelessness.

### Legal Requirements of Local Education Agencies and Homeless Liaisons

The federal McKinney-Vento Act includes requirements that all LEAs, regardless of whether they receive federal funding, support students experiencing homelessness. Among these requirements is to designate an appropriate staff person to act as the liaison for children and youth who are experiencing homelessness. The law mandates that each LEA shall ensure that:

- according to the child’s or youth’s best interest, children and youth experiencing homelessness can continue attending their school of origin for the remainder of the school year or enroll in any school that non-homeless students who live in the attendance area are eligible to attend;
- children and youth experiencing homelessness are immediately enrolled in school, regardless of ability to produce immunization records, proof of residency, or other documentation;
- academic, health, birth, and guardianship records and evaluations for special services for students and youth experiencing homelessness are available in a timely fashion when a child enters a new school;
- children and youth experiencing homelessness are identified by school personnel through outreach and coordination activities with other entities and agencies;
- children and youth experiencing homelessness are enrolled in and have a full and equal opportunity to succeed in school;
- families, children, and youth experiencing homelessness have access to and receive educational services, including services through Head Start programs, early intervention services under Part C of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, and other preschool programs administered by the local education agency;
- families, children, and youth experiencing homelessness receive referrals to health care services, dental services, mental health and substance abuse services, housing services, and other appropriate services;
- the parents or guardians of children and youth experiencing homelessness are informed of the educational and related opportunities available to their children and are provided with meaningful opportunities to participate in the education of their children;
- public notice of the educational rights of children and youth experiencing homelessness is disseminated in locations frequented by parents or guardians of such children and youth, and unaccompanied youth, including schools, shelters, public libraries, and soup kitchens, in a manner and form understandable to the parents and guardians of children and youth experiencing homelessness as well as unaccompanied youth;

- enrollment disputes are mediated in accordance with the law;
- the parent or guardian of a homeless child or youth, and any unaccompanied youth, is fully informed of all transportation services, including transportation to the school of origin;
- school personnel providing services receive professional development and other support; and
- unaccompanied youth are enrolled in school and have opportunities to meet the same challenging state academic standards as the state establishes for other children and youth, and that these youth are informed of their status as independent students for college financial aid.

Source: Grants for states and local activities for the education of homeless children and youth, 42 U.S.C. § 11432 (g)(3) and 42 U.S.C. § 11432 (g)(6)(A) (2002). <https://uscode.house.gov/view.xhtml?req=granuleid:USC-2000-title42-section11432&num=0&edition=2000>

While the law does not mandate that the district provide specific services to students experiencing homelessness, it does require LEAs to designate an appropriate staff person to serve as the local liaison for students experiencing homelessness. McKinney-Vento education liaisons are responsible for ensuring that the rights and processes provided to students experiencing homelessness outlined in the federal law are executed.

To help address the needs of students experiencing homelessness, federal, state, and local resources are available. However, there are few funding streams that are dedicated specifically to students experiencing homelessness. The two main ongoing federal funding sources are the McKinney-Vento Act and set-asides from the federal Title I, Part A program. In addition, the American Rescue Plan contained \$800 million in new one-time funding to states for districts to identify, support, and engage students experiencing homelessness. However, this funding is not recurring, and it was not available to districts at the time of this study.

LPI research has found that just four states provide targeted funding to help students experiencing homelessness: California, Massachusetts, New York, and Washington. Spokane, in Washington, is the only district in our study in one of these states. Finally, some districts supplement these resources with a mix of public and nonpublic resources. These investments are described in greater detail later in the report when we examine how districts in our study meet the needs of students experiencing homelessness.

## About This Study

This study examines how districts address the needs of students experiencing homelessness, the resources they use, the challenges they face, and their efforts to confront these challenges. This study builds on an existing LPI report, *The Need for Increased Federal and State Resources for Students Experiencing Homelessness*, which examines current state and federal policies and funding mechanisms that address students experiencing homelessness in pre-kindergarten through grade 12.

Three research questions guided our inquiry:

1. How do districts support students experiencing homelessness?
2. How do districts fund and staff their programs supporting students experiencing homelessness?
3. What challenges do districts confront in meeting the needs of students experiencing homelessness?

## Data and Methods

For the study, we purposefully selected five school districts receiving McKinney-Vento funds that have been recognized for their commitment to addressing the needs of students experiencing homelessness. To identify districts, we reviewed documents and publications (e.g., research studies, annual reports, peer-reviewed journal articles) and spoke with national experts who work with McKinney-Vento liaisons. From a list of 13 identified districts, we selected 5: Browning Public Schools (Montana), Cincinnati Public Schools (Ohio), Polk County Public Schools (Florida), Santa Fe Public Schools (New Mexico), and Spokane Public Schools (Washington).<sup>51</sup> These districts were purposefully selected to represent the range of contexts in which districts operate. Across the set of selected districts, we sought to ensure a range of services and approaches, including transportation, extended day, family supports, community collaboration, and funding sources. Selected districts are located in different regions of the country. As Table 1 shows, the districts vary in urbanicity, size, and student demographics.<sup>52</sup>

**Table 1**  
**District, Student, and Community Characteristics, 2019–20 School Year**

	Browning PS (MT)	Cincinnati PS (OH)	Polk County PS (FL)	Santa Fe PS (NM)	Spokane PS (WA)
<b>District characteristics</b>					
Students experiencing homelessness (#)	237	2,014	3,669	936	1,085
Students experiencing homelessness (%)	12.0%	5.5%	3.3%	7.1%	3.5%
Urbanicity	Rural Fringe	City Large	Suburb Midsize	City Small	City Midsize
Student enrollment	1,982	36,674	112,559	13,105	31,211

	Browning PS (MT)	Cincinnati PS (OH)	Polk County PS (FL)	Santa Fe PS (NM)	Spokane PS (WA)
<b>Student characteristics</b>					
Students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch	100.0%	80.0%	49.0%	74.0%	60.0%
Students with IEPs (%)	12.9%	20.9%	14.5%	15.1%	15.8%
English learners (%)	0.0%	49.6%	9.0%	26%	6.9%
<b>Race/Ethnicity</b>					
% Black or African American	0.1%	61.2%	20.3%	0.9%	3.3%
% Hispanic or Latino	0.5%	7.9%	37.3%	79.8%	11.2%
% Asian or Asian/Pacific Islander	0.1%	1.4%	1.6%	1.6%	2.3%
% American Indian/Alaskan Native	95.1%	0.1%	0.3%	2.1%	1.0%
% White	3.5%	22.8%	37.6%	15.0%	67.0%
% Two or more races	0.8%	6.5%	2.8%	0.4%	13.2%
% Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander	0.0%	0.1%	0.2%	0.2%	2.0%
<b>Community characteristics</b>					
Communitywide percentage of families with income below the poverty line	33.2%	33.4%	20.4%	16.7%	16.2%
Community median household income	\$30,976	\$38,365	\$50,600	\$57,170	\$63,556

Sources: Montana Department of Education. [2019–20 district report card: Browning Elementary](#) and [2019–20 district report card: Browning High School](#); Ohio Department of Education. [Enrollment by student demographic \(district\) – overview](#); Florida Department of Education. [Florida Department of Education pk–12 education information services district homeless record counts 2019–20 survey 5 final data](#); Florida Department of Education. [Education information portal](#); New Mexico Department of Education. [STARS enrollment data 2019–20](#); New Mexico Public Education Department. [New Mexico Vistas: Santa Fe Public Schools](#); Washington Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction. [Report card: Spokane School District](#); Washington Office of Superintendent of Public Education. [Report card enrollment 2019–20 school year](#); New Mexico Public Education Department. [Homeless students counts, school years 2010–20](#); U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. [Common Core of Data, 2019–20 district data](#)

For each of the districts, we:

- Gathered and reviewed public documents that provided information on services and funding from public websites.
- Conducted 60-minute semistructured interviews with McKinney-Vento liaisons in each district. Liaisons were invited to include other staff involved with serving students experiencing homelessness. Overall, 12 district staff participated in interviews—between

1 and 4 district staff in each district. We recorded and transcribed interviews and used a qualitative software package, Dedoose, to identify predetermined topics and emergent themes.

- Collected financial (revenue and costs) and staffing data through public documentation, a post-interview survey, or an additional interview. (See Table 2.) Although we intended to gather detailed data on the cost of services, we did not receive sufficient cost data to reliably analyze and report.

**Table 2**  
**Sources of Financial and Staffing Data**

	Browning PS (MT)	Cincinnati PS (OH)	Polk County PS (FL)	Santa Fe PS (NM)	Spokane PS (WA)
Revenue data	Unavailable	District website	Post-interview survey	Post-interview survey	Provided by the district (SY 2020–21)
Expenditure data	Interview	District website	Interview	Interview	Provided by the district (SY 2020–21)
Staffing data	Interview	District website	Post-interview survey	Post-interview survey	Interview

Source: Cincinnati Public Schools Financial Information. <https://www.cps-k12.org/domain/99> (accessed 08/09/22).

## District Programs in the Study

**Browning Public Schools** comprises two colocated school districts, Browning Elementary School District and Browning High School District. In the heart of the Blackfeet Nation Reservation in Montana, Browning Public Schools is the primary k–12 education system for the Blackfeet Nation, with 95% of the student population identifying as Blackfeet. All students in the district are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch, and 12% were identified as experiencing homelessness in the 2019–20 school year. To support students experiencing homelessness, Browning Public Schools runs the [Families in Transition program](#), which “provides support to students in homeless situations to ensure they receive the same free, appropriate public education as provided to other children and youth.” The program describes its work as removing barriers to students’ academic success, such as access to school supplies, laundry facilities, child care for teen parents, mental health care, and transportation.

**Cincinnati Public Schools** is a large, urban district in Ohio. In the 2019–20 school year, 80% of students were eligible for free or reduced-price lunch, and 6% were identified as experiencing homelessness. Cincinnati has 74 community learning centers, which provide health services, counseling, after-school programs, nutrition classes, parent and family engagement programs, career and college access services, youth development activities, mentoring, and arts programming. To support students experiencing homelessness, the district runs [Project Connect](#), described as a program that “provides advocacy paired with specialized educational services and lifestyle enrichment opportunities for children who have neither a voice, nor a choice, in experiencing

homelessness.” In addition to providing transportation, school supplies, enrollment help, and clothing for eligible students, Project Connect offers an 8-week summer academic and enrichment course and provides tutoring and enrichment opportunities through after-school programs.

**Polk County Public Schools** is a large county school system in Florida. In the 2019–20 school year, 49% of students were eligible for free or reduced-price lunch, and 4% were identified as experiencing homelessness. Polk County Public Schools runs the [Homeless Education Advocates Restoring the Hope \(HEARTH\) Project](#). The HEARTH Project is “dedicated to assisting homeless and in-transition families and children by eliminating barriers to school enrollment, attendance, stability, and overall academic success.” The project describes its work as ensuring students’ rights related to school selection, enrollment, transportation, and free meals; providing information to parents, youth, and the community; working with community partners; and seeking financial resources to support the program.

**Santa Fe Public Schools** in the 2019–20 school year had 74% of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch and 7% of students identified as experiencing homelessness. This predominantly Latino/a school district has a Bilingual and Multicultural Education Program at 11 schools and operates 6 community schools. To support students experiencing homelessness, Santa Fe Public Schools runs the [Adelante Program](#), which has the mission “to strengthen opportunities for the academic achievement and life success of Santa Fe children and youth who are experiencing homelessness.” The program advertises support for students experiencing homelessness and their families, including school supplies, clothing, groceries, tutoring, mentorship, and case management. Families can access program information and services in Spanish and English.

**Spokane Public Schools** in the 2019–20 school year had 60% of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch and 4% of students identified as experiencing homelessness. The district provides a robust portfolio of health services to students. In addition to mandated school counselors, Spokane Public Schools also has a Home/Hospital Teaching program that provides in-person instruction for students unable to attend school for more than 4 weeks because of health reasons and uses positive behavior interventions and support in its approach to student discipline. To support students experiencing homelessness, Spokane Public Schools runs the [Homeless Education and Resource Team \(HEART\)](#) program, which aims to “support and meet the educational needs of students in short-term or temporary housing situations; maintain consistency of the educational process while living in transitional housing; ensure the same opportunity to meet high academic standards as all students; and engage parents, school, and the community as full partners in the educational process of students who are in transitional situations.” The program publicizes a range of supports for students experiencing homelessness, including coordinating transportation, visiting school buildings, and networking with community agencies.

## Study Limitations

This report should be useful to districts and policymakers looking for ideas on how to create supports and systems that help students experiencing homelessness. However, the study has some key limitations. First, it addresses only the specific role of school districts, and in particular, their homeless programs. It does not address any separate strategies schools use or the supports provided by other social service agencies, such as in housing or health and human services. Second, while the districts selected were identified as having a robust system of supports for students experiencing homelessness, we do not know the quality of implementation, whether students and families feel the supports met their needs, or the effectiveness of those supports in creating better educational outcomes for students.

In this report, we describe five districts' approaches to supporting students experiencing homelessness. We detail how the districts' homeless programs identify and support students experiencing homelessness, how they fund and staff their programs, and the challenges they confront. We conclude with a discussion of key findings and offer recommendations for federal, state, and local policy.

## What Can Districts Do to Support Students Experiencing Homelessness?

Students experiencing homelessness face multiple, intersecting challenges that can interfere with their opportunities to learn. In each of the study districts, homeless programs utilized district, school, and community-based organization staff to identify and support students experiencing homelessness. Partnerships with schools, shelters, food banks, medical providers, nonprofits, child welfare agencies, and local housing authorities led to the identification of more students experiencing homelessness and access to a broader set of services to meet their needs. In this section, we describe the strategies districts in our study used to identify and support students experiencing homelessness. We then turn to how they funded that work and the factors that enabled and challenged their efforts.

### Identifying Students Experiencing Homelessness

Identifying students who are experiencing homelessness is a challenge. The population of students experiencing homelessness is constantly changing, and families or students may not self-identify due to a lack of knowledge about available rights and services, fear, or embarrassment.<sup>53</sup> All districts in our study distribute disclosure of homelessness forms to identify students upon school entry; however, because housing status changes over the course of the year, this is insufficient to identify all students experiencing homelessness during the school year. Homeless program staff in all of the districts we studied described using multiple strategies to identify students experiencing homelessness.

**Public education campaigns.** In order to increase the rate of self-referrals, district staff in our study advertised available services to the public through posters, social media, podcasts, and radio ads. For example, three of the districts in our study (Cincinnati Public Schools, Polk County Public Schools, and Spokane Public Schools) put up posters at popular community locations to publicize the services that they offer to students experiencing homelessness.

**Continuous education of school staff.** Districts rely on school staff to refer students who are experiencing homelessness to the program. To do that, school staff need to understand 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. In order to increase referrals from school personnel, each study district conducted periodic training for school staff that included content on how to recognize students experiencing homelessness and refer them for support. As one liaison described it, “A lot of the work honestly has just been educating the staff. Doing trainings [for] every single grade level, every single department, food service, transportation, maintenance; just explaining to them what our program is about, some things they can look for, how to do referrals.”

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In one district, to address staff turnover and the need for regular refreshers, staff disseminated documents to school personnel to provide information and raise awareness. For instance, the district's McKinney-Vento liaison distributed a quarterly newsletter to school personnel that provided an overview of the district's program to support students and families experiencing homelessness, answered questions that frequently emerged during training sessions, and shared poems or personal messages from students experiencing homelessness. Staff in another district developed and disseminated PowerPoint presentations on discrete program components (e.g., transportation, fees and fines, identification).

**Direct outreach to vulnerable families.** In addition, districts in our study shared information about available services for students experiencing homelessness through district and school-run programs serving vulnerable populations, such as food pantries. Sometimes they also conducted direct outreach to participants of those programs. As one McKinney-Vento liaison explained, "We were contacting families that were being referred for gift cards, for food assistance [for example]. And we were able to identify families that were also experiencing homelessness during that time and let them know there was another component to [our services]."

**Relationships with other organizations serving vulnerable families.** In order to increase referrals, study districts developed relationships with other organizations that serve families who are experiencing homelessness or are likely to experience homelessness. For example:

- Browning Public Schools collaborated with motels and hotels to identify students experiencing homelessness.
- Santa Fe Public Schools worked with local utility companies to determine which families were in danger of having their utilities disconnected, which is a marker of potential housing insecurity. Adelante Program staff were part of a communitywide Homeless Task Force made up of multiple community organizations that coordinated to identify and support unaccompanied youth in shelters.
- Cincinnati Public Schools developed relationships with local shelters that send weekly logs of families staying in the shelter. They also developed a memorandum of understanding (MOU) with the eviction courts and are automatically notified when a student's family is facing eviction.

### **Project Connect's Multipronged Approach to Identification**

The first step to supporting students and families experiencing homelessness is identifying them. Cincinnati Public Schools' Project Connect takes innovative, multifaceted approaches to promptly and effectively identify students and families in need of support. In addition to required identification strategies such as inquiring about housing stability on school enrollment forms and training school staff, Project Connect staff disseminate surveys to students and families multiple times per year asking about housing stability. Staff also have developed partnerships with community and city agencies to expand their ability to identify students eligible for services. For example, Project Connect embeds a staff person at a local shelter, which has enabled the program to identify and directly serve families where they are staying. It also has helped the program develop a closer partnership with additional local shelters, all of which send weekly logs of families staying in the shelter. Program staff compare these logs against records of students enrolled in the district.

Another innovative strategy is the MOU that Cincinnati Public Schools developed with the Hamilton County Clerk of Courts and the University of Cincinnati School of Law. The agreement ensures that Project Connect staff are automatically notified when a family in the district is facing eviction. Previously, program staff manually searched the names of individuals being evicted to see if they had a child enrolled in the district, a time-intensive process. The Project Connect program manager estimated that during the 2021–22 school year, this agreement was leading to identification of about 70 students per month.

This partnership enables program staff to proactively respond to families in immediate need of assistance. An up-to-date resource page with links to funding sources for rental assistance, tools for locating legal aid, and resources for understanding protections for students experiencing homelessness is one example of the outreach materials they provide to families identified through the MOU. This outreach is handled sensitively, as the Project Connect program manager noted: “We do approach conversations with the families very delicately so that we’re not retraumatizing them. ... When we call, we call as a support. We call to say, ‘We want you to know you have these rights [like staying in your school of origin].’ That alone just eases our parents’ minds.”

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.” In a few study districts, staff described difficulties of reaching English learners, because of language barriers or because these student groups were small in number, and unaccompanied youth, who may be more isolated than their unhoused peers in the custody of a parent.

## Providing Services to Children and Families Experiencing Homelessness

Once students experiencing homelessness are identified, districts also must uphold their educational rights, ensuring that they attend school and participate fully in school activities, stay in the same school if in their 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. Districts must also ensure that students are afforded all they are entitled to under other statutes (IDEA, Title I, Part A).

Across study districts, program staff worked to support students experiencing homelessness by providing access to essential items, shelter, transportation, academic services, mental and physical health services, and family resources. Program staff in all districts in our study discussed prioritizing students’ most basic needs, such as access to clothing, food, school supplies, and securing short-term shelter, before addressing other needs. Below, we highlight examples of study districts’ approaches to providing these services.

**Basic necessities.** Children experiencing homelessness often have insufficient access to food, hygiene products, clothing, shoes, and school supplies. All the district programs in our study provided students experiencing homelessness these basic necessities directly or through community partners, such as a local food bank. For instance, Browning School District had partnerships with local nonprofits that provide emergency food to unaccompanied youth, food pantries in schools, and fresh produce and meals to send home with students on the weekend. Santa Fe Public School’s Adelante Program and Cincinnati’s Project Connect both operated centrally located warehouses where families experiencing homelessness could go to receive essential goods, such as food, backpacks, school supplies, and clothing.

## Families in Transition’s Approach to Services: Engaging Families With Respect

The Browning Public Schools district, located on the land of the Blackfeet Nation, is nestled among the breathtaking eastern slopes of Glacier National Park in northern Montana. The district serves 2,000 students, many of whom contend with deep poverty and geographic isolation. All students in the district are eligible for free or reduced-priced lunch, and many students’ families struggle with high unemployment and inadequate housing, with multiple families living in shared spaces. While 10% of Browning Public Schools students have been officially identified as experiencing homelessness, program officials estimate that the numbers are likely three times that amount.

The Browning district differs from the other districts in how it organizes its supports for students experiencing homelessness. Rather than having a “homeless program” focused exclusively on serving students and families experiencing homelessness, Browning has a Families in Transition (FIT) program, referred to by the community as *Āisspoōmmootsiyō•p*, meaning “we help each other.” The FIT program is a parent community outreach program that serves the entire community. The district braids revenue sources to provide supports to students experiencing homelessness, students in foster care or kinship care, and other arrangements supported by the district. The FIT program also provides a community-based higher education program and operates a child care center for district staff and teen parents. As the FIT program director shared, “It’s really in *The Wizard of Oz*, the behind the curtains, that we figure out, Are they McKinney-Vento? Are they foster care? Are they a grandparent? And if they don’t fit any of that, then we’ll just support them anyway.”

To serve all students, but especially students experiencing homelessness, the FIT program focuses on relationship building. It does this by respectfully engaging with all community members. The director of FIT explained, “We’ve really gotten away from using the word homeless.... And a lot of what that has done for us is really break down those barriers between us and the families.... Not only is it culturally contextual; it’s just friendlier.”

The FIT program also builds relationships by providing tangible supports and services. The FIT program director explained that in Native American communities, gift-giving is a way to respect and honor one another. When the FIT program provides supplies or food, it helps establish trust and build a relationship. An example of the supports and services provided by the program is access to food pantries. There are five food pantries throughout the district: three in schools, one in the administrative building, and one in a community that is 40 miles away. The food pantries are open to all students, but the FIT program works to ensure that students and families experiencing homelessness are served. Notably, students are able to pick out the food they want to bring home. This provides students with a more dignified shopping experience centering self-sufficiency.

**Transportation.** As required by the McKinney-Vento Act, all districts in our study provided transportation to students experiencing homelessness to attend school (either continuing at their schools of origin or going to new neighborhood schools) and participate in extracurricular activities, tutoring services, and other appointments. One liaison said, “Our school buses will transport ... the students wherever they need to [go].” Some districts in the study also provided transportation services to families—using district vehicles, providing bus passes, or covering mileage costs. For

example, Spokane’s HEART program provides public transportation passes to families so they can continue to engage in their children’s education through parent–teacher conferences, orchestra performances, and other events.

Homeless program staff in our study described transportation as a large cost for their programs. As one McKinney-Vento liaison put it, “Our district spends a ton on transporting our students in homeless situations all over the city across district.” Coordinating transportation was also time-consuming, particularly for programs in our study serving many students. The two programs with large numbers of students experiencing homelessness hired a transportation coordinator. This approach is consistent with research from other districts, which has found that districts ranked coordinating transportation as one of their highest costs and one of the most time-consuming tasks.<sup>54</sup>

### **The HEART Program Works to Ensure That Students Can Travel to School and Beyond**

Spokane Public Schools’ homeless program, the HEART program, has been recognized for its wide-ranging efforts to ensure that access to transportation is not a barrier to participating in school, school events, and other activities that benefit students and families experiencing homelessness—everything from medical appointments to late-night basketball games.

The HEART program is fairly unique in that it has a full-time transportation and intake specialist. This staff member coordinates transportation services, relying on a variety of methods, including school buses, city bus passes, mileage reimbursement, and a new program called HopSkipDrive.

HopSkipDrive is a novel approach to meeting the transportation needs of students and families when other methods are not available. Spokane Public Schools and the HEART program have partnered with HopSkipDrive, an “Uber-like” service that contracts with school districts to provide safe and reliable transportation. Through the HopSkipDrive program, an app matches schools and families with drivers. All drivers must pass a 15-point driver certification and have 5 years of caregiving experience. Rides are scheduled in advance and are tracked by GPS from pickup to drop-off. Drivers wear bright orange shirts and have stickers on their cars. Students have a code word only they know to be sure they have the right driver. Then the driver will ask another question to make sure they have the right student.

Source: Pham, T. (February, 2021). Spokane Public Schools partners with rideshare app for students. KREM2. <https://www.krem.com/article/news/education/back-2-school/spokane-public-school-student-ride-share-service/293-293db059-60b6-49cf-b369-ebd3166b2428> (accessed 05/24/22).

**Academic support.** All of the districts in the study provided students experiencing homelessness some sort of additional academic support, such as tutoring, summer programs, or assistance with planning for after high school. In some cases, students experiencing homelessness were referred to school or district programs that included other students in need of academic support. For instance, the Santa Fe Adelante Program connected students to tutoring services offered at each school, and the Cincinnati Project Connect program linked students experiencing homelessness to school-based tutoring supports and ACT preparation courses. The Cincinnati district places tutoring programs in schools with the highest percentage of students experiencing homelessness or in schools in which the achievement gap is greatest between students experiencing homelessness and other students.

Other programs in our study offered services specifically for students experiencing homelessness. For instance, Polk County’s Homeless Education Advocates Restoring the Hope (HEARTH) Project offered 30 or more sessions of tutoring to a minimum of 100 students experiencing homelessness each year and tracked students’ progress related to access to tutoring. According to the McKinney-Vento liaison:

We try to make sure we give them at least 30 sessions. I track all students who have received tutoring ... tracking whether or not they matriculated, retained, and promoted. So, every single student that received tutoring last year was promoted, which is what we want to see.

### **The HEARTH Project’s Tutoring Program Promotes Academic Success**

The name of the HEARTH Project, Polk County Public Schools’ homeless program, stands for Homeless Education Advocates Restoring the Hope. The program is dedicated to eliminating barriers to school enrollment, attendance, stability, and overall academic success. The HEARTH Project tracks a set of data that includes outcomes for students experiencing homelessness, such as school attendance and grade promotion. Staff noted that grade promotion was the weakest outcome. To increase the number of students being promoted, the HEARTH Project enacted a tutoring program. The tutoring initiative serves a minimum of 100 students each year, and each student participates in at least 30 sessions. HEARTH Project staff noted that every student who had received tutoring in the previous year had been promoted.

Ben Rush, Polk County’s McKinney-Vento liaison, explained, “We’re ... providing support year in and year out with the goal of these kids being promoted and eventually graduating. We see education and the students eventually graduating as the best chance they have for getting out of the cycle or preventing [homelessness] from happening.... If we can keep them in school and they can get that education, they’re going to have a much better chance down the road of not being in that situation again.”

**Physical and mental health supports.** All districts in our study ensured that students experiencing homelessness had access to physical and mental health supports provided in the community. Services mentioned by homeless program staff included physicals; vision and hearing screening; mobile medical services; counseling; and classes on safety, safe sexual behaviors, and recognizing teen dating abuse. For instance:

- Cincinnati Public Schools provided complete physicals, visual and hearing screenings, and access to a mobile medical service. This included offering physicals to help families get health insurance.
- Santa Fe Public Schools secured grant funds that were used to assist families with medical bills.
- Spokane arranged for medical and dental appointments for its students and, like Cincinnati and Santa Fe, helped families secure health insurance.

Mental health supports included mental health therapists, counseling, and therapeutic and social emotional groups. For example, one program liaison in our study described the district’s approach to meeting mental health needs: “We have in all of our schools ... resource coordinators, and we contract with mental health partners. So we refer our students to counseling, and we [also] provide therapeutic writing groups in several of our high schools.”

**Specialized support for unaccompanied youth.** District staff in our study identified unaccompanied youth as the group of students who are most at risk. Many unaccompanied youth have been rejected by their families. A Cincinnati Public Schools McKinney-Vento liaison explained, “We find that a lot of times [LGBTQ+] students come out to their families, [and] they’re kicked out.” Staff in two districts described insufficient lodging for unaccompanied youth as a core challenge. As one program liaison explained:

We don’t have a great shelter for our teens at this point. We have a basic shelter downtown for teens. And it’s not really a place you want to send your doubled-up kids that maybe are not as streetwise.

Homeless program staff in our study noted that unaccompanied youth, because they were missing the support and guidance of family, faced barriers to accessing education, staying engaged, and achieving in school, unique even among students experiencing homelessness. A program staff member at Polk County Public Schools responsible exclusively for unaccompanied high school students and high school students without younger siblings shared her objectives of “making sure students are on track for graduation, so that way they can get out of the cycle of homelessness.” Another major role of program staff in our study is to help students navigate situations when they have to act as adults, such as accessing health care and mental health care. Some regular activities supporting unaccompanied youth include:

- Cincinnati Public Schools has a program staff member with an office at the local youth shelter;
- Cincinnati Public Schools quarterly trains youth shelter staff members to meet student needs, including providing information on the magnet school enrollment process to ensure that students experiencing homelessness have similar academic opportunities to other students;
- Browning Public Schools uses grant funding from the Housing and Urban Development-Youth Homeless Demonstration Program, an initiative to reduce the number of youth experiencing homelessness through coordinated community approaches, to cover the cost of prepaid cell phones to stay connected to unaccompanied youth;<sup>55</sup> and
- Santa Fe Public Schools program staff work with a Homeless Task Force made up of local community organizations to identify and support unaccompanied youth in shelters.

**Supports for families.** Students’ ability to successfully engage in school is greatly influenced by their home life and family situations. Because of this, study districts’ homeless programs offered a range of supports to families experiencing homelessness. For example, program staff described linking families to:

- child care for young children (Browning, Santa Fe);
- preschool application and enrollment training and support (Cincinnati, Santa Fe);

- counseling and classes for parents (Cincinnati);
- transportation services and bus passes for families (Cincinnati, Spokane); and
- resources on housing options and eviction prevention (Cincinnati, Santa Fe).

In each study district, program staff helped families find emergency housing by referring them to a shelter or sometimes paying for a hotel room when shelters were full. One district liaison said, “Just today, we had a family who was sleeping in a car and [had] nowhere to go; shelters are full. So we got them a hotel for the night.”

Across all districts in our study, homeless program staff occasionally provided families with emergency funding for medical bills, housing deposits, overdue utility bills, or car repairs in order to prevent them from losing housing. However, funding for this support was limited and had to come from private sources due to restrictions on how general and federal education funds can be spent. All program staff described wanting to do more to prevent homelessness. When asked to describe the one thing that would be most helpful in supporting students experiencing homelessness, one McKinney-Vento liaison’s simple response was “housing.”

When asked to describe the one thing that would be most helpful in supporting students experiencing homelessness, one McKinney-Vento liaison’s simple response was “housing.”

## How Do Districts Fund and Staff Their Homeless Programs?

The prior section described identification strategies and supports that study districts coordinated on behalf of students experiencing homelessness. This section provides information about how the study districts funded and staffed their homeless programs. We had intended to gather information on the total expenditures and staffing that supported districts' programs. However, the information was not readily available because many of the services provided to students experiencing homelessness are provided through school programs serving a range of vulnerable students or through community nonprofit organizations. As a result, the information provided in this chapter does not represent the full set of resources required to support students experiencing homelessness. It only represents the funding and staffing directly allocated to the homeless program in each study district. Below, we provide a brief description of the available federal and state funding dedicated to students experiencing homelessness and then describe how four of the districts in the study funded and staffed their programs.

### Available Federal and State Funding

Insufficient funding is a common challenge districts face when trying to serve students experiencing homelessness.<sup>56</sup> While many sources of federal and state funding can be used to support these students, the available resources are modest in scope and are stretched to support many different purposes. Only two funding sources are required to be spent on students experiencing homelessness, and they are neither available to every district nor substantial enough to meet the range of needs students experience.<sup>57</sup>

While many sources of federal and state funding can be used to support [students experiencing homelessness], the available resources are modest in scope and are stretched to support many different purposes.

**Federal funding.** The two main ongoing federal funding sources dedicated to students experiencing homelessness are the McKinney-Vento Act and set-asides from the federal Title I, Part A program. The American Rescue Plan Act represents a third federal funding source for meeting the needs of students experiencing homelessness; however, it is only a one-time infusion of resources.

The McKinney-Vento Act is the primary federal funding source to support eliminating barriers to educational access for students experiencing homelessness. Grants to states through the program totaled \$106.5 million in 2020–21. However, these funds are not allocated to states based on actual student experiencing homelessness enrollment but based on the percentage of Title I funding that they receive. This leads to a large variation in funding per student experiencing homelessness across states. For example, using 2019–20 school year data (the most recent available), Utah received the lowest amount per student experiencing homelessness at \$38 per student, while Vermont received the most at \$287 per student.<sup>58</sup>

Beyond uneven funding allocations, states distribute McKinney-Vento funds to local education agencies (LEAs) applying a variety of methods. While all states distribute at least 75% of funding to LEAs via a competitive grants process, some states, like Illinois, distribute McKinney-Vento



funds to all school districts in their state.<sup>59</sup> Because states use a competitive grant process, many districts that serve students experiencing homelessness receive no federal funding. In 2018–19, the districts that received federal funding educated approximately two thirds of all identified students experiencing homelessness. That means that about one third of all identified students experiencing homelessness, approximately 500,000 students, are educated in districts that do not receive any additional federal funding.<sup>60</sup> Also, there are no other mandates about these subgrants, which means that states can decide to distribute larger grants to fewer districts or smaller grants to more districts within their state and can award different per-pupil amounts to districts. The distribution mechanism of this funding leads to substantial variance across and within states. Of the 4,400 districts that did receive McKinney-Vento funding, the average grant was \$18,595, and the average funding per student experiencing homelessness was \$60.12.<sup>61</sup>

McKinney-Vento district grants have a range of authorized activities detailing what they can be spent on. Allowable uses include tutoring; provision of referral services for medical, dental, and mental health services; attracting, engaging, and retaining students experiencing homelessness in school; summer programs; school supplies; and emergency assistance needed to enable school attendance.<sup>62</sup> McKinney-Vento district grants cannot be used for other expenses that might keep a family housed or address students' nonacademic needs, such as paying utility bills or emergency expenses.

In addition to McKinney-Vento grants, the federal government requires local education agencies to set aside some of their Title I, Part A funding for students experiencing homelessness.<sup>63</sup> Title I, Part A funds provide assistance to LEAs with high numbers and also high percentages of students from low-income backgrounds. Districts have discretion to determine the amount of Title I, Part A funding to set aside.<sup>64</sup> For example, they can multiply the number of students experiencing homelessness identified by the district by the Title I, Part A per-pupil allocation or match the amount of McKinney-Vento subgrant dollars received by the district, if applicable. District Title I, Part A set-asides are not reported publicly, so it is unclear how much money is reserved for supporting students experiencing homelessness.

There are also restrictions on what Title I, Part A set-aside funds can be used for. For example, these funds can be used to purchase shoes needed for physical education classes, glasses, food, immunizations, expanded learning time, Advanced Placement fees, and college entrance exam test fees. The statute and guidance dictate that services provided using these funds be reasonable and necessary to assist students experiencing homelessness to access education opportunities and that funds are used as a last resort when other public and private funds are expended.<sup>65</sup>

**State funding.** Only a handful of states provide specific line-item funding for students experiencing homelessness in their school funding formulas and education programs. A national review by Learning Policy Institute staff found that only four states do so: California, Massachusetts, New York, and Washington.<sup>66</sup>

## Funding for Study District Homeless Programs

Four of the districts in our study supplied us with financial data for their homeless programs. Table 3 shows that each of these districts reported blending multiple funding streams from federal, state, district, and private funds. However, it is important to remember that this does not account for all the funding that was used to support students experiencing homelessness. These were funds

that four study districts identified as specifically supporting district operation of the homeless program. Each of the four study districts relied on additional services provided by schools and nonprofits beyond those reflected in these budgets to serve students experiencing homelessness. As a result, the data presented should be considered illustrative of the methods and level of funding for the operation of district programs but not descriptive of the amount of money spent supporting students experiencing homelessness. The four study districts reported spending between \$128 and \$556 per student on homeless program operations.

**Table 3**  
**Sources of Funding for District-Level Homeless Program Operations**

	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 from district	\$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		
Total	\$980,241	\$468,250	\$520,135	\$379,203
Total expenditure per student experiencing homelessness	\$487	\$128	\$556	\$349
McKinney-Vento grant per student experiencing homelessness	\$334	\$34	\$73	\$48

Source: 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://www.cps-k12.org/domain/99> (accessed 08/09/22).

**Federal funds.** Each of the four study districts relied on the two sources of federal funding specifically targeted to students experiencing homelessness: McKinney-Vento funding and Title I, Part A. This federal funding accounted for an important portion of the reported financing for all four district programs, ranging from 94% in Cincinnati to 37% in Santa Fe. As discussed earlier, the method for distributing McKinney-Vento funding leads to significant variance in per-student funding. This variance can be seen in Table 3, where McKinney-Vento grant funding ranged from \$334 per student experiencing homelessness in Cincinnati to \$34 per student in Polk County.

In the four study districts that provided financial data, McKinney-Vento grants ranged from \$73 to \$335 per student experiencing homelessness. These grants accounted for a substantial portion (69%) of Cincinnati’s funding and only 13% of Santa Fe’s.

In addition to McKinney-Vento grants, the federal government requires local education agencies to set aside some of their Title I, Part A funding for students experiencing homelessness.<sup>67</sup> Districts have discretion to determine the amount of funding to set aside.<sup>68</sup> All four study districts used Title I funding to support their homeless programs. This funding ranged from \$125 per student in Cincinnati to \$153 per student in Spokane. In two of the districts, Polk County and Spokane, Title I funds were the largest single source of funding for homeless programs.

**State funds.** Santa Fe and Spokane Public Schools relied on state funds to help support their homeless programs. In both districts, state funds made up at least one third of their total homeless program budget.

**District funds.** The four homeless programs were far less likely to report district general operating funds as part of their homeless program budgets. Only one district, Cincinnati, reported using any district general funds for program operations, and it accounted for a very small portion of the budget. However, in each of these districts, there are unaccounted district funds that supported students experiencing homelessness, particularly services that students experiencing homelessness accessed at their schools. In addition, across all study sites, homeless program staff relied on district staff in schools and the central office to aid in their efforts.

**Private funding.** While public funding sources were essential to the homeless programs that were part of our study, all programs received private funding through grants and donations. Programs in Polk County, Santa Fe, and Spokane received a substantial portion of funding from private grants and donations. In Santa Fe, private grants and donations were the second-largest source of funding for the Adelante Program. Some of this funding came through a local nonprofit foundation, which acted as the program's fiscal agent.

**Other grants/donations.** Each of the four districts reported receiving funding in the form of grants and donations from other sources. These funds could include funding from other local or regional governments or from quasi-government organizations. The districts did not specify exactly which organizations provided them with this funding.

**In-kind goods and services.** While funding for the four districts' homeless programs supported district staff and some services provided to students, many of the supports provided to students experiencing homelessness were provided by schools and nonprofit organizations and were not funded directly by the district homeless program. For instance, local food banks provided food, homeless shelters provided shelter and resources, schools provided tutoring and counseling services, and clinics provided physicals and checkups. Each of these programs and organizations had its own federal, state, and private funding sources, which are not accounted for when looking at the districts' revenue sources. All of the districts in our study described this in-kind support as essential to their programs.

## **The Adelante Program Uses a Fiscal Agent to Support Services That Help Prevent Homelessness**

Santa Fe Public Schools' Adelante Program takes an innovative approach to raising funds, which enables it to provide a broader range of supports to students and families experiencing homelessness. The program is a fiscal project of the Santa Fe Partners in Education Foundation. The arrangement allows the Adelante Program to raise and spend funds in ways available to nonprofit organizations but not districts. For example, the Adelante Program uses the Santa Fe Partners in Education Foundation to raise funds through private donations and obtain government funding unavailable to districts. Through the fiscal agent, the Adelante Program was able to obtain city funding from the Affordable Housing Trust Fund and access Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act funding.

These additional sources of revenue make up a significant portion of the Adelante Program budget, enabling the program to provide more services to more students experiencing homelessness. Funds from the Santa Fe Partners in Education Foundation are also used for services that cannot be funded through the district, including assistance with rent and utility expenses, which help families avoid homelessness. As one staff member noted, "It's less expensive to keep our families housed than to try to find new housing." Additionally, private dollars from local philanthropies are being used to help families pay for unexpected medical bills. Staff described these funds as a "miracle grant," saving families from going into debt or potentially having to make difficult decisions about which bills to pay.

## **Staffing for District Homeless Programs**

Study districts' ability to identify and serve students is dependent on dedicated staffing. Our study could not account for the total number of staff supporting students experiencing homelessness within each district, since there are so many individuals in the district office, school, and community organizations involved in meeting different aspects of students' needs while they also manage the needs of other students. However, each district in our study had staff dedicated to supporting students experiencing homelessness, in a combination of full- and part-time positions. Study districts identified between 2 (Browning) and 11 (Santa Fe) homeless program staff. 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. For example, Project Connect contracts with a school psychologist to conduct pre- and post-testing for students receiving services. Homeless program staff in our study described school teams as critical for identifying and supporting students. Table 4 describes the number and type of staff dedicated to serving students experiencing homelessness.

**Table 4**  
**Staffing for Programs Supporting Students Experiencing Homelessness**

	Browning (MT)	Cincinnati (OH)	Polk County (FL)	Santa Fe (NM)	Spokane (WA)
Number of identified students experiencing homelessness	237	2,014	3,669	936	1,085
Number of full- and part-time staff dedicated to supporting students experiencing homelessness	2	10	6	11	3
Student-to-staff ratio	118.5 to 1	201.4 to 1	611.5 to 1	85.1 to 1	361.7 to 1
McKinney-Vento liaison	x	x	x	x	x
Assistant coordinator				x	
Transportation coordinator		x			x
Advocates/counselors/social workers/case managers		x	x	x	
Grant writer				x	
Academic coach/enrichment specialist		x			
School-level coordinators		x		x	x
Shelter specialist		x			
Other (support, warehouse manager, technician)	x	x	x	x	

Sources: Interview responses provided data for Browning Public Schools, Cincinnati Public Schools, and Spokane Public Schools. District staff in Polk County Public Schools and Santa Fe Public Schools responded to a Learning Policy Institute survey.

**McKinney-Vento liaison.** All of the districts in our study had applied for and won McKinney-Vento grants, which supported liaisons with dedicated time to support students experiencing homelessness. As one interviewee stressed, “Liaison work is kind of the core, the center, of the work that we do. Everything else kind of stems off of that.” The McKinney-Vento liaison worked to broker relationships with community-based organizations and schools, conducted outreach and education efforts, and ensured the rights of students experiencing homelessness were protected. In Browning, which had the smallest program and only two dedicated staff, the McKinney-Vento liaison also took on responsibilities like coordinating transportation, conducting case management, and writing grants.

**Transportation coordinator.** The Cincinnati and Spokane school districts have a dedicated staff member responsible for coordinating transportation. As noted above, they focus not only on transporting students to and from school, but also meeting the transportation needs of the families. Developing transportation plans is often time-consuming, and the transportation itself is expensive. That the districts dedicate significant resources to meeting the wide range of transportation needs in their communities reflects their strong commitment to serving students experiencing homelessness and their families.

**Advocates/Counselors/Case managers/Social workers.** Cincinnati, Polk County, and Santa Fe districts all have staff in these positions, serving multifaceted roles. “There is a huge, huge span of things that I do for our kids,” one social worker noted. The list includes mentoring students, serving on school multi-tiered system of support teams, assessing student assets and needs, connecting students and their families with helpful district and community resources, leading development of transportation plans, developing credit recovery plans, and more.

**Grant writer.** Santa Fe employed a full-time grant writer for the Adelante Program to raise the private and competitive funding to supply the majority of funding for this program. An Adelante Program member explained, “We’re a bigger program than some, but we also have to work harder to support the salaries that make the program work.”

**School-level coordinators.** Three of the study districts employed school-level coordinators. The Cincinnati and Spokane districts have school community coordinators who work with their students experiencing homelessness. The Santa Fe school district has four staff who work as site coordinators for their homeless programs. Having dedicated coordinators at the school level is a way to (1) have more frequent contact with and get to know students and (2) partner with and educate teachers, administrators, and other school staff so they can identify and support students experiencing homelessness.<sup>69</sup> While considering a promising and impactful practice, a Spokane Public Schools staff member acknowledged, “We have to spread people more thinly than we would like because their school-based coordinators work across multiple schools.

**Shelter-based coordinators.** As described earlier, Cincinnati employed a coordinator who worked out of a local shelter to provide services, identify students and families, and develop relationships with other local shelters.

## What Challenges Do Districts Confront in Meeting the Needs of Students Experiencing Homelessness?

Prior research has documented common challenges districts face in identifying and serving students experiencing homelessness, including insufficient funding and staffing.<sup>70</sup> Our study identified these challenges as well and revealed district efforts to mitigate them on behalf of students experiencing homelessness. We discuss the key themes emerging from these cases below.

### Challenges

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.** Because federal and state funds are inadequate to meet needs, districts in our study are dependent on grants and donations from community groups and other philanthropic organizations to supplement funding provided by the districts' homeless programs. However, these funds require critical staff time to obtain and are not consistent. When grant funding ends, the positions and supports they fund may also end unless additional funding opportunities are obtained. Annual McKinney-Vento grants were an important source of funding for the districts that we interviewed. However, as stated earlier, state education agencies have a great deal of flexibility in how they distribute McKinney-Vento funds to local education agencies. This flexibility can create significant variation between states, or even within states, in the per-pupil McKinney-Vento funding districts receive. Provision of supports (services and programs) is limited by access to resources, not by need. All districts in our study said there were outstanding needs that they were not able to address.

**Restrictions on the uses of McKinney-Vento and Title I funds limit study 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. For example, McKinney-Vento allowable uses include: tutoring; provision of referral services for medical, dental, and mental health services; attracting, engaging, and retaining students experiencing homelessness in school; summer programs; school supplies; and emergency assistance to enable school attendance.<sup>71</sup> Title I funds can be used to purchase shoes needed for physical education classes, glasses, food, immunizations, expanded learning time, and Advanced Placement and college entrance exam test fees. This constraint has 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. The McKinney-Vento liaison at Browning Public Schools explained:

Another thing [the] McKinney-Vento grant does not do [for students experiencing homelessness] is emergency housing, like paying for a night in a hotel room until we can help them find more stable housing.

**In all study districts, insufficient staffing is a key constraint to identifying and serving students experiencing homelessness.** In each homeless program in our study, homeless program staff were responsible for training school staff, developing transportation plans, identifying student

and family assets and needs, building relationships with community organizations and schools, and connecting students to services. However, the number of staff assigned to each program ranged from an average of 1.5 full-time employees to 10.5 full-time employees. Not surprisingly, programs with more staff were able to take on more direct-service activities and provide more intensive case management, while smaller programs had to rely primarily on services provided by schools and community organizations. For instance, Browning, the smallest program (in terms of students served and number of staff), used partnerships with nonprofits to provide food to students experiencing homelessness and their families, while the two largest programs—Santa Fe’s Adelante Program and Cincinnati’s Project Connect—operated centrally located warehouses that distributed food, backpacks, school supplies, and clothing.

While homeless programs serving fewer students experiencing homelessness would be expected to have fewer staff than programs serving more students, this was not the case in our study sample. The district serving the greatest number of students experiencing homelessness, Polk County Public Schools, had only six staff members, while Santa Fe Public Schools, serving approximately one fourth the number of students as in Polk County, had 11 staff members. And staff in all programs in the study expressed that more could be done for students experiencing homelessness with additional staff—more students could be identified, and students and their families could receive more support. Given limited resources, district staff described needing to triage resources to address the greatest needs. Homeless program staff in Cincinnati described having to concentrate school-based services in schools with the highest concentrations of students experiencing homelessness, limiting the number of students receiving particular services. As one staff member explained:

The challenge is where to place our programming because we have 56 schools in the district, and we don’t have the capacity to have these programs in every school. We always start with our schools with the highest [homeless] populations. Unfortunately, this means some deserving students are left out.

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.** District staff in our study spend significant time and energy providing support for students experiencing homelessness. However, those interviewed described frustration at not being able to solve the problem by addressing its cause—ensuring stable housing for all students. Restrictions on how federal and state education funds are spent meant that they could not use that funding to pay a utility bill or supplement rent in order 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’ period of homelessness. As one coordinator in Santa Fe noted:

If we could build our way out of having the need for our program, that’s my hope. That’s always my hope, and 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.



## Mitigation Efforts

Study districts worked to mitigate challenges by seeking McKinney-Vento funding—which is not available to all districts in need—pursuing private funding and resources through ongoing outreach, and tapping into existing school- and district-based resources. These efforts have been helpful in augmenting 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.

**To help mitigate the challenge of insufficient staffing, study districts sought funding for dedicated homeless program staff who can focus on coordinating partners and resources to meet student needs.** Under the federal McKinney-Vento Act, all school districts, regardless of whether they receive McKinney-Vento funding, must designate a district homeless liaison.<sup>72</sup> However, many districts do not receive McKinney-Vento funding to help support this work. As a result, this responsibility is often given to district staff who have many other responsibilities, which severely limits the time they have to educate school staff, coordinate transportation, and provide and identify services that meet student needs.<sup>73</sup> 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.

**Study districts sought private funding to supplement insufficient public education support and funding restrictions.** As described earlier, private funding, often provided by district nonprofit organizations and philanthropies, expanded the amount of resources and the sources of funding for district programs in our study. In addition, private funding expanded the type of services study districts could provide. While McKinney-Vento and Title I funds are restricted to academic-related uses, districts are able to use private funds to support a wider array of student needs. Program staff in Santa Fe Public Schools and Cincinnati Public Schools reported receiving support from their education foundations and were able to direct resources to students experiencing homelessness that were not available to districts. For instance, one district described accessing Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act federal funding in fall 2020 through its education foundation, which helped keep families housed and essential needs met.

**Study districts partnered with a variety of community-based organizations and government agencies to better identify and support students experiencing homelessness.** This was a consistent theme in our interviews, regardless of program size or the number of students served. Staff of district programs—large and small— frequently 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. 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.” These partnerships reflect the reality that homelessness is an issue that transcends education.

**To expand their capacities, district homeless programs in our study 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. For instance, in Santa Fe, program staff lamented the dearth of after-school programs for students experiencing homelessness. However, in study districts in which schools provided many supports for vulnerable students, homeless program staff were able to make referrals, and students experiencing homelessness were folded into existing programs. Cincinnati Public Schools offers an example. The district operates community learning centers as part of its districtwide community schools initiative. These centers employ a resource coordinator at every school to help bring community resources such as after-school programs, tutoring, and health services to their students. Homeless program staff in Cincinnati were able to work with school-based resource coordinators, connecting students experiencing homelessness to webs of services, such as tutoring or mental health care, that were offered to any students who needed them in the school.

## Summary of Findings and Policy Recommendations

Homelessness creates stress, instability, trauma, and school mobility, placing students who experience homelessness at educational, physical, and emotional risk. Despite challenges, many students display resilience and achieve academic and life success. School districts play an important role in supporting and enabling that success by identifying students experiencing homelessness and providing them the support that meets their physical, emotional, and academic needs. Below, we describe the key findings from our study and offer recommendations for federal, state, and district policymakers.

### Summary of Findings

Through an examination of five districts' approaches to supporting students experiencing homelessness, we have a better understanding of how district homeless programs identify and support students experiencing homelessness, how they fund and staff their programs, and how they confront the challenges they face in meeting students' needs.

#### **Districts in our study used many creative strategies to identify students experiencing homelessness, but all were certain that they had not reached all eligible students.**

Identifying students experiencing homelessness is challenging. The population of students experiencing homelessness is constantly changing, and families or students may not self-identify due to a lack of knowledge about available rights and services, fear, or embarrassment. To identify students eligible for support and services, program staff in our study educated school personnel and staff from community-based organizations that serve vulnerable populations. Simultaneously, they conducted public information campaigns and outreach to families at risk of homelessness through district and school-run programs, such as food pantries. Program staff in our study also developed relationships with organizations serving families experiencing homelessness to increase referrals. For instance, Browning Public Schools collaborated with motels to identify families, Cincinnati Public Schools received referrals from local shelters, and Santa Fe Public Schools received referrals from local utility companies. Even with multiple approaches to identifying students, homeless program staff in all districts in our study stated that having additional resources (e.g., funding to promote housing stability or to provide supplies to meet basic needs) and staff would allow them to identify more students experiencing homelessness.

#### **Districts in our study strived to provide a wide range of services to students experiencing homelessness to safeguard their educational rights.**

Students experiencing homelessness face multiple impediments to fully participating in school. School districts are obligated to address these impediments in order to safeguard students' educational rights. While program staff in our study were unable to address the root cause of students' challenges—lack of stable housing—they 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 ensure full participation in school by providing:

- **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 transportation to students experiencing homelessness to and from their school and, in many cases, to extracurricular activities. Some districts in the study also provided transportation services to families—using district vehicles, providing bus passes, or covering mileage costs. 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 some sort of additional academic support, such as tutoring, summer programs, or assistance with post–high school planning.
- **Physical and mental health supports.** Services mentioned by homeless program staff in our study included physicals; visual and hearing screening; 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 the 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. Also, homeless program staff reported that, when they had the resources and knew of the need, they were able to provide families with emergency funding for medical bills, housing deposits, overdue utility bills, or car repairs in order to prevent families from losing their housing.

**Staffing of homeless programs and the availability of school-based services for vulnerable students were essential for study districts’ ability to support students experiencing homelessness.**

The most critical resource for supporting students experiencing homelessness is program staff. All districts in our study had applied for and won McKinney-Vento grants, which funded liaisons with dedicated time to provide and coordinate support for students experiencing homelessness. Districts we interviewed identified between 2 (Browning) and 11 (Santa Fe) homeless program staff. Homeless program staff positions in our study districts included a McKinney-Vento liaison, transportation coordinator, counselor (also referred to as advocate, case manager, and social worker), grant writer, school-level coordinator, and shelter-based coordinator. Beyond the homeless program staff, study districts utilized school and district staffing in both formal and informal ways to extend the reach of the homeless program. In study districts in which schools provided many supports for vulnerable students, homeless program staff were able to make referrals, and students experiencing homelessness were folded into existing programs.

**The available funds for homeless programs in our study varied considerably across study districts, with spending between \$128 and \$556 per student.**

Funding sources included federal funds (i.e., McKinney-Vento funding and Title I, Part A) and private funding and grants in all districts in our study, state funds for Santa Fe and Spokane Public Schools, and district funds in Cincinnati Public Schools. Districts in our study are dependent upon grants and donations from community groups and other philanthropic organizations to supplement funding provided by the districts' homeless programs. It is important to note that the per-student spending amount does not represent the full cost of the support provided by the districts. When possible, homeless program staff in our study connect students and families to resources in schools and in the community that do not rely on their districts' homeless program funding.

**Federal and state funds are inadequate, so districts in our study needed to raise funds and blend and braid public and private funding to support their homeless programs.**

Insufficient funding is a common challenge that districts we interviewed faced when trying to serve students experiencing homelessness. While multiple sources of federal and state funding can be used to support these students, there are few funding sources that are required to be spent on students experiencing homelessness. The McKinney-Vento Act is the primary federal funding source to support eliminating barriers to educational access for students experiencing homelessness. However, these funds are not allocated to states based on the number of students experiencing homelessness. Instead, states are allocated funds based on the percentage of Title I funding they receive. States then use a competitive grant process to distribute funds to districts. This leads to a large variation in funding per student experiencing homelessness across states, with many districts receiving no McKinney-Vento funds despite serving eligible students. Further, restrictions on the use of McKinney-Vento and Title I funds limit districts' ability to address certain needs related to students' housing instability.

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. Private funding, often provided by district nonprofit organizations and philanthropies, expanded the amount of resources and enabled programs to meet students' nonacademic needs, as it did not come with the funding restrictions of federal education funding streams.

## **Policy Recommendations**

As outlined above, districts face considerable challenges in meeting their goals of ensuring that all students experiencing homelessness have the same academic and social opportunities as students who are housing secure. Federal and state governments can make investments to reduce student homelessness and create conditions that empower districts to better support students experiencing homelessness. State and federal policymakers could consider the following recommendations to keep students housed, augment and target funding, prioritize support for students experiencing homelessness, and ensure students have access to a readily available web of school-based supports.

**Federal and state policymakers could adopt policies that help eliminate child poverty and keep families housed.** Homeless program staff discussed a variety of strategies that enabled them to provide greater supports for students experiencing homelessness amidst the funding constraints they faced. However, as our interviewees noted, 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.<sup>74</sup> Federal policymakers could also expand the allowable use of McKinney-Vento funds to include expenses such as payment for utilities, rent, or emergency medical expenses that compete with rent.

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

**Federal policymakers could ensure that financial resources are available to cover the costs 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 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. While districts receiving Title I are also required to set aside some of that funding for students experiencing homelessness, the amount actually allocated and how it is spent is not tracked. Given that districts in our study reported spending \$128 to \$556 per student on homeless program operations (which is not inclusive of all the resources used to serve these students) and that all relied on additional public and private funds, it is clear that the amount and structure of funding for students experiencing homelessness is inadequate.

The Education for Homeless Children and Youth program should be fully funded to enable districts to meet its mandate. Funds should be sufficient, proportional to need, and stable to allow 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 may provide Congress a guide to what would be needed to fully fund this program each year. The funding for students experiencing homelessness under the American Rescue Plan totaled \$800 million, approximately \$530 per student experiencing homelessness based on 2017–18 counts. This level of funding likely comes closer to providing districts what is required to fund their homeless programs; 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 limited the ability of homeless program staff in our study to support families and unaccompanied youth by keeping them 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.** During interviews, it became clear that one of the leading issues facing school districts seeking to support students experiencing homelessness

is identifying all students requiring homeless services. Research has found that there can be a reciprocal relationship between the identification of students experiencing homelessness and districts receiving grants. That is, the application for and receipt of McKinney-Vento funds can increase awareness of student homelessness in a district and further develop district capacity to identify and support students experiencing homelessness.<sup>75</sup> To promote better identification of students experiencing homelessness, the McKinney-Vento allocation formula could take into account the enrollment of students experiencing homelessness.

However, policymakers should keep in mind that some districts do not have the resources to identify all of their students experiencing homelessness. To promote fairness, 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. Some organizations use 5% or 10% of the count of economically disadvantaged students (i.e., students eligible for free or reduced-price meals under the National School Lunch Program) as a benchmark for guiding whether districts are effectively identifying students experiencing homelessness.<sup>76</sup> 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.<sup>77</sup> 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,<sup>78</sup> states can help support programs for students experiencing homelessness by targeting additional funding to districts with a high concentration of low-income families. This additional funding can allow districts to offer supports to vulnerable students that students experiencing homelessness can access. There are currently 16 states with additional funding for districts with concentrations of students from low-income families.<sup>79</sup> An example of this is Kansas, which recently adopted a poverty concentration factor into its state’s funding formula. The state provides additional funding to districts with at least 35% of their students being defined as at risk. This funding amount increases again if a district has 50% or more of its students at risk.<sup>80</sup>

**Federal, state, and district policymakers can ensure students have access to a readily available web of school-based supports by increasing investments in community schools.**

In addition to increased targeted funding for students experiencing homelessness, districts can support the success of these students by developing school-based webs of support. For example, Project Connect liaisons in Cincinnati leveraged programming through community learning centers—part of a community schools initiative—to better meet the needs of students experiencing homelessness. In Santa Fe, homeless liaisons served on school wellness teams to discuss assets and needs of individual students and families and develop strategies to support them.

These findings point to the value of community partnerships and site-based, multisector (e.g., education, housing, health, and social services) wraparound supports that district homeless programs can access to increase support for students experiencing homelessness. 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, the nonprofit sector, and local government agencies and by promoting strong family and community engagement.<sup>81</sup> By establishing partnerships and bringing together various funding streams, the community school strategy can help ensure that children and families get the services they need in an integrated way and can overcome barriers to local collaboration, such as between-system differences in priorities, funding and reporting requirements, and program eligibility rules.<sup>82</sup>

Federal policymakers could build on the American Rescue Plan’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 can also look to investments made in California, New Mexico, and New York for examples of how they can structure their own community school investments.<sup>83</sup> Because students experiencing homelessness often experience disrupted social relationships and school instability, these programs could be structured to support relationship-centered school designs, as California has done with the state’s Community Schools Framework.<sup>84</sup> In the framework, the state articulates a vision for community schools, grounded in the science of learning and development, that acknowledges that students learn best in environments that foster strong relationships, attend to students’ social and emotional learning, and provide systems of support that enable healthy development.



## 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 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.

## Endnotes

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