

Investments to Support Students Experiencing Homelessness

A Decade of Policy, A Decade of Progress in Washington State



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Summary

Washington state has a set of policies and programs to support students experiencing homelessness, including two key and complementary grant programs: the Homeless Student Stability Program (HSSP) and the Homeless Student Stability Education Program (HSSEP). The programs are designed to foster collaboration between school districts and community-based organizations to support students experiencing homelessness and their families. This brief gives an overview of the state policy ecosystem that supports students experiencing homelessness and describes these two grant programs. We find that partnerships between districts and community-based organizations, as well as alignment and collaboration across multiple state-level agencies, have positively supported implementation of these programs. Findings on outcomes for students experiencing homelessness since the introduction of the grants show improvements in identification rates, school stability, and graduation rates. Based on these findings, this brief offers lessons learned and policy considerations for both Washington and other states.

The report on which this brief is based can be found [here](#).

Introduction

Student homelessness is a substantial and growing problem across the United States. Data from the National Center for Homeless Education show that more than 1.5 million students in grades PreK–12 were identified as experiencing homelessness in 2023–24. Students experiencing homelessness have the federally guaranteed right to “equal access to the same free, appropriate public education, including a public preschool education, as provided to other children and youths.”¹ However, grant funding under the federal McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act is very limited, and [around a third of all students](#) identified as experiencing homelessness nationwide are in districts that receive no McKinney-Vento funding. The state of Washington is among relatively few states that provide any funding over and above McKinney-Vento funds to support students experiencing homelessness, and Washington’s experience offers meaningful lessons for personnel in other states looking to implement analogous supports.

Based on interviews with state, district, and community organization personnel and drawing on analyses of state datasets, this brief describes Washington’s policies and programs to support students experiencing homelessness, with a focus on two complementary grant programs: HSSP and HSSEP,

collectively referred to as the Homeless Student Stability programs. A primary goal of both programs is to “encourage the development and implementation of collaborative strategies between housing and education partners.”² The programs help bridge two otherwise separate sets of entities. Each has its own funding sources and organizational structures; both are important to establishing home and school stability for students and setting them up to succeed academically.

- **Homeless Student Stability Program.** Administered by the Office of Homeless Youth (OHY), HSSP provides competitive grants to Washington community-based organizations that work with school districts to help students and their families secure stable housing. Grant-funded strategies have frequently included housing navigation and case management, direct short-term financial assistance to help families secure stable housing, and diversion to help families avoid entering shelters or unstable housing.
- **Homeless Student Stability Education Program.** Administered by Washington’s Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI), HSSEP is a competitive grant program for school districts. HSSEP promotes educational stability for students experiencing homelessness by improving district capacity to identify these students and provide them with appropriate supports. HSSEP grants target districts that demonstrate a commitment to partnering with local community-based organizations, including housing partners. Districts have commonly used HSSEP grant funds to subsidize district homeless liaison salaries; train building-level points of contact; and support a range of student needs, including academic supports, basic aid, and wraparound services.

Both programs use the McKinney-Vento definition of homelessness rather than the less inclusive definition from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. This ensures access to services for more families.³

Trends in Key Outcomes for Students Experiencing Homelessness

Measurable gains in several key statewide outcomes for students experiencing homelessness have emerged over a decade of related policy development and program investment in Washington, including the 2016 introduction of HSSP and HSSEP. While meaningful challenges remain, these findings evidence the value of state policy and aligned investment to more fully support students experiencing homelessness.

Improved Student Identification. The number of students identified as experiencing homelessness has steadily increased statewide, with increases most pronounced in HSSEP grantee districts. Improved identification is vital in ensuring eligible students can receive needed services, supports, and resources.

Improved School Stability. School stability has improved statewide for students experiencing homelessness, with reductions in school moves during the academic year most pronounced for students in districts that received HSSEP and/or McKinney-Vento grants. Analyses suggest that grant receipt contributed to increased educational stability among students in grantee districts—a core intent of state policy. [Research](#) associates high levels of school mobility with a range of diminished student outcomes over time, underscoring the importance of school stability.

Improved Graduation Rates. High school graduation rates for students experiencing homelessness have steadily increased statewide, with more pronounced increases than for stably housed students. Moreover, these increases take place against the backdrop of increased identification, meaning that even larger numbers of students experiencing homelessness are now graduating high school, making these improvements especially significant.

Source: Learning Policy Institute. (2026).

Washington’s Ecosystem of Support

Enacted over the past dozen years, HSSP and HSSEP feature prominently within a broader ecosystem of state policies and programs that address student and youth homelessness. (See [Figure 1.](#))

Figure 1. Washington’s Homeless Student Stability Programs: Policy Development Timeline, 2014–Present

Policy Groundwork		Policy & Program Creation	Policy & Program Strengthening & Expansion		
2014: Recognizing the Challenge	2015: Building State Infrastructure	2016: Launching the Programs	2019: Strengthening Identification	2023: Expanding Supports	2026: Codifying McKinney-Vento
S.B. 6074 - Identified student homelessness as a growing statewide issue - Highlighted under-identification of students experiencing homelessness - Required improved data collection and sharing of best practices	S.B. 5404 - Created the OHY within the Department of Commerce - Established a statewide “landing spot” for issues related to youth and student homelessness - Enabled coordination across education, housing, and youth services	H.B. 1682 Established two complementary grant programs: HOUSING STABILITY Homeless Student Stability Program (HSSP) - OHY-administered competitive grants to community-based housing organizations EDUCATION STABILITY Homeless Student Stability Education Program (HSSEP) - OSPI-administered competitive grants to school districts	H.B. 5324 - Added further data collection requirements - Required building-level points of contact in every public school - Strengthened coordination between district policy and school-level supports	H.B. 1406 - Expanded shelter access for unaccompanied youth under age 18 H.B. 1622 - Broadened allowable uses of HSSEP funds - Aligned funding flexibility with expanded federal ARP-HCY guidance	H.B. 2594 Enshrined federal McKinney-Vento protections into state law (e.g., related to school enrollment, transportation)

Notes: ARP-HCY = American Rescue Plan-Homeless Children and Youth; OHY = Office of Homeless Youth; OSPI = Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction.

Source: Learning Policy Institute. (2026).

In addition to the 2016 establishment of HSSP and HSSEP, key policy moves included the establishment of OHY in 2015, described by key personnel as mission-critical in making a housing-focused student program like HSSP possible. Further policies included the requirement for building-level points of contact for students experiencing homelessness in 2019, a broadening of allowable uses for HSSEP funds in 2023, and codification of federal McKinney-Vento protections into state law in 2026.

Funding for the Homeless Student Stability Programs

Funding for HSSP ranged from \$1 million to \$2 million per year between 2016–17 and 2025–26. Twenty-four unique grantee organizations received funding in at least one HSSP grant cycle. Funding for HSSEP ranged from \$1 million to \$2.5 million per year between 2016–17 and 2025–26. HSSEP grants were allocated to 12–49 grantee districts per school year, with 83 unique districts receiving funding in at least one year. For comparison, Washington’s federal McKinney-Vento funds—which HSSEP grants are designed to supplement and not replace—ranged from \$1.1 million to \$2.2 million over the same period.

Program Implementation

HSSEP funds include flexibility in spending, which allows districts to fund strategies that best support students experiencing homelessness in their jurisdictions. Funded activities typically involve a combination of identification strategies, logistical and academic supports, and case management for students with higher needs.

Identification of students experiencing homelessness is the first important step to providing them with services and supports. Interviews with district homeless liaisons revealed that HSSEP funds have been key in supporting more comprehensive identification, including through training for building-level points of contact, school counselors, attendance clerks, and other school-level staff. As one interviewee explained:

It’s not that we have more kids [experiencing homelessness], necessarily. It’s just that we’ve done so much training and intensive work with school district staff that they understand what they’re looking for and are more likely to identify kids.

To more fully address the needs of students experiencing homelessness, districts have obtained funding from a range of sources that substantially exceed what the HSSEP grant can fund on its own. Together, these funds have commonly been used to provide logistical supports like transportation for students to their school of origin; subsidies to participate in school activities; connections and referrals for students and families to external housing partners and other community organizations; and physical resources like clothes, shoes, hygiene items, and snacks or gift cards.

Districts have frequently provided some combination of more intensive interventions for unaccompanied students experiencing homelessness, those identified as most academically or behaviorally at risk, or those with higher needs. These interventions include tutoring or academic coaching, career planning, facilitation of credit retrieval opportunities, and post-graduation planning and support with the transition to college or career. Dedicated counseling and/or case management has also frequently been available to high-need subsets of students experiencing homelessness, especially at the secondary school level.

Partnerships With Community Organizations

Interviewees at the state and local levels consistently emphasized the importance of community partnerships in helping districts more holistically support students experiencing homelessness and their families. These district–community partnerships enabled district staff to connect students and their families with services beyond those that the school district itself was positioned to provide. These included direct services and resource navigation, such as food banks, community health organizations, legal aid groups, free or low-cost translation services, local and state social services, organizations providing student and family case management, and organizations providing housing support.

Common district partners included local faith- and community-based organizations like the YMCA/YWCA, Boys and Girls Clubs, Elks, Rotary, and United Way. These organizations were instrumental in helping students and families address broader needs like housing stability and navigating discrete circumstances that threatened students' educational access and success. Support from local organizations helped cover costs or resources that might fall outside the uses typically allowed through district funds. In many grantee districts, family and community resource centers also played an outsized role both in providing resources and connecting students and families with partner organizations.

District Collaboration With HSSP Grantees

HSSP grantee organizations provided more intensive services, working closely with small cohorts of students and families to help secure stable housing. Common supports included assistance with housing searches, navigating housing supports and services, and case management, as well as direct short-term financial assistance to pay housing-related expenses on behalf of families or unaccompanied students. For example, HSSP-funded organizations frequently helped families resolve debts that would otherwise preclude their eligibility for stable housing (e.g., rental arrears, backlogged utility payments) and with expenses involved in procuring that housing (e.g., security deposits, first and last month's rent, moving expenses). Some HSSP-funded community organizations also blended HSSP dollars with other sources of funding to provide more comprehensive wraparound services for students and families. Close district partnerships have been crucial to their work. As one representative explained:

I think our relationship with the McKinney-Vento liaisons is critical for a lot of the students. It's very helpful to have a more comprehensive picture ... and a lot of times the McKinney-Vento liaisons will know the family history a little bit; they'll have had more regular contact.

“Warm Handoffs” With Community Partner Organizations

Nearly all interviewees described the importance of “warm handoffs” by staff at schools or districts to staff at community partner organizations. More than just referrals to resources, warm handoffs can increase the likelihood that students and families who are referred to an agency or organization for assistance will be able to efficiently access those services. A district staff member spoke to the power of maintaining these relationships with community partners, explaining, “We do a really good job of keeping up to date on what resources are available. We have a lot of back doors into agencies.”

Warm handoffs can also minimize the number of times students and families need to repeatedly share their situations—which may be traumatic or associated with shame and which may discourage families from seeking services. Replicable district practices included making deliberate efforts to hire

personnel with lived experience of homelessness and/or other shared characteristics (e.g., common linguistic backgrounds), training building-level points of contact to be effective resource navigators, and working to ensure students and families do not feel they are in trouble or being judged for their unstable housing situation.

State-Level Administration and Support

Cross-agency relationship building and collaboration have also been central to program functioning. Situating the two programs in separate agencies—HSSP at OHY and HSSEP at OSPI—allowed each agency to draw on its particular area of expertise. At the same time, the interconnected nature of these programs required substantial communication and collaboration. Over time, each agency built knowledge of the other’s relevant practices, systems, and constraints. For example, the two agencies collaborated on reviewing and scoring applications across both programs.

The nonprofit technical assistance provider, Building Changes, helped OHY and OSPI create a bridge between housing partners and school districts. Building Changes staff worked alongside OHY and OSPI personnel to create regular opportunities for shared learning and collaboration. These included the School/Housing Network and Communities of Practice (both online and in-person) through which grantee districts and nonprofit organizations could hear directly from the state agencies, learn from examples of collaboration and positive practices, understand mutual needs, jointly problem-solve, and form relationships that might undergird new partnerships.

OHY and OSPI have also built state-level capacity since the grant programs began in 2016. This has allowed OHY to develop a more comprehensive suite of programs to begin addressing the root causes of youth homelessness. Likewise, greater capacity at OSPI has enabled greater support to non-grantee as well as grantee districts, including webinars and live training to all district homeless liaisons statewide. Key personnel inside and outside of OSPI posited that this state-level infrastructure created a “rising tide lifts all boats” effect that helps explain some of the statewide trends in outcomes for all students experiencing homelessness. As one interviewee explained, “It’s allowing us to leverage the funds [to have] a much broader impact than [on] just the districts that are receiving HSSEP dollars.”

Student Outcomes and the Role of State-Level Funding

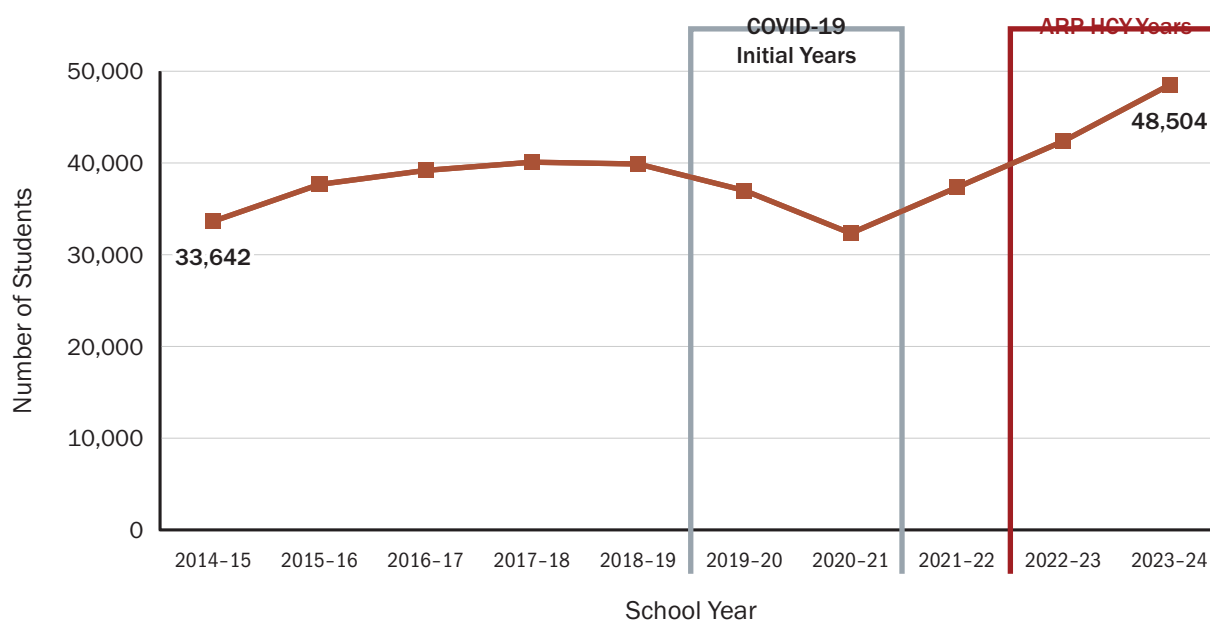
Findings from quantitative analyses, together with interviews with district homeless liaisons, suggest that since the inception of the HSSEP and HSSP programs, Washington has seen improvements in some outcomes. Notably, analyses of state data show increases in the number of students identified as experiencing homelessness, improvements in school stability (fewer students changing schools during the academic year) among students experiencing homelessness, and statewide improvements in high school graduation rates for students experiencing homelessness. Additionally, data published by Building Changes show that the majority of families receiving services from HSSP grantees increased their residential stability. However, we did not find improvements in attendance or incidences of exclusionary discipline, outcomes that also reflect school culture and climate and may take more time, effort, or financial investment to change. This evidences the challenges that remain and the value of continued investment to more fully support students experiencing homelessness.

Identification

Statewide data showed that the number of Washington students identified as experiencing homelessness increased over time, as shown in Figure 2. Although some of this increase may be attributable to worsening economic conditions, interviews with district and state personnel strongly suggest that at least part of this increase can be attributed to improvements in identification processes and procedures, as noted previously in this brief.

Additionally, we found that the proportion of students from low-income backgrounds—those most at risk of homelessness—who were identified as experiencing homelessness increased more rapidly in districts that received HSSEP and/or McKinney-Vento funds. Moreover, these identification rates increased at even greater rates in districts that regularly received HSSEP funds (i.e., in 4 or more of the first 9 years of the program), relative to districts receiving neither funding source. This indicates that funded districts were able to make greater gains in identifying students experiencing homelessness than unfunded districts.

Figure 2. Number of Washington Students Identified as Experiencing Homelessness, 2014–15 to 2023–24



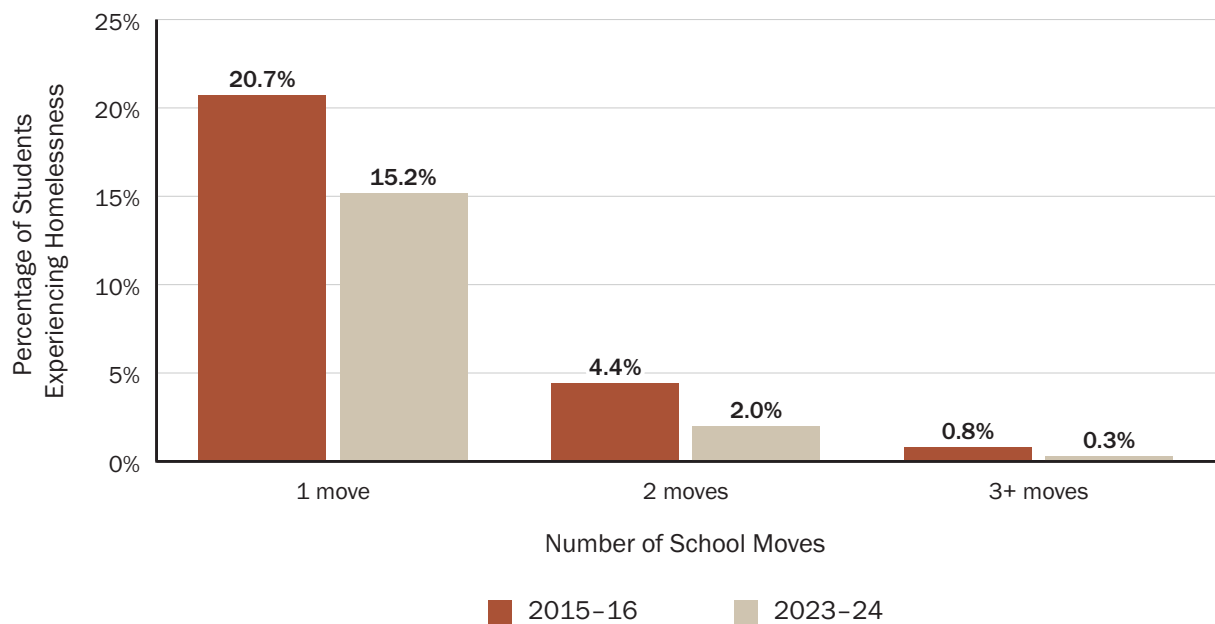
Notes: The gray bracketed region (2019–20 and 2020–21) indicates the initial years of the COVID-19 pandemic, during portions of which many schools were closed to in-person instruction. The red bracketed region (2022–23 and 2023–24) indicates the years during which American Rescue Plan-Homeless Children and Youth funds were available to school districts.

Source: Washington Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction. (2024). [Data on students experiencing homelessness: Report to the legislature](#).

School Stability

A primary objective of the HSSEP and HSSP programs is to provide increased school stability for students experiencing homelessness. [Previous research](#) has found that high student mobility can disrupt supportive relationships, impact opportunities to learn, and be associated with lower academic outcomes. Analysis of student-level statewide administrative data showed that in the school year prior to the introduction of the Homeless Student Stability programs (2015–16), nearly 26% of students experiencing homelessness changed schools during the school year (see [Figure 3](#))—a rate more than 5 times greater than their stably housed peers (at 5%). Around 5% of students experiencing homelessness changed schools two or more times; for their stably housed peers, this was just 0.4%. By 2023–24, less than 18% of students experiencing homelessness changed schools during that year, and the number who changed schools two or more times had been cut in half to less than 2.5%.

Figure 3. Percentage of Washington Students Experiencing Homelessness Who Changed Schools During the School Year, 2015–16 and 2023–24



Note: A school move is defined as a change in a student’s school of primary enrollment occurring during the school year.
Source: Learning Policy Institute analysis of an administrative dataset provided by the Washington Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction. (2026).

Additional analyses used a matched sample of students experiencing homelessness in districts that did and did not receive HSSEP and/or McKinney-Vento funding. Controlling for student and district characteristics, we found that district receipt of funds was statistically significantly associated with an approximately 3 percentage point decreased likelihood of these students changing schools. These findings provide a strong indication that receipt of HSSEP and/or McKinney-Vento funds is a contributing factor in improving student stability, a core intent of state policy. Grant-funded district activities included efforts to improve transportation logistics for students experiencing homelessness and to inform newly identified students of their right to transportation to their school of origin, which may have helped reduce their school mobility.

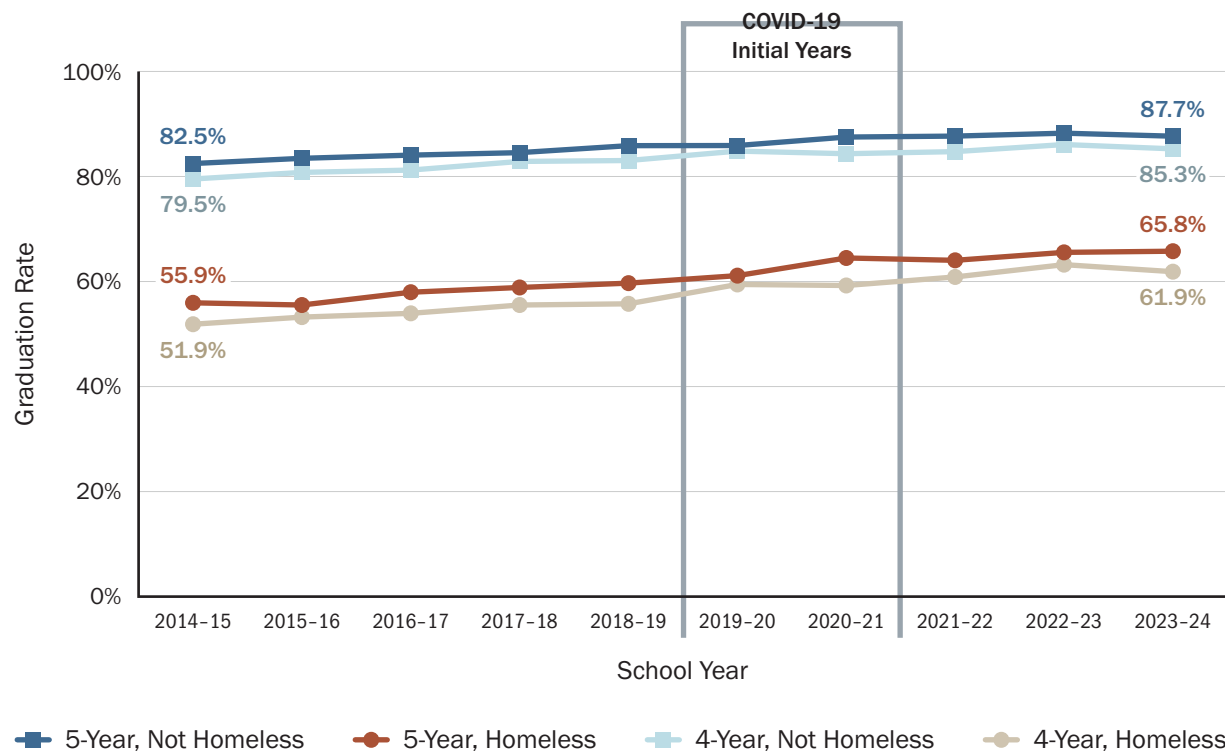
The HSSP program simultaneously provided greater residential stability for many families. According to data published by Building Changes, HSSP housing programs served 1,049 families between 2022 and 2025, and 925 families had subsequently exited these programs. Among these, nearly 60% had moved into permanent housing, and another 5% had improved their housing situation (e.g., from unsheltered to a hotel/motel).

Graduation Rates

High school graduation is influenced by many in-school and out-of-school factors across the course of the student's schooling. Importantly, [one study](#) indicates that the lack of a high school diploma or GED is the largest risk factor for experiencing homelessness beyond school. Interviewees indicated that some districts applied their HSSEP funds to support high school students experiencing homelessness and unaccompanied youth with academic tutoring and in attaining sufficient credits, helping move these students towards graduation.

State data displayed in [Figure 4](#) show that Washington's 4-year and 5-year graduation rates have risen steadily for all students over the past decade and have risen at greater rates for students experiencing homelessness. Specifically, the 5-year graduation rate for students experiencing homelessness increased by 10 percentage points over 10 years, from 56% in 2014–15 to 66% in 2023–24, at a greater rate than the increase for stably housed students (from 82% to 88%). Moreover, the increase in graduation rates takes place against a backdrop of increases in identification. Taken together, these data reveal that even larger *total* numbers of students identified as experiencing homelessness are now graduating high school.

Figure 4. Washington State 4-Year and 5-Year High School Graduation Rates, by Homelessness Status, 2014–15 to 2023–24



Notes: The bracketed region (2019–20 and 2020–21) indicates the initial years of the COVID-19 pandemic, during portions of which many schools were closed to in-person instruction. Washington graduation pathways changed following the passage of H.B. 1599 in 2019, and some graduation requirements were waived between 2020 and 2024 in the wake of the pandemic.

Source: Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction. [Report card graduation 2014–15 to 2023–24](#) [Datasets] (accessed 12/16/2024).

Data and Funding Implications

Based on our research, two areas emerged as important for states to consider if looking to improve supports for students experiencing homelessness: (1) increasing data collection and availability and (2) increasing funding. First, we found variation among sample districts in the type and frequency of data collected, perhaps reflecting limited district capacity. The limited access to data on the specific interventions received by individual students limited our ability to more directly study pathways from interventions to outcomes. States considering similar programs may wish to consider a role for state-level support of data collection and analysis in ways that minimize additional district liaison burden.

Second, while the findings suggest increased funding could contribute to improved outcomes, interviewees universally noted that the scale of funds needed to fully serve students experiencing homelessness still greatly exceeded that of combined funding under the McKinney-Vento and HSSEP programs. Interviewees also explained that because HSSEP and HSSP funding are allocated as

competitive grants, they are viewed as uncertain sources of year-to-year district funding, presenting challenges with program sustainability and staff retention. For funding to adequately meet the needs of districts to support students experiencing homelessness, grants would need to be consistently available and predictable from year to year.

Lessons and Policy Considerations

Washington's investment in HSSP and HSSEP provides proof of concept for what can be achieved with relatively modest—yet still not enough—funding that supplements McKinney-Vento funds. These efforts offer lessons for actors in other states interested in investing in supporting students experiencing homelessness.

State Implementation

- Build capacity in the state education agency to support students experiencing homelessness.
- Because student homelessness is a multifaceted challenge whose root causes and solutions reach far beyond the education system, consider placing oversight responsibility for certain broader issues related to student, family, and youth homelessness outside the state education agency.
- Foster explicit early and ongoing cross-agency coordination to successfully administer programs like Washington's that aim to address student homelessness from multiple angles.
- Anticipate an increase in the number of students identified as experiencing homelessness. This will likely be due—at least in part—to more accurate measurement of an already-occurring problem, rather than an automatic signal of worsening conditions.
- Use robust and precise data tracking to accurately identify program impacts at the district and state levels, with technical assistance support around data tracking and use.
- Build state legislation to align with McKinney-Vento, enabling coherence across the various policies designed to support students and families experiencing homelessness.
- Consider avenues to increase the scale and enhance the sustainability of funding to more fully meet the needs of the total statewide population of students experiencing homelessness.

Local Implementation

- Build strong district–community partnerships. In Washington, community partners have played a crucial role in providing direct resources, referrals, and navigation, as well as in initial and ongoing policy advocacy.
- Establish and support building-level points of contact for students and families experiencing homelessness—a powerful lever for increasing identification and addressing student needs.
- Enable dedicated time for district homeless liaisons to fulfill their extensive responsibilities.
- Blend and braid funds to support students experiencing homelessness.

Endnotes

1. Education for Homeless Children and Youths, 42 U.S.C. § 119 VI, Part B (1987). <https://uscode.house.gov/view.xhtml?path=/prelim@title42/chapter119/subchapter6/partB&edition=prelim>
2. Rev. Code of Washington, Title 43, Chapter 185C § 340. Students experiencing homelessness—Grant program to link families with housing—Program goals—Grant process—Requirements—Grantees report to the department. <https://app.leg.wa.gov/rcw/default.aspx?cite=43.185C.340>; Rev. Code of Washington, Title 28A, Chapter 300 § 542. Students experiencing homelessness—Grant process to identify students and district capacity for support—Award criteria—Districts' responsibilities—Report. <https://app.leg.wa.gov/RCW/default.aspx?cite=28A.300.542>
3. In contrast with the McKinney-Vento Act, the definition of homelessness used by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development does not include families living doubled up due to economic hardship or in hotels/motels. Such differences in the definition of homelessness can serve as a barrier for families in these circumstances to access some services.

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