EXPLORING EQUITY ISSUES:
Students Experiencing Homelessness in the Age of ESSA

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PART I: HOMELESSNESS IN AMERICA'S SCHOOLS

Across the United States, districts and schools work to ensure equal access to high-quality education for all students, including students who face unique barriers to academic success. Children and youth who are homeless represent one of the highest need and most challenging to serve groups for educators, who must consider the impact of unstable living situations and related stressors on students' educational needs. The Education for Homeless Children and Youths Program (EHCY), authorized under Subtitle VII-B

of the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act (McKinney-Vento Act), is the primary piece of federal legislation related to the education of children and youth experiencing homelessness. Reauthorized in 2015 by the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), the McKinney-Vento Act ensures that policies and procedures are in place to remove barriers to educational access for a growing number of students who are homeless.

Under the McKinney-Vento Act, state education agencies (SEAs) and local education agencies (LEAs) are required to implement key legal provisions for students experiencing homelessness that include: consistent access to education in the student's school of origin or immediate enrollment in a new school when appropriate; transportation to and from school and school-related activities; access to all programs and services for which the student is eligible; and the right for students and parents

to participate in and dispute education-related decisions (U.S. Department of Education, 2016a). Coordinated support for students who are eligible for McKinney-Vento services happens at multiple levels.

- **State coordinators** monitor LEAs to ensure students who are homeless are receiving full protections of the law. The state coordinator role includes coordinating with state and local policymakers to remove barriers for students who are homeless; gathering and reporting data on homelessness among students; providing professional development programs for district liaisons and other school personnel to build awareness and capacity to serve students in homeless situations; listing contact information for local liaisons; posting data on student homelessness; and responding to inquiries from parents and youth (National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth [NAEHCY], 2016a).

- **Local liaisons** are assigned to every LEA to support the implementation of McKinney-Vento protections. Liaisons are tasked with ensuring that eligible students are identified and receive access to all that they are entitled to under the act. Liaisons ensure equity for youth who are homeless by working to identify students in homeless situations; informing youth and families about their rights; training other school staff providing services to students experiencing homelessness; connecting students to needed educational services and referring to community-based services as needed; ensuring disputes are resolved and transportation is provided; and ensuring the educational needs of particular groups, such as unaccompanied youth, are met (NAEHCY, 2016a).

- **School staff** who spend the majority of the day with students are well positioned to help recognize the warning signs of homelessness and connect McKinney-Vento students to needed supports. School staff responses can positively or negatively impact the trajectory for a student who is homeless, based on extent of staff awareness of the issue and level of sensitivity toward students (Ausikaitis et al., 2015).

Under ESSA, guidelines related to school stability, immediate enrollment, transportation, and disputes are further clarified, strengthened, and expanded. New or changed requirements include preschool-aged children who are

homeless having access to and receiving services; collaboration with other service providers, such as child welfare, social service agencies, law enforcement agencies, and runaway and homeless youth programs; additional training and support at state and local levels; removing enrollment barriers related to missed deadlines, fines, or fees and missing records or documentation; expanded definitions of "school of origin" to include preschools; and privacy of student records (U.S. Department of Education, 2016b). Additional amended requirements include more training for school personnel about student homelessness; greater public awareness building for parents and youth about educational rights by McKinney-Vento liaisons; and increased flexibility with policies related to attendance, homework, and required paperwork for participation in activities (U.S. Department of Education, 2016b). Under ESSA, schools now need to separate out and provide data specific to the performance of students who are homeless (Data Quality Campaign, 2016).

THE FACE OF HOMELESSNESS IN SCHOOLS

Homelessness is a steadily growing problem in our nation's schools. During the 2014–15 school year, there were nearly 1.3 million children and youth experiencing homelessness enrolled in public schools, which reflects a 100% increase since 2007 (National Center for Homeless Education [NCHE], 2016; U.S. Department of Education, 2016a). Under the McKinney-Vento Act, children and youth are considered to be homeless if they lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence and includes children and youth:

- who are sharing the housing of others due to loss of housing, economic hardship, or similar reason; are living in motels, hotels, trailer parks, or camping grounds; are living in emergency or transitional shelters; are abandoned in hospitals
- who have a primary nighttime residence in a public or private place not designed for or ordinarily used as a regular sleeping accommodation for human beings;
- who are living in cars, parks, public spaces, abandoned buildings, substandard housing, bus or train stations, or similar settings;
- who are migratory children who live in one of the above circumstances (U.S. Department of Education, 2016a).

The majority of students who are homeless and enrolled in school (76%)

are "doubled up," meaning that they are sharing housing with others due to loss of housing, economic hardship, or a similar reason (NCHE, 2016). The second highest group of students in homeless situations (14%) live in shelters. Subpopulations of homeless youth that have grown in recent years include children with disabilities, limited English proficient students, migratory children and youth, and unaccompanied youth who are not in the custody of a parent or legal guardian (NCHE, 2016). Students of color and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or questioning (LGBTQ) students are disproportionately represented among youth who are homeless (NCHE, 2016). Experiences of discrimination and marginalization related to race and/or gender identity and sexual orientation among school-age youth may further exacerbate educational barriers related to homelessness.

CAUSES AND CONSEQUENCES OF STUDENT HOMELESSNESS

The major causes of homelessness among families in the United States include persistently high rates of poverty and increases in low wage employment; lack of affordable housing; natural disasters; and adverse or traumatic experiences in families, such as domestic violence and abuse

(American Institutes for Research, 2014; NCHE, 2017a; Institute for Children, Poverty & Homelessness, 2015). Children and youth who are homeless often live in chaotic environments where there are dramatic and unpredictable life changes. Youth and their families are negatively impacted by the loss of possessions and familiar surroundings, intrusions upon family autonomy, dislocation from friends and neighborhood supports, and, in some cases, interrupted school attendance (American Institutes for Research, 2014; Cowan, 2007).

Children and families experiencing homelessness demonstrate high rates of lifetime exposure to trauma in the form of childhood abuse and neglect, domestic violence, community violence, unsafe living conditions, parental stress and mental health and substance abuse issues, and risk of separation from family members (Anooshian, 2005; Buckner, Beardslee, & Bassuk, 2004; Hayes et al., 2013; Jasinski, Wesley, Mustaine, & Wright, 2005; Perlman, Cowan, Gewirtz, Haskett, & Stokes, 2012). The loss of a sense of safety and security associated with homelessness is also traumatic. Risk of trauma exposure is even higher among certain groups of homeless students based on their particular experiences. For

example, an estimated 43% of a growing population of homeless LGBTQ students are forced from their homes because of conflicts with their families about their sexual orientation or gender identity (Durso & Gate, 2012).

The effects of homelessness and related potentially traumatic experiences on children's well-being vary depending on factors such as age, duration of the stressful event, family health, history of trauma, and level of support (Miller, 2011; Pat-Horenczyk, Rabinowitz, Rice, & Tucker-Levin, 2009). Despite this variation, exposure to homelessness and related stressors, including high rates of mobility and family separation, can compromise healthy development and lead to a range of problems that impair a student's ability to cope with the requirements of a normal school day (Sulkowski & Michael, 2014). Students who are homeless are more likely to have physical, emotional, and behavioral problems; experience developmental delays; and require special education services (American Institutes for Research, 2014; Hong & Piescher, 2012). The majority of youth in homeless situations say that being homeless negatively impacted their physical and emotional health, self-confidence, and ability to feel safe and secure (Ingram, Bridgeland, Reed, &

Atwell, 2016). Youth who are homeless describe difficulties maintaining relationships with family members and friends (Ingram et al., 2016).

The impact of homelessness on academic success is profound. Students who are homeless are more likely to miss school, repeat a grade, score lower on achievement tests, be retained, and drop out of school altogether (Hong & Piescher, 2012; Losinski, Katsiyannis, & Ryan, 2013; Murphy, 2011). Youth who are homeless report that it is harder to stay in school and to do well in school, and nearly half of youth who are homeless report that, at one or more points, they dropped out of school. Chronic exposure to adverse experiences, such as those experiences that are common among homeless students, place these youth at greater risk for adverse developmental, emotional, functional, and academic outcomes into adulthood (Feletti & Anda, 2010).
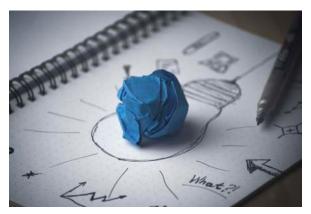
BARRIERS TO SERVING HOMELESS STUDENTS

The significant increase in numbers of children experiencing homelessness raises concerns about the capacities of the education system to best support the needs of these students. Even with McKinney-Vento protections in place, it

can be difficult to implement strategies and collect data on homeless students. High rates of mobility make it difficult to identify homeless students and to gather data on academic outcomes.

There are both logistical and emotional barriers to education for youth who are homeless. Logistical barriers that can lead to increased absences or gaps in education for homeless youth include youth not being identified for needed services; difficulty enrolling youth without records or proof of residency; navigating the process of switching schools multiple times based on changes in living situations; and lack of stable transportation and basic needs such as food, shelter, and supplies. Emotional barriers to full educational participation include issues of stigma related to homelessness that make youth and families hesitant to disclose their housing issues and the negative effects of homelessness and related stressors on student health and well-being (NCHE, 2017; Ingram et al., 2016).

PART II: WHAT CAN WE DO?

Helping youth who are experiencing homelessness overcome barriers to education is challenging for schools. McKinney-Vento liaisons charged with implementing federal provisions often wear many different hats in addition to fulfilling their roles supporting homeless youth, and many liaisons report being the only person within their school district who receives training related to this issue (Ingram et al., 2016). Many liaisons report feeling that their school district does not prioritize the problem of homelessness, and the majority of students who are homeless feel their schools do a fair or poor job supporting them (Ingram et al., 2016). McKinney-Vento liaisons identify several key challenges to serving youth and families experiencing homelessness that need to be addressed, such as funding, time, staff, and resources; community awareness of the problem of homelessness; information sharing

across agencies; and support from local and city government (Ingram et al., 2016). Under ESSA, the newly amended McKinney-Vento Act addresses many of the challenges identified by students and liaisons by adding critical protections to recognize and support students who are homeless. Liaisons and students acknowledge that, with supports in place to foster resilience, homeless students are successful.

For many students experiencing homelessness, school is the one constant in an otherwise chaotic situation. Schools play a critical role in addressing the problem of homelessness and helping students get the needed supports to be successful. School personnel at all levels—particularly local homeless education liaisons can implement a number of strategies to support students who are eligible for McKinney-Vento protections, as outlined by ESSA.

IDENTIFY STUDENTS WHO ARE HOMELESS

Identifying students who are homeless is a critical first step to connecting youth to the supports to which they are entitled. Although critical, identification of students in homeless situations can be extremely challenging. Students and families may be hesitant to reveal their homeless status to school staff due to embarrassment, a fear of being stigmatized, or a lack of trust in school personnel. Identification may be more difficult for some groups, such as unaccompanied youth who are often reluctant to disclose being homeless and find themselves navigating their living situations and education on their own (Ausikaitis et al., 2015). Strategies for identifying youth who are homeless include the following (NAEHCY, 2016a; NCHE, 2017b):

- Provide ongoing education and training to build awareness of homelessness and its effects for all school staff and key members of the community serving youth.
- Post information about homelessness on websites and in places visible to students in the school and include information in student handbooks and on school forms.
- Post information about homelessness and education-related rights in places where youth congregate, such as parks, campgrounds, libraries, and youth clubs.
- Include a housing questionnaire and related rights in enrollment and registration packets for all students.
- Build relationships with community-based agencies who serve youth who

are homeless to support identification (e.g., homeless shelters and transitional living sites, youth organizations, community centers, homeless coalitions, health clinics, and motels).

- Collaborate with those individuals responsible for implementing other federally mandated education and related programs, such as Title I, Part A, and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, to see which students eligible for other programs may qualify as homeless.
- Participate in attendance reviews to determine whether homelessness is a factor and educate attendance officers on ways to identify homeless students.
- Keep a list of local shelter and motel addresses that may be used by students and families who are homeless.
- Identify preschool students who are homeless and school-age siblings.
- Build inquiries about living situations into forms related to enrollment and withdrawal.
- Consider language and potential barriers associated with labeling students as "homeless." Examples of person-first language include "students experiencing homelessness", "students who are homeless", "students in homeless

situations", or "students eligible for McKinney-Vento services".

- Involve youth in educating the school community about homelessness and rights to help foster an accepting culture.
- Incorporate homelessness and related topics into the school curriculum.

RESOLVE DISPUTES

ESSA guidelines call for the prompt resolution of disputes regarding educational placement of children and youth who are eligible for McKinney-Vento services. Disputes between parents, guardians, or unaccompanied youth and schools most commonly arise over issues such as eligibility for McKinney-Vento protections, whether a student should remain in the student's "school of origin" or be enrolled in a new school based on current living situation, immediacy of enrollment and participation in all school activities, and transportation to and from school and school activities. Liaisons are required to ensure that parents, guardians, and youth are aware of their right to dispute decisions and steps to take if a formal dispute process is necessary. The following strategies help schools prevent and resolve disputes (NCHE, 2015; NCHE, 2017b):

- Liaisons ensure that the school or

district is familiar with and is implementing the McKinney-Vento Act. Compliance with the law helps to prevent disputes.

- Liaisons educate parents, guardians, and youth about McKinney-Vento provisions and what is and is not covered under the law.
- Schools treat parents, guardians, and youth with respect in all verbal and written communications to avoid negative interactions that may result in or intensify a dispute.
- Schools provide parents, guardians, and youth with contact information for the local liaison, clear and complete information about the dispute process, and assistance in accessing supports such as advocates or attorneys; schools also ensure that the process is manageable and flexible and minimizes inconvenience for parents, guardians, or youth.

SUPPORT SCHOOL PERSONNEL

Support for school personnel, including local homeless education liaisons and school staff is critical to successfully implementing McKinney-Vento provisions. SEAs are responsible for providing adequate training and support to district liaisons, and, in turn, liaisons are responsible for educating all school staff. A key strategy for identifying and

supporting students and families who are homeless is to ensure that all school personnel are educated about homelessness and related issues and receive training on how to respond to homeless students and families in a respectful, compassionate, and informed manner (NCHE, 2017).

Training topics that are particularly important for school personnel as they relate to homelessness include: (1) the prevalence and impact of homelessness and trauma on youth and families; (2) the McKinney-Vento act and related requirements for serving homeless students; (3) warning signs of student homelessness; (4) strategies for supporting students experiencing homelessness in the classroom and schoolwide; (5) the developmental effects of trauma; and (6) trauma-informed approaches to working with homeless youth and families. Broader trainings for fostering safe and supportive school environments and culture help to foster an environment in which all students get what they need to succeed academically.

ENSURE ACCESS TO SERVICES AND ADDRESS RELATED PROBLEMS

The McKinney-Vento Act requires that students experiencing homelessness be immediately enrolled in school

regardless of whether they have the necessary documentation. While in school, students who are homeless should have full access to all academic and extracurricular activities, and schools are required to minimize barriers that prevent youth from receiving appropriate credit for coursework in a previous school. The strategies outlined below represent best practices for ensuring equal access to education and support services for McKinney-Vento students (NCHE, 2006; NCHE, 2010a; NCHE, 2010b; NCHE, 2017c).

- Keep students in the school of origin when possible to avoid disruption and assure students receive full credit for coursework.
- Enroll students who are homeless immediately.
- Address any immediate safety issues.
- Orient parents and students to the school and staff.
- Protect privacy and confidential information.
- Contact previous school immediately for any information that can help with enrollment.
- Gather information from parents and youth about school performance and experiences and any paperwork they may have.
- Create a portfolio of class work that

students can take with them to a new school.
- Seek out alternative ways to access key documents such as birth certificates (e.g., online services to obtain records).
- Develop community collaborations and refer students for services that are important for enrollment (e.g., healthcare, including health insurance and examinations).
- Use a brief, valid assessment of academic placement needs. (See examples at https://nche.ed.gov/downloads/briefs/assessment.pdf.)
- Ensure that unaccompanied youth have information about all educational and related opportunities.
- Ensure that students who are homeless have the same opportunities to participate in extracurricular activities as their peers, and educate adults providing these activities about homelessness.
- Provide support to ensure consistent attendance (e.g., access to basic needs such as food, quiet study spaces, involvement in extracurricular activities of interest to the students, additional support from teachers and administrators to help students earn credits).
- Ensure access to alternative

community-based programs related to employment training, earning college credits, and mentoring.

- Maintain connections with community-based agencies providing related services (e.g., housing, behavioral health services).
- Identify resources to help pay for equipment and fees associated with participation in various activities.

ENACT POLICIES TO REMOVE BARRIERS

A key component of the McKinney-Vento Act involves developing and revising policies that support equal access to education for students who are homeless. Schools consider putting in place or strengthening specific policies related to core aspects of the law, such as enrollment of homeless students, dispute resolution, and access to services. For example, states should make their dispute resolution policy available to all LEAs and ensure adequate training on the policy. SEAs and LEAs should review all completed disputes to determine whether revisions to the policy are needed (NCHE, 2015; NCHE, 2017b). Guiding questions for SEAs and LEAs to consider related to policies and procedures include the following (NCHE, n.d.):

1. How often do you review state-level policies, regulations, and practices that might be barriers to the enrollment, attendance, and success of students who are homeless?
2. What issues frequently arise in calls received by the state requesting information or technical assistance?
3. What barriers to enrollment and school success do students who are homeless still face in your districts and schools?
4. What policy documents have been provided to districts and schools?
5. What training have schools received on policies related to the education of students experiencing homelessness?
6. What processes are in place to ensure consistent implementation of policies related to McKinney-Vento?
7. Is there an efficient dispute resolution policy with which all LEAs are familiar?

ASSIST HOMELESS STUDENTS IN PREPARING FOR COLLEGE

Ensuring that students who are homeless receive guidance related to college readiness is also a requirement under McKinney-Vento. College readiness is a particularly salient issue for unaccompanied youth who require adult support to prepare for postsecondary education. School counselors ensure that students experiencing homelessness are aware of

their options after high school and help students take the steps to apply for college, which includes helping students identify schools and complete application and financial aid forms. McKinney-Vento liaisons and school counselors should be aware of laws, such as the College Cost Reduction and Access Act, that help remove barriers to accessing federal financial aid for unaccompanied homeless youth (NCHE, 2012). Once a student who is homeless is accepted into college, school counselors can help connect them with college programs that offer academic and social supports (NAEHCY, 2016b).

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RESOURCES

Staff Training
- National Center for Homeless Education: http://nche.ed.gov/web/s_p.php
- National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth: http://www.naehcy.org/essa-training-and-professional-development-resources
- National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments:
  - https://safesupportivelearning.ed.gov/events/webinar/trauma-sensitive-schools
  - https://safesupportivelearning.ed.gov/ESSA-TitleIVPartA-SSAE
  - https://safesupportivelearning.ed.gov/safe-and-healthy-students

McKinney-Vento Information and Implementation Tools
- U.S. Department of Education, Education for Homeless Children and Youths Program Non-Regulatory Guidance: https://www2.ed.gov/policy/elsec/leg/essa/160240ehcyguidance072716.pdf
- The Most Frequently Asked Questions on the Education Rights of Children and Youth in Homeless Situations: http://www.naehcy.org/sites/default/files/dl/legis/2017-10-16_NAEHCY%20FAQs.pdf
- Unaccompanied Youth Toolkit for High School Counselors and McKinney-Vento Liaisons: http://www.naehcy.org/toolkit-high-school-counselors
- National Center for Homeless Education's Homeless Liaison Toolkit: https://nche.ed.gov/pr/liaison_toolkit.php
- College Access and Success for Students Experiencing Homelessness: A Toolkit for Educators and Service Providers: http://www.naehcy.org/sites/default/files/dl/toolkit.pdf

Websites
- National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth: http://www.naehcy.org
- National Center for Homeless Education: https://nche.ed.gov
- U.S. Department of Education: https://www.ed.gov

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