



Education Barriers for Homeless Youth

The Intersection of Youth Homelessness and Educational Barriers

The absence of a stable living arrangement has a devastating impact on educational outcomes for youth.¹ For many students who are homeless, not having the proper school records often leads to incorrect classroom placement. Medical records, immunization records, previous school transcripts, proof of residency, and for unaccompanied youth, parental permission slips, are some of the “paper” barriers to students being placed efficiently and appropriately within school districts.

When students change schools frequently, it is difficult for educators to correctly identify their needs and ensure proper placement. Parents may also have difficulty identifying the difference between academic or social difficulties that result from the stress of homelessness and mobility.² Also, transportation is an obstacle that further prevents many homeless children and youth from obtaining education. Stigmas about homelessness combined with lack of support from the school district can often prevent homeless students from receiving the best education possible. All of these reasons prevent homeless youth from receiving education effectively and efficiently.

Homeless Youth Need Easier Access to Education as Well as Supportive Surroundings and Increased Funding

Most homeless youth have difficulty staying at the same school for an entire school year. Frequent mobility can increase anxiety and is associated with lower student achievement.³ The lack of necessary documents serves as a main barrier to homeless youth receiving education. Access to documents is essential for quick and proper placement. Under the education title of the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, schools must eliminate the barriers that impede homeless students’ enrollment and attendance. An appointed liaison is also mandated through McKinney-Vento to work with homeless students and their families.

In many areas, there are extremely limited resources available to implement the McKinney-Vento Act. As a result, many states are serving only a small portion of their estimated population of homeless students.¹ Other times, schools must keep retraining staff due to high turnover, while others will try to avoid implementing the law.⁴ Policy makers should allot more funding towards homeless youth obtaining an education as well as prioritize the necessity of homeless youth having a safe, stable environment in which to learn. Communities also need to become aware of the problems and obstacles surrounding homeless youth. Educational facilities must become supportive systems for these youth.



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Homeless Youth Need Educational Assistance Overcoming Barriers to Help Break the Cycle of Poverty and Homeless

Children and youth experiencing homelessness do not fit society's stereotypical images of the homeless population.¹³ Homeless children and youth face a number of obstacles within society – receiving education in a stable environment is one of them. These students face unique barriers to enrolling and succeeding in school including school attendance policies, legal guardianship requirements, transportation, and credit accrual. Youth are often prevented from enrolling in and attending schools by curfew laws, liability concerns, and legal guardianship requirements.¹

Congress established the McKinney-Vento Act's Education for Homeless Children and Youth (EHCY) program in response to reports that only 57% of homeless children were enrolled in school.¹ Currently, addressing the needs of homeless youth is required by law – schools must eliminate barriers to enrollment, attendance, and success in schools for students. The act also mandates that schools appoint a liaison to work with homeless students and their families as well as serve as a resource for educators.

State coordinators have indicated that the slow transfer of student records along with differing course requirements from school to school complicate homeless students being able to receive sufficient credits for grade promotion or graduation.⁵ Missing documents can have a devastating effect on a homeless youth's ability to achieve an education in a safe, supportive environment. School transfers have a well-documented negative effect on academic achievement, as do lack of quiet, safe places to do homework, lack of school supplies, and lack of food.¹³

Even when correct documents are obtained, mobility remains a major barrier to homeless youth receiving education. One half of homeless children attend three different schools in one year.⁶ Researchers indicate that it takes anywhere from four to six months to recover academically from a disruption like moving more than twice in one school year.⁷ Moving for reasons other than normal family progression can have devastating effects on youth. Students who receive only partial credit for courses will be forced to start the semester over. Other times, students will be placed incorrectly due to the different academic standards of schools and may repeat courses or be placed in classes they are unprepared for academically. Between 2001 and 2002, forty-two percent of homeless children transferred schools at least once. Out of these children, 51% transferred schools two or more times.⁶ Frequent moves from school to school not only put teachers and students at a disadvantage, but mobility rates are frighteningly high and getting worse.³ Although children and youth who experience homelessness represent the full range of academic abilities, frequent residential moves also put them at risk of falling behind in school.¹³

The McKinney-Vento Act is recognized as a milestone for the education of homeless children. However, transportation to their school of origin can cause more harm than good and continues to remain an influential barrier to homeless youth. The Fiscal Year 2000 Report to Congress cited a lack of transportation as the number one barrier that homeless children and youth face when they attempt to enroll in school and attend regularly.⁸ Some schools have tried to solve the problem of mobility by offering transportation from their new location to their previous school to eliminate changing schools.



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One study reveals that since the passage of McKinney-Vento, more homeless parents are trying to keep their children enrolled in their original schools rather than moving them to a school closer to the shelter. As a result, the time it takes for students to get to their school “significantly increases the onset of homelessness.”² Some specific transportation barriers include parents not knowing how to voice their needs in the district, parents not knowing whom to call, complicated and costly transportation when schools are far from the youths temporary residence, lack of communication and coordination, inability to find additional local financial and staff resources, and a lack of school transportation policy.

Some youth do not have a parent or a guardian to advocate for their rights and may remain out of school for extended periods of time.¹⁰ Unaccompanied youth often do not know the full extent of their rights to receive an education. Being unfamiliar with policies regarding unaccompanied youth and education is yet another barrier that prevents youth from receiving help for their education. If a family experiencing homelessness lacks information about the rights of homeless children and youth, the youth may be prevented from remaining in a stable school setting with access to transportation, tutoring, or other services. Schools continue to suffer unnecessarily high mobility rates and lower performance when families and assistance organizations remain ignorant of the educational rights of homeless students.¹³

Schools have been documented having apathy in enrolling unaccompanied youth because they “just don’t want these kids, and will try to avoid implementing the law.” The National Law Center on Homelessness & Poverty sued last year in New York’s Suffolk County to get schools there to stop burdensome process that delayed the enrollment of homeless children. The Center also sued New York State, which agreed to do more to enforce compliance with McKinney-Vento.⁴ Stigma and prejudice against unaccompanied youth from the school system must cease before policies like McKinney-Vento can be truly effective and helpful. Teachers, administrators, and staff need to be willing to help this group of youth continuously and successfully.

Another obstacle of the McKinney-Vento Act is the extremely limited resources available for implementation. Appropriations for EHCY have not been kept up with the inflation or demand for services. Some states are only available to help a small portion of their unaccompanied youth. The program still lacks proper funding preventing adequate implementation on the state and local level.¹

A large problem with achieving academic access is the adult and parent connection that is beneficial to homeless and unaccompanied youth. Parents play a pivotal role in education their children. They must embrace education in order to better promote their children’s intellectual growth and academic achievement. Because homeless parents often feel ill-equipped to help their children, they seldom assist their children or introduce early learning experiences in the home.² In order for children and youth to value education; parents must learn the value and worth of school as well as the importance of keeping stability for their children and receiving education.

Parents who are homeless often spend much of their time finding food, shelter, doing laundry, maintaining hygiene, searching for reemployment, and caring for basic daily survival needs. These different demands can often take away a parent’s ability to identify their child’s educational needs and they often lack communication with counselors and teachers.² Homeless youth who have parents are often denied educational attention from their parents and unaccompanied youth face the same consequences by not having an adult or guardian looking out for their educational needs. With no consistent educator following the behavior and achievement of a student for more than a few days or a few weeks, educational needs can remain unrecognized for months or years.²



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In general, the academic achievement of homeless students is poor. Only one-third of homeless student read at a grade level compared to more than half of their same-aged peers.¹¹ Feelings suffered by homeless youth can take a toll on their academic success. Fatigue can destroy their concentration, hopelessness can undermine initiative, and anger can cause bad behavior.

By allowing homeless children and youth to grow up without a focus and commitment to education, society fails to cultivate a future for them, but also promotes the cycle of poverty.

(D) Review of Research

Further Statistics Concerning Homeless Youth and Education

- Nationally, one-fifth of homeless children repeat a grade in school, and sixteen percent are enrolled in special education classes – rates 100 percent and 33 percent higher than their non-homeless counterparts.⁶
- In a single school year, 12 percent of homeless youth miss at least one-month of classes and 33 percent miss at least two weeks.⁶
- About 12 percent of homeless children are not enrolled in school and up to 45 percent do not attend school regularly.¹²
- In the FY 2000 Report to Congress, it was indicated that 87 percent of homeless K-12 children and youth were enrolled in school. However, only 77 percent attended school regularly.⁸
- Within a year, 41 percent of homeless children will attend two different schools; 28 percent of homeless children will attend three or more different schools.²
- Between 2001 and 2002, 42 percent of homeless children transferred schools at least once. Out of these children, 51 percent transferred twice or more.⁶

(E) Review of Recommendations with Narrative

Educational Support, Funding: Services that will Help Homeless Youth Overcome Education Barriers

Children and youth experiencing homelessness are faced with many obstacles in every-day life. Receiving an education to lead them towards successful and stable lives should not be one of them. Policymakers and community members should support the following reforms and suggestions.

1. Increase Support Within the Educational System

Educators need to help and be supportive regarding the educational needs of homeless youth. Educators not only should make the transition processes for homeless youth as easy as possible, but should also be helpful informing youth, parents, and families about their rights to obtain an education. Youth should not feel rejected by their schools, nor should they slip through the cracks because educators “just don’t want these kids.” It is important that homeless youth are accepted into a supportive and positive educational environment, without any stigma or prejudice, so that they may achieve their maximum potential.



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2. Increased Enforcement of McKinney-Vento

Without enforcement of programs supporting and helping homeless youth, programs are ineffective and results are not maximized. The McKinney-Vento Act has many helpful provisions that would be increasingly beneficial to homeless youth if implemented correctly and efficiently. Mandatory transportation services, admissions without documents, as well as help to all youth who are homeless under McKinney-Vento's definition are a few situations that should be enforced continuously by educators at every school.

3. Increased Federal Funding for McKinney-Vento Services

Without increased funding, enforcement, support and services will continue to decrease. This decline will have a devastating effect on homeless youth and their opportunity for education. Funding must be enhanced in order for the McKinney-Vento Act to achieve all of its goals. When there is inadequate funds, schools are able to help only a small portion of their homeless youth. With increased funding, more schools could help more homeless youth as well as improve their services and staff to be more helpful and more effective.

Contact Information and Web Resources

National Network for Youth – www.nn4youth.org

National Center for Homeless Education – www.serve.org/nche

National Association for Education of Homeless Children and Youth – www.naehcy.org

National Law Center on Homelessness & Poverty – www.nlchp.org

Sources

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National Network for Youth

The National Network for Youth (NN4Y), founded in 1974, is a nonprofit membership organization that champions the needs of runaway, homeless, and other disconnected youth through advocacy, innovation and member services. NN4Y provides its members and the general public education, networking, training, materials and policy advocacy with federal, state, and local lawmakers. NN4Y is committed to ensuring that opportunities for development and per-

manence be made available to youth who face greater odds due to abuse, neglect, exploitation, homelessness, lack of resources, community prejudice, differing abilities, barriers to learning, and other life challenges.

NN4Y's membership includes community-based, faith-based, and public organizations that provide an array of services to youth and families in the U.S. states and territories as well as some international locations. NN4Y's organization members provide the full gamut of preventive, interventive, and developmental supports to youth and families in high-risk situations, including street-based crisis intervention, emergency shelter, transitional and independent living arrangements, permanent housing, individual and family counseling, lifeskills, parenting, and health and wellness education, physical and mental health treatment and care, and education, workforce development, arts, and recreation services. Collectively, NN4Y member organizations serve over 2.5 million youth annually. In addition, youth, youth workers, and regional and state networks of youth-serving organizations belong to NN4Y.



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