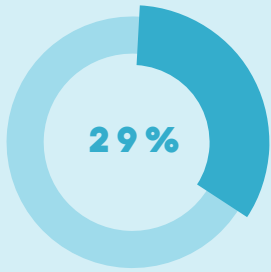


2023



Supporting Unhoused Students

**A BLUEPRINT FOR
MASSACHUSETTS SCHOOLS**



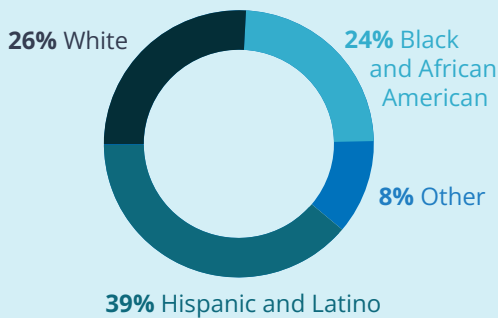
of those experiencing homelessness in the U.S. are families with children.

23,000

children and youth in Massachusetts have been identified as homeless.

% OF UNHOUSED STUDENTS BY RACE

Black and Brown youth are disproportionately affected by homelessness.



About one-third of those experiencing homelessness in the U.S. are families with children.¹ In the 2019-20 school year, nearly 1.3 million students experienced homelessness, representing 2.5% of all students enrolled in public schools.² A similar percentage was reported in Massachusetts, where 2.4% of all public school students—close to 23,000 children and youth—were identified as homeless.³

Child and family homelessness is associated with a host of negative outcomes, such as:

- Poor physical and mental health, including chronic conditions related to asthma, lead exposure, and nutritional deficits;
- Increased school mobility;
- Lower academic performance;
- Higher rates of absenteeism and grade retention; and
- Hindered social and emotional development.

While all students are at risk of experiencing negative impacts from homelessness, Black and Brown youth are disproportionately affected. In 2019-20, Hispanic and Latino students accounted for 38% of students experiencing homelessness despite making up only 28% of the U.S. student body, and Black and African American students accounted for 27% of students experiencing homelessness despite making up only 15% of the student body. In contrast, White students accounted for nearly half of all students enrolled in public schools, yet they represented only 26% of students experiencing homelessness.⁴

¹ Henry, M., de Sousa, T., Roddey, C., Gayen, S., & Bednar, T. J. (2021, January). The 2020 annual homeless assessment report (AHAR) to Congress: Part 1: Point-in-time estimates of homelessness. The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. <https://www.huduser.gov/portal/sites/default/files/pdf/2020-AHAR-Part-1.pdf>

² National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). (2021). State nonfiscal public elementary/secondary education survey, 2017-18 v.1a, 2018-19 v.1a, 2019-20 v.1a. [Data set]. Common Core of Data. <https://nces.ed.gov/ccd/files.asp>

³ NCES, State nonfiscal public elementary/secondary education survey.

⁴ NCES, State nonfiscal public elementary/secondary education survey.

Given the well-documented impact that experiences of homelessness have on student outcomes, particularly for students of color, schools have a responsibility to attend to the impacts of housing instability in their communities to ensure equitable, high-quality learning experiences for all students. Research shows that school-based efforts to support students experiencing homelessness make a difference.⁵ Classrooms can serve as a stable refuge for students, providing them with safety, routine, and support. Steps like working to improve student attendance, engaging with families, and helping students develop self-regulation skills can all lessen the harmful effects of homelessness. However, schools cannot be expected to do this work alone. District administrators and educators can carry out this work more effectively by working closely with community-based organizations with expertise in issues of homelessness and housing stability.

The need for school- and community-based supports for homeless students and their families is urgent. Resources and protections, such as an eviction moratorium and rental assistance, that prevented a dramatic rise in homelessness at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic have largely gone away. With current economic uncertainty and without these protections in place, many experts predict a rise in homelessness.

This blueprint, intended to guide schools and districts in developing school-community partnerships to support homeless youth and their families, combines research-based best practices with lessons learned from homelessness programs nationwide. It includes four sections detailing the process schools can undertake to design and implement a program, providing tools and templates to support this process along the way.

PREPARE

What conditions should be in place to develop school-community partnerships that support homeless youth and their families?

DESIGN

What best practices should school-based homelessness partnerships have in place?

IMPLEMENT

What steps should be taken when rolling out a quality program?

EVOLVE

How can programs monitor success and continually improve?

⁵ Edwards, E. J. (2019). Hidden Success: Learning From the Counternarratives of High School Graduates Impacted by Student Homelessness. *Urban Education*, 0(0).

PREPARE

What are the conditions for success to develop school-based programs to support homeless youth and their families?

Successfully launching and effectively running a new program to support homeless youth and their families requires careful planning. Schools should expect to spend a significant amount of time preparing and designing their program before launch. This preparation includes building trust and buy-in within a school, identifying and cultivating community partnerships, and, if possible, obtaining funding. Below is an outline of key considerations and guiding questions to inform the planning process.

Build School/District Capacity and Buy-In

ACTION	DESCRIPTION	GUIDING QUESTIONS
Identify Community Need	Gather information about needs in the school community by reviewing school and community-level homelessness data and by interviewing key stakeholders.	<p>What is the prevalence of homelessness in the community?</p> <p>What resources are currently provided by the school/district to students experiencing homelessness and their families?</p> <p>What resources are currently available in the community?</p> <p>What barriers do students/families face in accessing services?</p> <p>What gaps in services exist?</p>
Set a Vision	<p>A clearly articulated vision ensures that stakeholders understand the purpose of the program and what success looks like. A vision should be bold, achievable, easy-to-explain, and future tense. It should avoid jargon or buzz words.</p> <p><i>For example, Our vision is to provide every student experiencing homelessness with equal access to quality education through school-community partnerships that address families' non-academic needs.</i></p>	<p>Which stakeholders should be involved in developing and sharing our vision?</p> <p>What long-term change should result from the program?</p> <p>What family-level impacts will we see if the program is successful?</p> <p>What student-level impacts will we see if the program is successful?</p> <p>What community-level impacts will we see if the program is successful?</p>
Define Housing Stability	In order to prioritize resources, each school/district must decide how they will define housing stability. For example, will the program support the full range of families included in the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act's definition of homeless? (See sidebar on page 6). This definition will drive the scope of the program.	<p>What is our current definition of housing stability?</p> <p>Is the current definition appropriate for our current resource capacity (staffing, funding, services, etc.)?</p>

<p>Build School Buy-In</p>	<p>A successful school-wide program to support homeless youth and families requires dedicated investment from all school staff, including, but not limited to, administrators, teachers, counselors, and social workers.</p>	<p>To what extent are stakeholders aware of the numbers of students experiencing homelessness in the community and their unique needs?</p> <p>Is supporting homeless youth a specifically defined priority in our school?</p> <p>To what extent do all staff know and embrace our vision for supporting homeless youth and families?</p> <p>What are the current roles and responsibilities of different staff members regarding support for homeless youth and families?</p>
<p>Establish a Team</p>	<p>In addition to general staff buy-in, most schools launching a homelessness program will need a team of individuals specifically charged with identifying and coordinating support for students and families experiencing, or on the verge of, housing instability.</p> <p>The number and roles of team members will depend on the number and needs of homeless students and families in the school, the school's current resources and capacity, and the specialties and skills of staff. Common members include a school administrator, McKinney-Vento liaison, social worker(s), and family liaison. Depending on the extent of housing instability in the community, schools may choose to hire a full-time homelessness liaison to provide targeted support to students and families.</p>	<p>Which school- or district-level administrator, with budgetary and decision-making authority, will participate on the team?</p> <p>Which school staff currently interface with community-based organizations and refer families to community resources?</p> <p>Does it make more sense for our school to form a full team dedicated to the program or to appoint one individual to coordinate our efforts?</p> <p>Who should be involved in our team? How can we allocate time for team members to directly support students/families?</p> <p>To what extent does our team include members whose identities and lived experiences are representative of families served through our program?</p> <p>To what extent does our team include staff with language skills to communicate with multilingual families?</p> <p>What training will the team need related to establishing strong relationships with families dealing with housing insecurity, crisis response, and/or the logistical elements of obtaining housing?</p>
<p>Identify Funding Opportunities</p>	<p>The amount of funding required for a school to start a program will be based on the number and needs of homeless students and families in the school, the capacity of current staff, and the ratio of students and families to staff. Funding may be needed to pay staff to take on new roles related to the program and/or provide additional support to students. If possible, funding can also be used to hire staff who can focus exclusively on supporting homeless students and families.</p>	<p>Do we need additional funding to launch our program? If so, how much?</p> <p>What current funding do we receive that can be put toward the program, such as McKinney-Vento funds and Title I funds? <i>NOTE: All students experiencing homelessness are eligible for Title I services even if they are not enrolled in Title I schools. All districts are required to set aside Title 1, Part A funds to support the enrollment, attendance and success of students experiencing homelessness.</i>⁶</p> <p>What additional sources of funding may be available, such as other federal funds (e.g., the American Rescue Plan Act's Homeless Children and Youth program), foundation grants, nonprofit collaborations, or internal fundraising initiatives?</p>

⁶ <https://www2.ed.gov/policy/elsec/leg/essa/letterforessatitleialeahomelesssetaside.pdf>

MCKINNEY-VENTO HOMELESS ASSISTANCE ACT

The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act requires that state and local educational agencies review and revise policies and procedures to remove barriers to a high-quality education for homeless children and youth.⁷ Under the McKinney-Vento Act, homeless children and youth are defined as individuals lacking fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence.⁸

Federal funds are available through the McKinney-Vento Homeless Education Grant to support programs that ensure students who are homeless enroll and attend school and receive racially equitable, culturally responsive opportunities to succeed. Funding is available to districts with significant numbers of homeless students and can be used to provide academic support, professional development, engagement of homeless families in their children's education, and access to mentoring and after school programming. To learn more about funding for the 2023 school year, visit <https://www.doe.mass.edu/grants/2023/310/>.

⁷ U.S. Department of Education. (2016, July 27). Supporting the success of homeless children and youths. <https://www2.ed.gov/policy/elsec/leg/essa/160315ehcyfactsheet072716.pdf>

⁸ U.S. Department of Education, Supporting the success of homeless children and youths.

Cultivate Partnerships

Supporting homeless youth and families, and disrupting the systems that perpetuate homelessness, requires a community-wide approach. By collaborating with others who have a similar mission, schools gain capacity, expand their access to resources, and benefit from the sharing of best practices.

Develop Partnerships with Housing-Focused Organizations

Connecting families with housing-specific supports is critical to addressing homelessness. Schools will benefit from working with community partners to identify all available housing services for which a family is eligible, such as Section 8 and Massachusetts Rental Voucher Program (MRVP) vouchers, project-based vouchers in affordable housing developments, and public housing authority units. Housing-focused partners may be able to provide insights and connections to new opportunities as well.

- The first step schools can take is to develop, and subsequently maintain, a list of local housing-focused organizations, specifically noting which of these serve homeless families and which serve unaccompanied homeless youth.
 - The Massachusetts Department of Housing and Community Development has created [A Guide to Obtaining Housing Assistance](#), through which schools can review information about public housing, rental assistance, and voucher programs, as well as locate service providers in their community. Service providers may include regional and local housing agencies and nonprofits, emergency shelter providers, and providers of housing mediation and legal assistance.
- Once schools have created their list of local organizations, they can identify a staff person at each organization to serve as a main point of contact and support.
- By establishing connections with local organizations, trusted school staff members will be able to introduce families and/or students to, and facilitate their connections with, providers whenever needs arise.

Barriers to consider when connecting families and youth with housing include prior evictions, unpaid utility bills, poor credit, and bankruptcy. Schools can work with their community partners to connect families with local housing advocates and legal support, when appropriate.

PROGRAMS IN MASSACHUSETTS

Below are several programs and organizations in Massachusetts currently working to support homeless children, youth, and families. This list can serve as a starting point to determine potential partners, depending on a school's location, as well as to learn about various types of supports and services that can be offered.

- Homeless Education Resource Network (Boston)**
- The Haven Project (Lynn)**
- Family-Led Stability Initiative (Boston)**
- Project Place Gatehouse (Brockton)
- Y2Y (Cambridge)
- Horizons for Homeless Children
- Schools on Wheels

**Specific practices from the Homeless Education Resource Network (HERN), the Family-Led Stability Initiative, and the Haven Project will be highlighted throughout this report. HERN represents a district-led initiative, FLSI is led by community partners in collaboration with the district, and the Haven Project operates separately from any individual school/district.

Identify Wraparound Service Partners

Services needed to support homeless students and their families extend well beyond housing. Schools may benefit from inventorying community resources and organizing all partnership information in a resource map. Consider the following key questions as you produce a resource map:

- In what areas do we need support beyond the resources available at the school?
- Which local organizations that we currently partner with provide relevant resources or services? *These may include organizations that specifically focus on housing as well as others that support student needs related to physical and mental health, academics, etc.*
- Which local organizations focus on the unique needs of unaccompanied homeless youth?
- Who is best positioned to make connections with these organizations?

An editable template for the wraparound partner resource map is available [here](#).

Develop Partnership Agreements

Once partners are identified, relationships need to be cultivated. This process not only involves consistent and clear communication, but it also includes technical steps like developing memorandums of understanding, establishing data systems to securely track and share student and family information, and delineating roles and responsibilities.

In meetings to launch or deepen partnerships, representatives from the school and community-based organizations should answer the following questions:

- What responsibilities will we take care of within the school? What responsibilities will be handled by our partners?
- Who from our team will serve as the liaison(s) with each of our partners?
- What steps do we need to take to ensure compliance with the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) and keep student and family information secure?

Consider the Unique Needs of Undocumented Families

Special consideration should be given to supporting undocumented students and families experiencing homelessness.

School Culture and Practices

When launching and advertising a program to support students and families experiencing homelessness, schools must work to establish trust so that those who are undocumented feel comfortable coming forward and sharing that they are homeless. School staff who already have relationships with these families have a particularly important role to play in developing and sharing information about the program.

Types of Support

When connecting families to community resources, schools must be aware of the types of housing supports that are and are not available to undocumented families. Vouchers are an especially common and helpful form of support. Of the two main types of vouchers:

- Massachusetts Rental Voucher Program (MRVP) vouchers are fully available to undocumented individuals.
- Section 8 vouchers only support members of a household who are documented (e.g., if two members of a family of four are undocumented, the family will receive 50% of a voucher).

SPOTLIGHT ON LOCAL PROGRAMS

Homeless Education Resource Network (HERN)

HERN was created to address the issue of homelessness among students in Boston Public Schools (BPS) and to eradicate barriers to student success. It is housed within the BPS Department of Opportunity Youth.

One of HERN's greatest strengths is its network approach. HERN brings together multiple stakeholders to strategize around and address issues of homelessness for BPS families. These stakeholders include the City of Boston's Office of Housing Stability (OHS), Boston Housing Authority (BHA), FamilyAid Boston, and two collaborators internal to BPS, the Division of Academics and the Office of Extended Learning. Together, these organizations are able to provide comprehensive support to families, with each serving in a distinct role.

- **OHS** connects families to local shelters, provides funding for short hotel stays, and offers rental assistance through the city's rental relief fund.
- **BHA** provides families with housing vouchers.
- **FamilyAid Boston**, one of the largest shelter providers in the city, provides case management services to families and can assist families in completing and submitting applications to BHA.
- **The Division of Academics and Office of Extended Learning** collaborate with HERN to ensure students experiencing homelessness are given priority to participate in certain opportunities and programs, such as academic mentoring and summer learning opportunities.

Family-Led Stability Initiative

The Family-Led Stability Initiative (FLSI) is a collaborative effort between Boston city agencies, Boston Public Schools (BPS), and nonprofit providers to address housing instability among Boston students and families and to improve educational outcomes. First launched as a pilot in January 2018, FLSI now provides case management, housing, furniture, and other wraparound supports to families in several BPS schools.

FLSI is a seven-member partnership. These partners include Project Hope; the Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative (DSNI); New Lease for Homeless Families; Boston's Higher Ground; BPS; Boston Housing Authority (BHA); and the Mayor's Office of Housing, formerly Boston's Department of Neighborhood Development. Each of these organizations has specific responsibilities to ensure clarity and efficiency. For example, BPS schools facilitate FLSI's relationship with families, and Project Hope and Higher Ground provide direct services, such as case management and housing assessments. Project Hope and Higher Ground often convene to discuss the cases they are managing and exchange knowledge and ideas.

The Haven Project

The Haven Project began as a grassroots effort to support homeless youth in Lynn. While several organizations in operation at the time of the Haven Project's founding served the homeless population, most were not designed to assist youth. The Haven Project has sought to fill that gap by providing aid to young people between the ages of 17 and 24.

The Haven Project assesses a youth's eligibility to receive support through an intake process. This process involves an initial assessment of the youth's circumstances, followed by a more thorough review by an intake specialist. Youth are eligible to receive services if they meet one of the four definitions of homelessness put out by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development:

1. Youth is fleeing or attempting to flee domestic violence or other dangerous situations;
2. Youth is living where they do not have a lease or in otherwise unstable conditions;
3. Youth is living where they will be evicted within 14 days, such as a hotel or motel; and
4. Youth is living in a place not intended for human habitation, such as in the car or on the street.

What best practices should school-based homelessness programs have in place?

Once a school has their vision, team, partnerships, and funding in place, the design process can begin. There are three key steps in designing an effective homelessness program:

1. Identify the specific students and families with which to work
2. Identify the services and supports needed by each student and family
3. Determine resource availability

Although these steps will likely need to be carried out sequentially when first designing a program—e.g., before identifying the specific services and supports needed, schools must know the individuals they are serving—the steps are also fluid. Schools should return to these steps while implementing their program in whatever order is necessary. For example, needs and resource availability should be carefully monitored throughout the year.

Identify Students and Families

The first step in designing a homelessness program is identifying the students and families experiencing housing instability. This process should be guided by the definition of housing stability determined in the “Prepare” phase. Different housing instability scenarios may include living in shelters, couch surfing, living doubled up with extended family/friends, and living on the street. Signs that a child is experiencing this instability can range from subtle to extreme.

The McKinney Vento Act requires districts to collect and track data related to student homelessness, and the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) has developed guidance for identifying student and family homelessness properly and consistently.

A summary of DESE’s guidance is included below, and more information can be found on their website.

Interviewing the family or student

School staff who suspect a family or student is struggling with housing instability should refer the family to the district’s or school’s homeless liaison, or other designee, to have a conversation with the family regarding their living arrangement. Suggested interview questions include:

- Where is the student currently living?
- Can the student access this unit at any time?
- How many other people are living there?
- Why is the family/student sharing the housing of others?

Staff should never contact landlords, housing authorities, or neighbors to verify residency or homelessness without consent from families.

Housing screening tools or affidavits, if used, should be used with caution and cannot create a barrier for accessing school or school services

Generic questionnaires used during enrollment to gather information about students' residency fail to capture the complexity surrounding a student's or family's experience with housing instability. These tools will not yield the information needed to properly determine whether a student is homeless and can result in under-identification.

Determinations of homelessness will often depend on staff members' relationships with families and, as appropriate, observations made during home visits. When home visits are utilized, it is important that these visits are conducted by trained school staff and that those conducting home visits assure families that information shared will remain confidential. Home visits may be appropriate to consider in cases where a staff member suspects that a student is experiencing homelessness.

Overall, schools should be proactive in confirming a student's residency status, rather than waiting for families to share this information. Depending on the scope of a school's homelessness program, a school may need to prioritize services based on the healthiness and safety of a student's circumstance. In general, research shows that those in doubled-up settings have more positive educational outcomes than those who are unsheltered, staying in hotels/motels, or living in a shelter.⁹ Meanwhile, unaccompanied homeless youth are particularly vulnerable to negative educational outcomes.¹⁰

Once students and families are identified, schools must determine the caseload for each staff member on the program team. Caseloads may depend on the number and type of community partnerships fostered in the "Prepare" phase. The program team should develop a streamlined and collaborative system for family intake, case notes, and progress tracking to ensure:

- Communication with partners is clear and coordinated, and
- Families are continuously monitored, and identified, throughout the year.

THE IMPORTANCE OF TARGETED OUTREACH

Schools must engage in targeted outreach to ensure all eligible students and families know about, are identified for, and receive the appropriate services from the homelessness program. Methods of outreach and communication should vary to reach every family. Below are a few best practices in connecting with and serving homeless students and families.

- Create a user-friendly website and/or social media page that provides clear information about the school's homelessness program, as well as other community services and resources that can support student and family wellness (e.g., local shelter information, mental health supports, and food distribution services).
- Post notices—such as flyers, brochures, and posters—in places where students and families experiencing housing instability will see them. These places may include campgrounds, motels, libraries, laundromats, grocery stores, and pharmacies.
- Communicate with families using the method that works best for them. Some families may prefer texting or phone calls, while others prefer in-person meetings.
- Provide all staff with information/materials on how to connect students experiencing homelessness with resources.

⁹ <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.3102/0013189X17742645>

¹⁰ <https://nche.ed.gov/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/youth.pdf>

SPOTLIGHT ON LOCAL PROGRAMS

Family-Led Stability Initiative

FLSI identifies families eligible for their services through a variety of avenues, such as referrals from schools. Once a family is referred to FLSI by the school, FLSI staff will meet with the family to conduct an assessment of their needs and goals. In addition to school referrals, Project Hope holds community walk-in hours, maintains an online presence, and participates in local outreach events to increase the organization's visibility and connect with families more directly.

FLSI makes sure to support students and families holistically. While the primary need of most families is housing, FLSI provides additional services like accompanying families to school and court meetings, helping families create a budget, sharing job opportunities with students, and guiding students through the college search process. Project Hope and DSNI also help families advocate for themselves within their community, and they have built partnerships with employers to bring jobs, including those in more stable STEM fields, into the neighborhood.

The Haven Project

Students are often unaware that their current circumstances fit one of HUD's definitions of homelessness, making them eligible for the Haven Project's assistance. Therefore, the Haven Project engages in direct outreach efforts to students in local high schools. It also relies on high school staff who are knowledgeable of the organization and its work—such as homeless liaisons, school counselors, and therapists—to spread awareness. The Haven Project provides its clients with an array of supports related to:

- Basic needs, such as food, hygiene, and housing;
- Employment, such as job coaching, interview preparation, and resume review;
- Education, such as FAFSA assistance;
- Health, such as referrals to healthcare practitioners; and
- Community, such as connections to organizations that need volunteers.

These supports are either provided in-house or through assistance from partners like the Lynn Housing Authority.

Identify Student and Family Needs

The core of designing a program to support homeless students and families is identifying the specific needs of a school's population. There are many reasons why families may be struggling with housing instability, such as:

- Loss of housing due to a fire, flood, eviction, or foreclosure;
- Economic hardship resulting from the loss of a job, increase in rent, major medical event, or divorce; and
- Safety concerns, such as domestic violence or gang violence.

These struggles can then produce significant challenges for students that can impact their academic performance and physical and mental wellbeing, including, but not limited to:

- Hunger and/or malnourishment caused by food insecurity,
- Diminished access to resources and supports like mental health and wraparound services, and
- Injuries and illness due to limited access to healthcare.

Thus, an effective homelessness program must coordinate an array of services beyond identifying and securing housing. The table on the next page describes best practices for holistically supporting students experiencing homelessness.

BEST PRACTICE	BENEFITS
After school and summer learning programs	Programs that extend the school day or year provide students with access to positive mentors, academic support, and continued social and emotional learning.
Mentoring and tutoring services	These services support students in their learning, provide space for safe and confidential conversations, and help students develop coping mechanisms and skills.
Free or discounted meal programs	Nutrition increases brain function, helps produce better behavior, and supports mental concentration, perception, and reasoning skills.
24/7 drop-in centers	These centers provide students with a place to be themselves without fear of judgment. Within these centers, students can relax and/or work on academics, while forming relationships with caring and supportive adults.
On-site showers	Many homeless drop-in centers offer bathing facilities so students can feel clean and refreshed to attend school with more confidence.
Apparel donations	Being able to wear clean and new or gently used clothes can help improve students' self-worth and confidence. Clothing donations can also support students who are going on job interviews or college tours.
Counseling and social work services	These services support students' mental health and social-emotional wellbeing and may be particularly important for children and youth who have experienced, or are experiencing, trauma. Counselors/social workers can also provide direct guidance to classroom teachers on creating safe classroom environments that meet the needs of students experiencing homelessness.
Technological access	Prepaid cell phones can help students and families stay in touch with each other and the school, enhancing options for connection and communication.
Transportation services	<p>Transportation can be one of the biggest challenges for families experiencing homelessness. Students often cannot participate in out-of-school-time programs due to transportation issues. Schools can provide several services in this area, including by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Partnering with public transit providers to subsidize the cost of buses and trains, • Creating a transportation hub where rides to and from school can be coordinated, • Purchasing a fleet of vehicles for staff to use as a car share program to transport students, • Assisting families and youth in obtaining driver's licenses, and • Reimbursing youth and families for gas.

Certain populations of students experiencing homelessness require unique supports.

Undocumented students may face specific barriers related to their immigration status, including:

- An inability to obtain the proof of identification or family records needed to access education programs
- Fear of their status being shared or fear of other students learning about their undocumented status, which can lead to not pursuing school/community-based services
- An inability to access certain government-sponsored programs

It is critical that students have a trusting relationship with an adult at the school with whom they feel comfortable sharing their immigration status. With this information in mind, schools can provide referrals to community-based organizations that serve undocumented families, reassurance on safe programs for students to participate in, and tailored information about resources that are accessible based on immigration status.

Unaccompanied homeless youth tend to have different demographic markers than the general homeless population. For example, unaccompanied youth are more likely to identify as transgender, and youth of color and women are overrepresented within this population (HUD). Thus, many unaccompanied youth are contending with multiple intersecting identities that make them especially vulnerable to violence and may impede their access to educational resources. When building support systems for homeless students and families, schools should work intentionally to identify and support the unique needs of unaccompanied homeless youth. This may include:

- Creating an alternative school enrollment option so that unaccompanied homeless youth can enroll in school without the typically necessary proof of guardianship.
- Developing a system that allows unaccompanied homeless youth to participate in school events (sports, extracurricular activities, field trips, etc.) without obtaining a guardian's signature.
- Working with regional Runaway and Homeless Youth service providers to help connect unaccompanied students to appropriate services.
- Providing flexibility with school assignments, considering pathways to credit accumulation, and connecting students with alternative education programs that allow flexible school hours or include paid work components for unaccompanied youth who need to support themselves.
- Ensuring that unaccompanied homeless youth have automatic access to free Advanced Placement exams, college entrance exam fee waivers, and FAFSA support.
- Providing financial empowerment education in schools, including how to manage money, pay rent, create a budget, understand taxes, and build credit.

Students who receive special education services may have their learning challenges exacerbated by the stresses of housing instability and require additional services. Below are suggested supports that schools or community partners can provide to ensure homeless students with disabilities are set up for success.

- Pair students with a social worker to coordinate housing services, provide school supplies and clothes, and ensure students have access to out-of-school time programs that can meet the student's unique, disability-related needs.
- Provide caregivers with a parent advocate who can assist them in understanding their rights and the IEP process.
- Use summer school and after-school programming to make up for days students miss.
- Incorporate transportation services within an IEP.
- Include basic services as part of an IEP, such as tutoring, access to school supplies, access to medical services, case management, caregiver training, and free or reduced-price lunch/breakfast.
- Be flexible and compassionate with the scheduling and modality of IEP meetings.

To determine the specific services and supports that a student and family should receive, a school's program team must not only engage with and hear from students and families, but they must also regularly solicit input and feedback from school staff. While data can and should be used to identify where students may need academic, social-emotional, and other supports, school staff provide invaluable insight into the day-to-day behaviors, attitudes, and interests of students. These interactions can help identify needs and determine appropriate strategies for addressing those needs. Families may also have strong and trusting relationships with certain teachers, counselors, or other staff and be more apt to trust a school's homelessness program if communications initially come from those individuals.

LOCAL PROGRAM SPOTLIGHT

Homeless Education Resource Network

BPS families experiencing or at risk of homelessness are primarily connected to HERN by school-based homelessness liaisons. (Each BPS school has at least one staff member serving in this role.) HERN provides these liaisons with training and professional development opportunities to support their work, which includes providing some case management to families, and organizes an annual convening to encourage collective learning and knowledge exchange. HERN may also be alerted to students in need of support through notifications in BPS's Student Information System, which HERN monitors daily.

Once connected with families, HERN identifies and gathers the resources and support they need, which may include:

- Essential items, such as winter coats, backpacks, and hygiene kits;
- Urgent assistance completing and filing applications with state agencies; and/or
- Transportation to and from school for students displaced outside of the district whose current place of residence is up to an hour away from their school of origin.

HERN also has an Early Homelessness Intervention Program to provide support to families who may be on the verge of homelessness, such as those who have recently experienced an increase in rent, lost their jobs, or had a reduction in work hours.

Determine a Mechanism to Track Services and Referrals

Once the needs of students and families have been identified, the final step is to determine how the school will refer students/families to resources and track whether students are accessing the services to which they are referred. Some schools use their student information system to track this information, while others use simpler methods such as a restricted Google sheet. Key questions to consider include:

- What resources and services does our school, or current partners, already provide this student/family?
- What additional resources and services do the student/family need?
 - How do we know?
- Who can provide these resources and services (e.g., the school, a partner organization, a state agency)?
- What steps do we need to take to connect the student/family to these additional resources and services?

The following template can be used to reflect on these questions and compile an inventory of current and additional services for each student.

STUDENT NAME:			
Current Resource(s) and Service(s)	Person Responsible for Coordination	Status	Date Service Started
Additional Resource(s) and Service(s) Needed	Person Responsible for Referral	Status of Referral	Referral Deadline

IMPLEMENT

What steps should be taken when rolling out a quality program?

To roll out a quality program, schools should create a schedule that outlines how often various stakeholder groups will meet to collaborate, provide updates, solicit feedback, and execute tasks. These meetings are key to ensuring both efficiency and effectiveness. Below are examples of the types of stakeholder meetings that can occur, with recommended frequencies.

STAKEHOLDER GROUP(S)	PURPOSE OF MEETINGS	FREQUENCY
School leadership team	To make sure support for homeless students and families remains a school-wide priority, the school leadership team should regularly discuss program actions and progress. If a member of the school leadership team is on the school program team, they can provide updates, solicit feedback on current progress, and attain advice for next steps. These meetings can also be used to monitor and ensure continued school buy-in.	Monthly
School program team	The program team should meet regularly to review supports provided to and services received by students and families currently experiencing housing instability, as well as students and families who may be on the verge of housing instability. Members of the team should share updates, solicit feedback, and collaboratively determine next steps. This process should be guided by a review of data relevant for measuring progress (see “Evolve” phase), allowing for adjustments to be made as needed.	Bi-weekly
School program team WITH representatives from partner organizations	The program team should meet regularly with the school’s partner organizations. Meetings should include at least one representative from each partner organization and focus on coordinating efforts, discussing concerns or issues, training, and planning or confirming next steps.	Monthly

STAKEHOLDER GROUP(S)	PURPOSE OF MEETINGS	FREQUENCY
<p>Member(s) of the school program team with families</p>	<p>The amount of time that staff spend working with families will vary depending on each family's needs. In all cases, the program team must establish effective, flexible channels of communication. Schools should establish a single point of contact for each family. To the extent possible, families should be matched with a contact person who speaks their home language. Types of communication may include mail, phone calls, texting, and home visits. Regular communication is important not only to ensure that families are receiving timely services and support, but also to build strong, trusting relationships.</p> <p>Where possible, staff should empower families to ensure their voice is heard in programming and decisions. One way to establish this presence is to facilitate focus groups that allow families to both connect with one another and share their experiences and needs with the program team. Schools can also form a monthly parent and teacher advisory group to ensure teachers are included in program efforts (see 'Role of Teachers' on page 18).</p>	<p>Ongoing, depending on the need and type of support</p>
<p>Member(s) of the school program team with students</p>	<p>There are various ways for the program team to engage and work with students. Options for engagement may include the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Using check-in forms to guide weekly conversations and gauge student needs • Sending care packages to students to build trust and cultivate relationships • Facilitating regular affinity groups for students to connect with one another <p>Regardless of the method(s) of engagement used, staff should ensure they are capturing and amplifying student voices to understand what services and supports are and are not working well.</p> <p>As students enter their teenage years, they face difficult choices between participating in academic/ enrichment activities and working to support their personal and family needs. Schools can explore partnerships with local agencies and organizations, who may be able to stipend students to incentivize their participation in educational activities.</p>	<p>Ongoing, depending on the need and type of support</p>

Role of Teachers

Teachers have an important role to play in supporting homeless students and families, regardless of whether they are official members of the school's program team. Best practices for teachers include the following:

- Avoid calling attention to specific students. Arrange for private meetings with students to bring up concerns.
- Provide time for students to complete work at school. Work directly with students to set up time(s) when they can complete homework in class or during the school day.
- Respect students' boundaries. Allow students to label their personal items and spaces if that helps them feel more secure.
- Be prepared to address and teach non-academic skills. Subjects may include personal hygiene and strategies to enhance social emotional wellbeing, which benefit all students but will be particularly resonant for students experiencing difficult circumstances.



How can programs monitor success and continually improve?

Monitoring and evaluating the impact of school-based homelessness support programs is key to ensuring these programs are effective and sustainable. To develop a monitoring system, school leadership must determine:

- (1) What measures to track to gain a comprehensive understanding of the program’s progress, including measures related to housing placement and stabilization, student academics, and stakeholder feedback; and
- (2) The target values that indicate success for each measure.

Strong measures will allow the team to identify areas of program strength, address weaknesses, and implement new strategies to better serve students and families. Potential measures and targets—many of which are derived from the National Center for Homeless Education’s McKinney-Vento Standards—are included below.

Housing and School Stability

Does being placed in housing via the program lead to more housing and educational stability?

MEASURE	TARGET
Average number of months in which families maintain the same home address	>= 24 months
Average number of months in which students remain continuously enrolled in their school of origin barring promotion to a higher-level school	>= 24 months
Average daily school attendance	>= district average

Academic Achievement

Are students experiencing homelessness and housing instability achieving at the same or higher levels than their peers?

MEASURE	TARGET
% of current or formerly homeless students who show academic gains as measured by classroom assessments and report cards	100%
% of current or formerly homeless students who advance to the next grade without being retained	>= district average
Average MCAS ELA scores among current or formerly homeless students in grades 3-10	>= district average
Average MCAS Math scores among current or formerly homeless students in grades 3-10	>= district average
High school graduation rate among current or formerly homeless students	>= district average

Student Behavior and School Participation

Are homeless and housing insecure students able to participate fully in school? Do disproportionately high levels of behavioral challenges and/or disciplinary interventions interrupt their educational experiences?

MEASURE	TARGET
Rate of disciplinary referrals among current or formerly homeless students	<= district average
In-school suspension rate among current or formerly homeless students	<= district average
Out-of-school suspension rate among current or formerly homeless students	<= district average
Expulsion rate among current or formerly homeless students	<= district average

Stakeholder Satisfaction

How satisfied are program participants with the services being offered? Are services supporting students to feel safe, included, and prepared to succeed in school?

MEASURE	TARGET
% of families expressing satisfaction with homelessness support program	>= 90%
% of students expressing feelings of safety at school	>= 90%
% of students expressing feelings of inclusion at school	>= 90%
% of students expressing belief in their ability to achieve academically	>= 90%

Once measures of success are identified, school leaders can begin soliciting feedback and monitoring their selected data.

- Soliciting Feedback: Develop a plan to collect feedback from students, families, staff, community partners, and other stakeholders.
- Monitoring Data: Devote time at regular program team meetings to review data and adjust programming based on findings.

The following template is designed to guide the program team's improvement planning and monitoring.

VISION				
Goal	Measure	Benchmark	Target	Time Frame
Specific goals that will lead to the program's vision	Data used to measure progress toward each goal	Current data	Goal data that will indicate success	Date by when this goal will be accomplished

The following template can be used to track progress toward each goal identified above. Columns can be added as needed for each new data point. Data should be tracked and presented during each program team meeting, at a minimum.

Goal	Benchmark	Data Point 1	Data Point 2	Data Point 3	Data Point 4
	Start date	Date of first checkpoint	Data of second checkpoint	Data of third checkpoint	Data of fourth checkpoint

Monitoring and acting upon the data and metrics above provides a powerful opportunity to identify broad programmatic improvements. As trends emerge in both quantitative and qualitative data, staff may recognize opportunities to expand or adapt the types of services and supports offered to meet students' holistic needs. The example below, from the Homeless Education Resource Network, describes how one program has identified a need, set a goal to address this need, and identified concrete action steps to move this goal forward.

SPOTLIGHT ON LOCAL PROGRAMS

The Haven Project

The Haven Project's primary measures of success are retention rates and clients' ability to gain stability while involved with the organization. They track these outcomes using a milestone-to-stability tracking system, which gives clients an initial baseline score following intake and records their progress toward stability as they utilize recommended resources.

Homeless Education Resource Network

In the future, HERN hopes to focus even more on addressing the root causes of homelessness. For example, HERN intends to make sure that the families they work with are aware of continuing education opportunities and trade programs that may provide them with more economic stability. Additionally, HERN hopes to organize a series of workshops to expose families to all the resources available to them through BPS and the City of Boston, such as those related to food, healthcare, education, and housing.

CONCLUSION

Effective homelessness programs require broad support and cross-sector partnerships to ensure children and families are provided with holistic services that meet their needs. Programs like HERN, FLSI, and the Haven Project exemplify these best practices by partnering directly with schools, public agencies, and nonprofits, and by supporting families and youth with basic needs, employment, and academics—among other services—in addition to housing. These programs are continuously measuring the impact of their work, and the benefits of school-community partnerships are readily apparent. For example, in the past year, the Haven Project served 220 youth, ensuring that 100% of those eligible enrolled in SNAP food stamp benefits to receive necessary services. The Family Led Stability Initiative exceeded its family housing goal by placing 300 formerly homeless students and their families in stable housing during a 3.5 year pilot.

With strategic preparation and diligent monitoring, schools can design and implement programs that support and improve student wellbeing, helping children and youth to thrive academically, physically, mentally, socially, and emotionally, in school and beyond.

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