



Report to Congress on the Feasibility of Creating Stronger Partnerships Between Schools and Housing Agencies

**Report for Congress From
U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness**

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Purpose

This report identifies areas where schools and housing agencies—specifically [public housing agencies \(PHAs\)](#)—can partner to improve housing stability for students and youth in K-12. This report reflects the best practices provided in the 2018 National Center for Homeless Education’s [Brief on “Housing and Education Collaborations to Serve Homeless Children, Youth, and Families.”](#)

Background

The United States Interagency Council on Homelessness (USICH) is pleased to submit this summary report highlighting activities designed to strengthen partnerships between schools and housing agencies. This report is created in response to language submitted with the *2021 Appropriations Act House Committee Report*, which directs USICH to study the feasibility of creating stronger partnerships between schools and housing agencies. Specifically, the report language directs USICH to address the following:

“The Committee is concerned that students lacking adequate housing opportunities leads to instability in schools, worsening school performance, and the continuation of the cycle of poverty. The Committee directs the USICH, in consultation with the Department of Education, to provide a report to the House and Senate Committees on Appropriations within 180 days on the feasibility of creating stronger partnerships between schools and housing agencies to facilitate access to stable housing opportunities for students.”

Importance of Coordination Between Schools and Housing Agencies

The links between housing stability and education achievement have been [well-documented](#), and numerous studies indicate that children who experience frequent school changes experience [declines in educational achievement](#). The effects of school mobility can be incredibly impactful if they occur during critical educational points, such [early development](#). Stabilizing housing can help children and youth increase their academic success, while access to housing—especially public housing—can accelerate the process of achieving long-term housing stability and enhancing family well-being.

Prevalence of Homelessness Among School-Aged Children

During School Year (SY) 2019-20, public schools identified **1,280,886** students who experienced homelessness*. This represents **2.5%** of all students enrolled in public schools.¹ Based on the Department of Housing and Urban Development’s (HUD) 2021 Annual Homeless Assessment Report (AHAR), on a single night in 2021, **131,377** people experienced sheltered homelessness as part of a family with at least one adult and one child under the age of 18 years old. **79,185** of individuals in these families were children under the age of 18 years old.

**The definition of homelessness used by the Department of Education includes children who are staying with others or “doubled-up” and families with children living in motels and hotels. This definition is more expansive than the [HUD definition](#).*

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

Role of Schools in Addressing Homelessness

Schools are required to address the needs of homeless children per The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, Subtitle VII-B of the Act (42 U.S.C. §§ 11431-11435, hereafter referred to as The McKinney-Vento Act). The McKinney-Vento Act authorizes the federal Education for Homeless Children and Youth (EHCY) Program, and it is the primary piece of federal legislation related to the education of children and youth experiencing homelessness. The act guarantees students experiencing homelessness the right to enroll in and attend school and provides [funds and resources for supports needed for school success](#).

The education services in the McKinney-Vento Act include state educational agencies (SEAs) that develop state policies on how schools meet the needs of school-aged children. Additionally, local educational agencies (LEAs) are local school-system partners that provide direct services to ensure children and youth receive direct academic services and supports to mitigate the impact of housing instability and homelessness. Every public school district has a designated staff point-of-contact, also known as a local homeless education liaison, to help identify, enroll, and support the education of students experiencing homelessness. This puts schools in the position of knowing at a neighborhood-level which households are precariously housed or would meet the HUD definition of homelessness. With this extensive household-level knowledge and the legitimacy of being connected to the education system, schools should be actively engaged in Continuum of Care (CoC) conversations around identifying households with children and youth experiencing or at risk of homelessness.

“Schools and youth-serving organizations often struggle to better meet the needs of low-income students and to connect them to resources that can stabilize their lives and strengthen their academic competencies. Assisted-housing providers, including housing authorities, are in a unique position to support educators, low-income students, and their caregivers outside the school day. By partnering with schools and school districts, housing providers can help address challenges outside school that can become barriers to learning—such as housing instability, truancy, and health problems.”

—Developing Housing and Education Partnerships Lessons from the Field, Megan Gallagher, March 2015

Additionally, the McKinney-Vento Act provides clear guidance calling for local coordination between education and homeless services. Local CoC funding, and the ability to demonstrate stronger community coordination outcomes, also serve as incentives to increase the involvement of LEAs in local CoC planning and coordination.

At the federal level, the Education Department, USICH, and HUD have all issued guidance to communities on specific strategies to increase coordination between housing agencies and schools.

Building on the McKinney-Vento Mandate for School and CoC Partnerships

Schools are required to address the needs of homeless children per the McKinney-Vento Act, which authorizes the federal Education for Homeless Children and Youth (EHCY) Program and is the primary piece of federal legislation related to the education of children and youth. Through the McKinney-Vento Act, the federal government has established an expectation of coordination between schools and housing agencies through the provision of services for children and youth experiencing homelessness. While this expectation is overarching, it does not put into place all the structures and processes that are required to build links at a community level where it is most impactful. Therefore, this

report focuses on the implementation efforts that states and local communities can undertake to increase the links between housing and education.

Feasibility Assessment

In preparing this report, USICH conducted the following activities to inform the strategies identified below:

- A review of past interagency collaborations between the departments of Education and Housing to identify shared areas for coordination;
- A review of local case studies and model practices for coordination between the two departments;
- A consultation with Department of Education McKinney-Vento staff; and
- A review of literature on the connection between housing stability and education.

Strategies

USICH recommends the following strategies to enhance and foster local partnerships between schools and housing agencies:

[Increase Access to Available Supports and Services](#)

[Strengthen Cross-System Referrals](#)

[Build a Foundation for Shared Use of Common Data](#)

Increase Access to Available Supports and Services

Education and housing should coordinate efforts to ensure that children and families can access the full range of housing, education, health (including mental health), employment, and other support services that are essential to [promoting child, youth, and family well-being](#). The **Youth Homelessness Demonstration Program (YHDP)** provided many communities the opportunity to test integrated coordination across housing and education, and the experience offered [lessons learned](#).

At a state level, SEAs should partner with state interagency councils on homelessness, if there is one, to make sure there is a general awareness of McKinney-Vento education services and to encourage the participation of LEAs in local CoCs. To prioritize communities that may benefit from efforts to coordinate homelessness and housing resources, state planning processes can make use of the [Department of Education's Data Express](#) to target communities based on risk characteristics like chronic absenteeism, four-year adjusted cohort graduation rates, and state assessment data published by states, LEAs, and schools for the homeless student subgroup.

At the local level, LEAs should emphasize the use McKinney-Vento subgrant funds to offer transportation and other services that keep children in their school of origin, whenever possible, to support quick exits from homelessness into permanent housing. By allowing families to continue to access [McKinney-Vento services](#) once initially housed, families may more readily accept permanent housing since the additional service window can mitigate the trauma of

homelessness while minimizing educational challenges. This may also speed up lease-up times for families with school-aged children who are worried about school enrollment disruptions when housing moves would impact school zoning. Specific examples of McKinney-Vento services that may incentivize permanent housing if kept in place include funding for eligible activities like after-school care, school supplies, tutoring, camp, and transportation assistance.

Strengthen Cross-System Referrals

K-12 and early childhood education programs should formally participate in CoC development of coordinated-entry processes and system maps. The goal of this engagement should be to increase access to important crisis and mainstream housing and services and to **establish referral pathways** that identify responsibilities for connecting families and youth to housing at a community level. In communities with [emergency housing vouchers \(EHVs\)](#), schools can provide a pipeline for PHAs to quickly identify families who may be eligible for housing assistance.

Cross-systems collaborations should promote a **“no-wrong door” approach** to serving families and allow schools to be a local point-of-entry to access services no matter which local provider identifies a housing crisis. Services can be identified and referrals can be made by either the education or housing systems, and the process can be facilitated through the community’s policies on [coordinated entry](#).

At a local level, CoCs should create **clear agreements with local SEAs** that 1) outline the services and supports available to McKinney-Vento-eligible students and 2) detail specific activities that the CoCs will take to include local SEAs in coordinating service provision. This may include crafting [formal partnership agreements](#) that clearly outline priorities and/or referral processes for families of McKinney-Vento-eligible households.

Communities should **work with schools to target eviction prevention** strategies to families, especially in situations where landlords undertake informal evictions. Schools can share general information about rental resources and make referrals to service providers who can assist families with dispute resolution and housing navigation. Additionally, since schools may become aware of specific challenges in the local rental market, providing schools with clear instructions on local housing advocacy points-of-contact can streamline assistance and connect communities early.

Build a Foundation for Shared Use of Common Data

Communities can rely on a **variety of data-collection partners** to develop a richer picture of children and youth experiencing homelessness in their communities. School systems keep attendance records, and schools may be the first to identify pupils with housing instability problems. Local CoCs use Homeless Management Information Systems (HMIS) to capture demographic data on individuals experiencing homelessness as well as document and report on housing and services provided to families and youth experiencing a housing crisis in a geographical area. HMIS also includes data on all youth served in Runaway and Homeless Youth (RHY) grant-funded CoC organizations. Combining these robust information systems can be invaluable both in supporting the success of individual students and supporting the effectiveness of systems-level planning and coordination. The Department of Education, in coordination with USICH, developed the [Interagency Data Disclosure: A Tip Sheet on Interagency Collaboration](#) to provide guidance on how to effectively and efficiently share information to best help children and youth experiencing homelessness.

Coordination around the annual Point-in-Time (PIT) Count can also help CoCs more easily find families with children and youth who may not be known to the shelter system. Communities can incentivize PIT support by establishing processes

to house families with children and youth found during PIT efforts. Additionally, schools can provide support for families and youth who are waiting on housing and serve as an information source for CoC providers who are providing housing search services. PIT counts can be helpful for finding youth experiencing homelessness, particularly when [promising practices](#) of engaging youth leadership are used.

Conclusion

In general, the process of working together can increase understanding among service providers, educators, advocates, and policymakers about the broad range of unique and complex needs of homeless children, youth, and families. This heightened understanding, in turn, can facilitate the planning and implementation of programs that better meet these needs.