National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth

National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty

Reauthorizing No Child Left Behind: The Education of Homeless Children and Youth

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About Homelessness

Homelessness is a lack of permanent housing resulting from extreme poverty; the mean income of families experiencing homelessness is less than half the poverty line.[1] Other contributing factors include domestic violence, health problems, natural disasters, and, for youth on their own, family conflict and/or neglect. Homelessness is an increasingly common experience for families living in poverty. Thus, the Urban Institute estimates that at least 10% of all children living in poverty will experience homelessness over the course of a year (1.35 million children).[2] Over 40 percent of children living in homeless shelters are under the age of five.[3] While many young people experience homelessness as part of a family, other youth in homeless situations are on their own. It is estimated that between 1.3 and 2.8 million youth run away or are forced to leave home each year.[4]

Educational Barriers

In a life filled with uncertainty, loss, and deprivation, school is a place of safety, structure, and opportunity. Yet homeless children and youth face unique barriers to education. These barriers include being unable to meet enrollment requirements (including requirements to provide proof of residency and legal guardianship, and school and health records); high residential mobility resulting in lack of school stability and educational continuity; lack of transportation; lack of school supplies and clothing; and poor health, fatigue, and hunger. When these barriers are not addressed, homeless children and youth often are unable to attend, or even enroll in, school, which prevents them from obtaining the education that is guaranteed under law and their best hope of escaping poverty as adults. In addition to barriers to school access and stability, homeless children and youth face unique barriers to participating in the full range of academic support opportunities offered by schools.

Existing Provisions in NCLB

Title I, Part A, of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act includes specific provisions on homelessness, including the categorical eligibility of homeless children and youth for Title I, Part A services, a mandatory reservation of funds, and planning and coordination requirements with homeless education programs. In addition, the McKinney-Vento Act's Education for Homeless Children and Youth (EHCY) program was created specifically to remove the barriers to education caused by homelessness. It was amended most recently in Title X, Part C, of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB).

What We've Learned Since 2002

The McKinney-Vento Act is essential to the mission of the No Child Left Behind Act. The most qualified teacher, or the most exceptional math or reading program, will not benefit children who are not enrolled in school, not attending regularly, and not assisted to overcome the barriers to their academic success caused by homelessness. Children and youth who

bounce between schools with each residential change have little hope of taking advantage of even the best school programs.

A recent Report to Congress[5] highlights some of the accomplishments of the McKinney-Vento Act's EHCY program:

States and local educational agencies (LEAs) have generally made significant progress in reducing the barriers that homeless children and youth face in enrolling, attending, and succeeding in school. The legislation has prompted States and LEAs to focus more on the needs of homeless students and has helped facilitate the expansion of local support networks to meet those needs. Most recently, McKinney-Vento has been an invaluable tool for assisting students who were left homeless by Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. Although the appropriation levels for this program are relatively small, the impact of the program has been very widespread.

Despite the last five years' progress, federal data collection from school districts with McKinney-Vento subgrants reveals that many barriers persist, most notably transportation, records and other enrollment barriers, and lack of awareness of the needs of homeless students. In addition, although federal data collection indicates that the numbers of homeless children included in state testing is increasing, and that academic performance in reading and math is improving, an unpublished analysis by the National Center for Homeless Education also shows a significant gap between the scores of homeless students and those in the economically disadvantaged category. Much work, therefore, remains to be done toward ensuring that all children experiencing homelessness enroll, attend, and succeed in school.

The McKinney-Vento Act is essential to the mission of the No Child Left Behind Act. The most qualified teacher, or the most exceptional math or reading program, will not benefit children who are not enrolled in school, not attending regularly, and not assisted to overcome the barriers to their academic success caused by homelessness.

Our Legislative Recommendations

As Congress begins the reauthorization of NCLB, we offer our experience as educators and advocates directly involved in the implementation of the McKinney-Vento Act and Title I, Part A. Our members work at the local and state level as local school district liaisons, state coordinators, school administrators, Title I staff, school social workers, and others associated with McKinney-Vento programs. Community and service organizations are also core members. Drawing from a series of dedicated focus groups, surveys, and our experience working with homeless children and youth in public schools across the nation over the past seventeen years, we offer recommendations designed to make a strong law even stronger by reinforcing and expanding its key provisions in five focus areas: school stability, access to educational opportunities, special populations, school district liaisons, and funding.

Focus Area: Increasing School Stability

The high mobility of homeless students disrupts learning and creates significant obstacles to academic achievement. The McKinney-Vento Act should be amended to further stabilize homeless students' education by: 1) strengthening the Act's school stability and educational continuity provisions; and 2) increasing transportation assistance.

BACKGROUND: Homelessness forces families with children and unaccompanied youth to move frequently. Emergency or domestic violence shelters limit lengths of stay, forcing families and youth to move. Furthermore, shelters may be full, non-existent, or located at a distance from previous residences, causing families to live temporarily in unstable living arrangements. Families and youth also may move in search of employment or housing.

Changing schools is damaging to students' academic achievement. Students who switch schools frequently score lower on standardized tests.[6] Mobility during high school greatly diminishes the likelihood of graduation.[7] Students suffer psychologically, socially, and academically from mobility.[8] Mobility also negatively impacts the education of non-mobile students.[9]

The McKinney-Vento Act currently addresses mobility by requiring school districts (LEAs) to keep homeless children and youth in their school of origin, "to the extent feasible," unless it is against the wishes of their parents or guardian. The Act further requires that districts provide transportation to and from the school of origin, at the request of a parent or guardian, or, for unaccompanied youth, at the request of the liaison.

In order to reduce the school mobility of homeless students and stabilize their education so that they may achieve to their full potential, we offer several recommendations in this area.

School Stability Recommendation #1: Require school districts to keep children and youth in their school of origin because it is presumed to be in their best interest, except if 1) doing so is contrary to the wishes of their parent or guardian, or 2) specific, student-centered factors demonstrate that staying in the school of origin is not in a student's best interest.

RATIONALE: In many ways, the school selection provisions are the centerpiece and the heart of the McKinney-Vento Act. Over the past five years, these provisions have contributed to a greater focus on school stability for homeless students and are regarded as central to the academic, social, and emotional well-being of homeless children and youth. However, the phrase "to the extent feasible" was not defined in current law and has resulted in different interpretations and standards of feasibility across school districts, contributing to a weakening of the school stability provisions. Current ED guidance helps to define the phrase by stating that school selection decisions must be based on "best interest determinations" that are child-centered and take into account a number of important criteria (age of child, safety of student, time remaining in the school year, etc.). Although the ED guidance has been helpful, it unfortunately has had a limited impact because, as mere guidance, it does not have the force of law. Consequently, it has been overlooked or disregarded by some LEAs, resulting in harmful and unnecessary school mobility. We therefore recommend incorporating the ED guidance and "educational best interest" criteria in the statute.

School Stability Recommendation #2: Establish a dedicated funding stream at the state level to support the transportation of homeless children and youth in all school districts, including school districts that do not receive subgrants or Title I funds.

School Stability Recommendation #3: Expressly authorize the use of Title I, Part A funds for transportation to stabilize the education of homeless children and youth.

RATIONALE: ED's 2006 Report to Congress states that "[a]lthough the requirement to provide transportation to the school of origin has presented challenges for districts without subgrants, it has proven to be essential to enabling homeless children to maintain continuity of their education in one school throughout the school year." Similarly, an evaluation of a federal demonstration project in Washington state found that while transportation to the school of origin was expensive, children who received transportation to stay in their schools of origin scored higher on state assessments.[10] Federal data collection on the academic achievement of homeless students in school districts with subgrants for the past three years indicates that the numbers of homeless children included in state testing is increasing and academic performance is improving. The evidence indicates that increased school stability may be a contributing factor to this progress.

"It's hard for kids to go from one school to the next, one school to the next, one school to the next, because they have to make new friends, they have to get adjusted to the school and, then, after they get adjusted . . . then they have to move again."

Taelin, a student experiencing homelessness in Florida

"Even when I was living in an emergency shelter, I had a ride to make sure I was in school every day, getting my homework done, and doing the best I could at the time with what I had."

Amanda, a student experiencing homelessness in Maine

Yet despite these gains, the issue of access to transportation remains the number one educational barrier faced by homeless children and youth. According to the most recent federal data collection, 83% (665 out of 804) of reporting LEAs with McKinney-Vento subgrants stated that access to transportation was a barrier. This is more than twice as many districts reporting the next most frequent barrier, school records. Access to transportation remains a barrier in large part due to cost, as many school districts have incurred significant costs in providing transportation. As a result of these costs, many liaisons struggle to obtain transportation for children who need it. In some communities, the costs associated with transporting homeless children have contributed to resistance to serving children who are desperately in need of the structure and opportunities provided by schools.

In response to this critical problem, we propose a dedicated funding stream at the state level to enhance the ability of schools to stabilize the school placements of all homeless children and youth. Separating this fund from the main McKinney-Vento appropriations would allow the McKinney-Vento appropriations to support programmatic infrastructure, capacity, and services to homeless children through statewide activities and subgrants, while the state transportation fund would allow <u>any</u> district, regardless of subgrant or Title I status, to receive assistance for transportation costs. We propose maximum flexibility for states to devise their own assistance programs, including reimbursement or program grants. We also propose a broad use of funds, including transportation assistance for school stability, early childhood programs, after-school activities, and parental involvement.

This statewide funding stream is a companion to our recommendation that Title I, Part A expressly permit Title I homeless set-aside funds to be used for transportation to the school of origin. Addressing a supplement-supplant issue, ED has interpreted the current Title I statute to prevent school districts from utilizing Title I funds to provide transportation to the school of origin. We believe this is inconsistent with other provisions of Title I policy, in particular, the permissible use of Title I, Part A funds for transportation for school choice. We believe it is consistent with the intent of the law for Title I, Part A funds to be used for transportation when parents choose to keep their children in the same school to avoid educational disruption. As mentioned earlier, the provision of transportation for school stability has been linked to better academic outcomes. We recognize that school districts may wish to use Title I, Part A set-asides in many different ways, including to support transportation costs, and we believe they should have the flexibility to do so.

<u>School Stability Recommendation #4</u>: Increase educational continuity when children and youth must enroll in new schools by requiring schools to immediately send school records to the enrolling schools, including records needed for academic placement decisions.

<u>RATIONALE</u>: The immediate enrollment provisions of the McKinney-Vento Act have facilitated the timely school enrollment of homeless children and youth. These provisions gained attention for their role

in assisting schools to enroll children displaced by the Gulf Coast hurricanes; displaced children, like so many homeless children, did not have records and would have faced serious enrollment barriers without the McKinney-Vento Act. Despite these successes, according to the ED 2006 Report to Congress, delays in transfer of records are still reported by school districts as a barrier to homeless children's education. Some schools will not transfer school records if a student owes fees, thus creating an additional enrollment barrier. Inability to pay fees often prevents homeless students from participating fully in school activities. We therefore recommend that schools be required to immediately send records to the enrolling schools, even if a student owes fees or fines, and that records needed for academic placement decisions be released immediately by fax or other electronic means.

Focus Area: Increasing Access to Academic Support Opportunities

Homeless students face unique barriers to participating in the full range of academic support opportunities offered by schools, including those provided through Title I, Part A. Title I must be clarified and strengthened to ensure that its programs support the academic achievement of homeless students.

BACKGROUND: Homeless students are part of Title I, Part A's target population of disadvantaged students. However, the high mobility, trauma, and deep poverty associated with homelessness create unique educational barriers and challenges. Homelessness is associated with lower standardized test scores and a higher likelihood of missing school and/or experiencing multiple transfers. Thus, homeless students often require additional supports for academic achievement and success on state assessments.

Academic Support Recommendation #1: Require an annual comprehensive needs assessment, including the mandatory participation of the homeless liaison, in determining the set-aside amount for McKinney-Vento eligible students.

RATIONALE: In recognition of the impact of homelessness on academic achievement, current law requires school districts to set aside Title I, Part A funds to provide educationally related services to homeless children. However, lack of clarity in how to determine the amount of the set aside, and how the funds can be spent, has resulted too often in the Title I funds not being set aside in adequate amounts, or not being used appropriately, to meet the needs of homeless students. We therefore propose that the Title I, Part A set-aside amount be determined by a rigorous annual needs assessment that requires the involvement of the homeless liaison.

Academic Support Recommendation #2: Clarify current Title I, Part A set-aside language by specifying that the reservation of funds applies to students in non-participating schools, targeted assistance schools, and schoolwide programs. Further define the parameters for the usage of Title I set-aside funds by including such examples as supporting the position of the liaison, funding transportation to the school of origin, providing services to secondary students and pre-school students, and more generally to remove barriers to enrollment, attendance, retention, and success.

RATIONALE: Although ED non-regulatory guidance allows LEAs the discretion to use Title I funds to meet a variety of educational needs of homeless students in both participating and non-participating schools, the lack of similar language in the statute has resulted in many school districts not using these funds to meet the unique needs of all homeless students. Confusion exists over whether the requirement for "comparable services" means "the same services" provided to non-homeless students or "equitable services" tailored to meet the needs of homeless children and youth. Although the current law states that Title I set-asides can be used to provide services not ordinarily available to other students, we recommend the inclusion of specific examples of important services, helping to clarify the parameters of eligible uses of funds.

Academic Support Recommendation #3: Require local Title I plans to describe the amount of funds reserved, the needs assessment conducted to determine the amount of funds reserved, how the amount of funds reserved is related to the needs assessment, and the collaborative role of the liaison in determining the amount of funds reserved and the services provided.

"To Whom it May Concern,

I like my school. I have friends at my school. I want to keep my friends. They have houses. I do not."

Mickey, a child experiencing homelessness in California

"Moving schools and losing all my friends in that school … we would go and do different subjects and so, I wasn't all caught up. So, it was kind of hard to move to the next grade."

Jordan, a student experiencing homelessness in California

RATIONALE: The McKinney-Vento Act's provisions have proven to be a key strategy in improving the academic achievement of homeless students. Coordination between McKinney-Vento and Title I, Part A is essential for efficient and effective use of funds, and should be specified in LEA planning requirements.

Increase Support for Certain Populations:

Young Children, Unaccompanied Youth, and Foster Children and Youth

Certain sub-populations of students – in particular, young children, youth on their own, and children and youth involved in the child welfare system – face special challenges in accessing education. The McKinney-Vento Act should be amended to better meet their needs.

YOUNG CHILDREN

BACKGROUND: Current law requires that preschool-aged homeless children have equal access to the same public preschool programs as non-homeless children. Over 40 percent of children living in homeless shelters are under the age of five, yet homeless preschool-aged children continue to be greatly underrepresented in early childhood programs.[11] According to the ED 2006 Report to Congress, most State Coordinators report little to moderate progress in ensuring that preschool-aged homeless children are enrolled in preschool. Young homeless children face unique barriers to enrolling and participating in early childhood programs. They may be denied enrollment for lack of records, birth certificates, or other documentation normally required for enrollment. In addition, high mobility frequently prevents families with young children from rising to the top of enrollment waiting lists before they move and/or maintaining placements as they continue to experience housing instability. Homeless families often need transportation for their young children to attend preschool programs.

Young Children Recommendation #1: Expand the reach of the McKinney-Vento Act to include state or local agencies responsible for the oversight of public early childhood programs.

Young Children Recommendation #2: Require public early childhood programs to identify and prioritize young homeless children for enrollment.

RATIONALE: In recognition of the unique barriers created by homelessness, we recommend requiring public early childhood programs to identify and prioritize young homeless children for enrollment. We also recommend including in the statute some common and successful methods of prioritizing young homeless children in early childhood programs (e.g., reserving slots or moving them to the top of waiting lists) in order to make clear that these activities are both permissible and recommended. Such methods were promoted within U.S. Department of Health and Human Services guidance, which was issued over a decade ago. These provisions would be included in a new section of the Act that aligns the early childhood provisions of the McKinney-Vento Act with the other school-age provisions, while at the same time accounting for the unique issues involved in early childhood programs (particularly program capacity issues).

Academic achievement gaps develop early in life and can be reduced or eliminated by high quality early education. In light of extensive research on the impact of early experiences on the development of the brain and later learning, specifically the impact of chronic stress, we recommend expanding the reach of the McKinney-Vento Act to include state or local agencies responsible for the oversight of public early childhood programs.

UNACCOMPANIED YOUTH

BACKGROUND: Unaccompanied youth include young people who have run away from home, been thrown out of their homes, and/or been abandoned by parents or guardians. These young people are separated from their parents for a variety of reasons. Over half report being physically abused at home, and over one-third report sexual abuse.[12] Over two-thirds report that at least one of their parents abuses drugs or alcohol.[13] For many of these young people, leaving home is a survival issue. Other youth are thrown out of their homes because they are pregnant, gay or lesbian, or because their parents believe they are old enough to take care of themselves.

School may be the only safe and stable environment available to unaccompanied youth. Yet unaccompanied youth often face unique barriers to enrolling and succeeding in school.

Without a parent or guardian to advocate for them and exercise parental rights, they are sometimes denied enrollment and remain out of school for extended periods of time. Unaccompanied youth also may not understand their educational rights or know how to acquire this information.

Since 2002, greater numbers of unaccompanied youth have gained access to school and extra-curricular activities. Yet according to the ED 2006 Report to Congress, State Coordinators report only moderate progress in LEAs enrolling and serving unaccompanied youth.

Unaccompanied Youth Recommendation: Improve the academic progress and high school graduation rate of unaccompanied youth by addressing academic credit accrual problems and access to academic credit recovery opportunities.

RATIONALE: High mobility and gaps in schooling caused by homelessness create serious issues in accruing enough credits for graduation or promotion. Not receiving credit for work completed in previous schools – or opportunities to recover credits – can serve as a strong disincentive to continuing in school. We therefore recommend inclusion of language from a successful California state law for children and youth in foster care, A.B. 490, which allows youth to receive credit for work done satisfactorily at previous schools and to recover credits lost during their homelessness. While granting partial credits may require policy revision at the state or local level, it is preferable to the alternative: highly mobile students dropping out of school and closing off their educational possibilities.

CHILDREN AND YOUTH IN FOSTER CARE

BACKGROUND: Children and youth in foster care encounter numerous barriers to school success, including many of the same barriers faced by children and youth experiencing homelessness, such as high residential and school mobility rates, loss, trauma, and disruption of their living situation. Children and youth in foster care struggle academically, with lower graduation rates, reading abilities, and overall academic performance than their peers who are not in foster care.[14]

Children and youth in foster care encounter numerous barriers to school success, including many of the same barriers faced by children and youth experiencing homelessness, such as high residential and school mobility rates, loss, trauma, and disruption of their living situation.

Child Welfare Recommendation #1: Make all children and youth in foster care eligible for all McKinney-Vento protections and services.

Child Welfare Recommendation #2: Address issues that are unique to these students, including educational-decision making and notice of McKinney-Vento protections.

Child Welfare Recommendation #3: Expand funding to increase the capacity of the McKinney-Vento program to serve this additional population, in addition to the nearly 50% of currently eligible homeless children and youth who are not being served by subgrants due to inadequate funding.

Child Welfare Recommendation #4: Amend child welfare legislation to coordinate funding, services, and programming with the McKinney-Vento Act.

RATIONALE: The McKinney-Vento Act currently covers a subset of children involved in foster care, including those "awaiting foster care placement." Yet states have defined this phrase differently, and vary widely in their application of the McKinney-Vento Act for this population. School districts have struggled to define this phrase in a way that meaningfully protects all children and youth whose education is disrupted as a result of their involvement in the child welfare system. As a result, many children and youth in foster care do not have the stability and support that they need to succeed in school. Including all children and youth in foster care would ensure that these students are able to access the protections and services of the Act, and increase their opportunities for better educational and life outcomes. Additional amendments would be required to account for the unique needs and family dynamics of children and youth in foster care, especially educational decision-making and notice. In order to successfully extend the McKinney-Vento Act to all children and youth in foster care, funding must be increased to build the capacity of McKinney-Vento programs to reach the nearly 50% of currently eligible homeless children and youth who are not being served by subgrants due to inadequate funding, in addition to all children and youth in foster care. Finally, child welfare agencies must share responsibility for the educational outcomes of the children and youth in their custody. To this end, complementary child welfare amendments must be enacted to address the coordination of funding, services, programming, and related issues.

Focus Area: Supporting School District Homeless Liaisons

The designation of a liaison for homeless students in every school district is among the most successful features of the McKinney-Vento program. Liaisons coordinate school district efforts to support homeless students through identification, enrollment, professional development and other activities. In order to fully carry out these important responsibilities, liaisons must have sufficient time, resources, and training.

BACKGROUND: Under current law, all LEAs are required to designate a liaison for homeless children and youth. Liaisons are LEA staff responsible for ensuring the identification, school enrollment, attendance, and opportunities for academic success of students in homeless situations. Some of these activities may be accomplished by the liaison himself or herself, while others are accomplished by coordinating the efforts of other staff.

Supporting Liaisons Recommendation #1: Require that liaisons have sufficient time, resources, and training to satisfactorily carry out the duties required by the Act.

Supporting Liaisons Recommendation #2: Require liaisons to participate in the professional development and technical assistance offered by the state coordinator.

RATIONALE: The position of the school district liaison is essential to the effective implementation of the McKinney-Vento Act. ED's 2006 Report to Congress describes the demonstrated benefits of having a local liaison in every school district, including increased identification of homeless children and youth, increased service provision, better coordination among school district programs, increased awareness of homeless children and youth among school and school district staff, and increased awareness of issues related to homeless education in the community. However, ED also noted challenges, including the fact that many local liaisons are unable to devote sufficient time to the educational needs of homeless children and youth. Additional challenges include inconsistent liaison participation in training activities, as well as inadequate resources to support the position and ensure more dedicated time to meeting the needs of homeless students. We therefore recommend that homeless liaisons have sufficient time, resources, and training to carry out their mandated duties. In addition, under current law, states are required to provide professional development, but liaisons are not required to participate in it. Appropriate training is essential in order for liaisons to be able to carry out their duties.

Focus Area: Expand Funding to Support All Eligible Children and Youth

Almost half of all students identified as homeless are enrolled in school districts that do not receive McKinney-Vento subgrants. The Act should be funded to support the school enrollment, attendance, and success of all eligible children and youth, including the newly eligible population of all children in foster care.

BACKGROUND: In the 2005-2006 school year, 914,255 homeless children and youth (K-12) were identified and enrolled in public school; this is a 50% increase from the 2003-2004 school year and a 40% increase from the 2004-2005 school year. Almost half of students identified by local educational agencies as homeless are in school districts that do not receive services paid by subgrants.

Funding Recommendation #1: Raise the authorized funding level to $210 million. The current authorized funding level is $70 million. $61.9 million was appropriated in FY2007.

RATIONALE: The proposed increase in funding is based on the fact that almost half of all students identified as homeless are enrolled in school districts that do not receive McKinney-Vento funding. Increased funding for this program would allow significantly more homeless children and youth to receive the services they need to succeed. It would also enable more schools to provide a greater level of outreach, identification, and support to children experiencing homelessness. Finally, the funding level must be increased in order to support the estimated 513,000 children and youth under the age of 18 who are in foster care on any given day.

"School was always a place where I had fun and I could escape many troubles that tormented me. Never did I realize until recently that it would be my path to my dreams. I finally figured out for myself that my schooling was important to me not just to please my family, but to give them what they could not give me for lack of an education."

Beatrice, a student experiencing homelessness in New Mexico

As fears and anxiety loomed, my children continued requesting that they remain in their schools. School became their secret haven. It was the one place safe and familiar in their already volatile world.

Julianna, a parent of 4 children experiencing homelessness in Arizona

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