“Deeper Dives” for Schools
Practical Strategies to Serve Young Children Experiencing Homelessness

2. Preparing staff and systems

The realities of homelessness can make it challenging for families to comply with standard policies of many early care and education programs. Families may struggle to organize documents; they may have challenges keeping children’s clothes clean. Children receiving classroom-based services may arrive late or early; they may forget their backpack; they may arrive without having eaten.

Think of the small things that make a big difference.

- Do your attendance slips say “tardy” or do they say “We’re so glad you made it today”?
- Do you have signs on your door that say “No entry until 8:00 am” or do the signs say “Come in. We are so happy to see you.” OR “This room will open at 8:00 am. You are welcome to go to ________ if you arrive before then.” (Designate a safe, comfortable, indoor space where children can go.)
- If possible, create a laundry space, with a washer/dryer that parents can use discreetly. Provide the detergent.
- Set up a computer that parents can use to fill out forms, job applications, and other documentation. They are unlikely to have this resource elsewhere, and offering it can help build a partnership with parents. Provide a printer with paper free of charge.

Prepare your staff to understand and respond to the needs of families experiencing homelessness.

- Provide training on homelessness and poverty locally and trauma-informed care.
  - This training should not be a “one and done” training, but ongoing.
  - Provide information to staff in multiple ways, including paper copies, online resources, videos, and social media.
- Provide training on the differences between poverty and safety concerns. Staff might feel that something is a safety concern, when really it is a troubling but not dangerous consequence of the living situations families are experiencing.

Work as a team to meet the needs of children and families.

- Make sure whoever maintains data is identifying children experiencing homelessness and able to report that data.
- Help transportation providers understand the reality of homelessness and mobility, and their importance in making sure children can access services.
  - Example: If a child needs a bus to access services, and the family is living in an unstable or hidden location (such as a park, car, or domestic violence shelter) does the transportation database support “little grocery store on the corner of X and Y Streets” for the transportation request? Does the transportation office know who to connect with if they run into problems arranging transportation for a child who is experiencing homelessness?

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