

SUPPORTING THE ATTENDANCE OF STUDENTS EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS

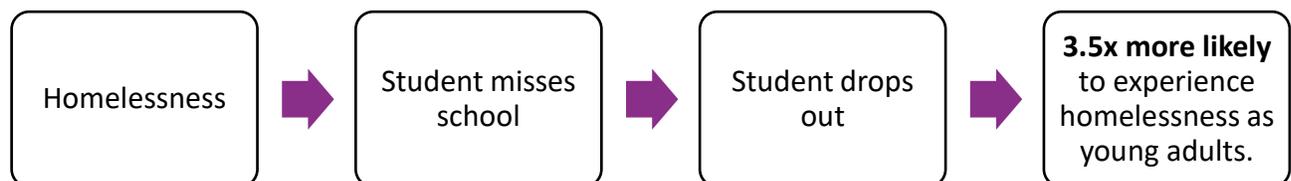


It's hard to get to school every day when you're experiencing homelessness—whether it is access to public transportation, food, clothing, sleep, fear of bullying because of your appearance, or the lack of material things (not having a backpack or necessary school supplies or support at home). Schools don't always address these student insecurities. They run through a standard checklist, but there isn't always strong follow through.

- *Tina, SchoolHouse Connection Young Leader*

Students experiencing homelessness are chronically absent from school at a rate at least twice that of the overall student population, and significantly more often than their housed, low-income peers.ⁱ The mobility, poverty, and trauma associated with homelessness affects students' emotional and physical health, hygiene, preparedness for school, transportation options, and other factors that increase absenteeism. Chronic absences increase the likelihood that a student will drop out of high school.ⁱⁱ This can perpetuate child and youth homelessness. Homelessness causes students to miss school, which can lead them to drop out, which then makes them [3.5 times more likely to experience homelessness as young adults](#).ⁱⁱⁱ

Not completing high school is the greatest single risk factor for young adult homelessness.^{iv}



This brief shares strategies that schools, districts, and communities are implementing to help ensure that students experiencing homelessness are in school, every day.

1. Help students experiencing homelessness meet their basic needs.

- Physical health: Homeless students often suffer from common chronic illnesses such as asthma, diabetes, and dental problems, causing them to miss school. Connect homeless students to school nurses and provide nurses with resources to implement [Nurse Case Management principles](#) to improve the attendance of homeless students with chronic illness.
- Mental health: Students experiencing homelessness undergo markedly more trauma than their housed peers and experience higher rates of anxiety and depression. Connect homeless students with school social workers or counselors for support. Host regular, [small-group lunch meetings](#) where students can talk with each other and a school counselor about school, relationships, goals, and challenges.

- Clothing, hygiene, and school supplies: Students who come to school without supplies or adequate hygiene often are subjected to bullying and embarrassment. Provide students experiencing homelessness with hygiene kits, showers, clothing, access to a clothes washer/dryer, and needed school supplies. Title I Part A funds can be used for these needs when other community resources are not available.
- Familial and/or work responsibilities: Many students miss school to care for younger siblings or to work. Support working students by helping them find jobs that are close to school and after school hours, and offering a flexible school schedule. Help families find [high-quality and affordable child care and other early childhood education programs](#) in the area.

2. Be creative with transportation supports.

While public schools are required to provide transportation to school in many circumstances^v, lack of transportation still can contribute to absenteeism for students experiencing homelessness. For example, lack of timely transportation to medical appointments or jobs can result in students missing partial or full days of school. Rural communities in particular must leverage their strengths and work as a team to support transportation needs, including through strategies such as:

- Using [HopSkipDrive](#) or other appropriate ride-sharing options;
- Collaborating with medical transportation services that can be covered by students' or parents' Medicaid or other health insurance;
- Working with community agencies and faith-based organizations that have vans to assist with transportation;
- Paying staff to transport students;
- Providing gas cards to students and parents;
- Tapping into multiple funding streams to pay for transportation needs; and
- Using data to build the case for increased transportation resources.



Metro Nashville Public Schools' homeless liaison Catherine Knowles noticed that students experiencing homelessness in her district were chronically absent at a rate more than double their housed peers—largely due to transportation barriers. With that information, she made a case for the need to hire an additional staff person to oversee transportation arrangements for McKinney-Vento students. Consequently, the district saw a 7.2% decrease in chronic absenteeism by the end of that school year, and committed to hiring an additional part-time position in the Transportation Department to collaborate with Catherine's staff.

3. Foster a supportive school climate.

[Studies show](#) a relationship between school climate and attendance. When students feel safe and valued at school, they will strive to attend despite challenges. School climate strategies include:

- Provide [ongoing training](#), coaching, and support for all school staff to build a [positive school climate](#), including topics such as gender identity, cultural competency, and empathy. Ensure that these efforts accommodate the harsh reality of students experiencing homelessness.
- Engage parents, caregivers and students in designing school climate programs—especially students who are homeless, LGBTQ students, gender non-conforming students, and students of color.
- Keep racial equity front and center in school climate efforts.
- Adopt positive school discipline policies district-wide.
- Ensure that strong anti-bullying policies and practices are in place and respected.

4. Invest in and implement proven intervention models.

Evidence-based truancy reduction and prevention programs include personalized learning, learning communities within schools, peer mentoring, student advisory programs, and interventions to improve educational effectiveness in the classroom. A successful [three-tiered system of interventions](#) is being implemented in many schools:

- “Tier 1” – provide positive reinforcement to influence behavior and attendance (celebrating good and improved attendance; reminders of the importance of coming to school; universal free breakfast programs; meeting students at the school door).
- “Tier 2” – build caring, supportive relationships with students and families to motivate daily attendance, address challenging barriers, and connect with students on their terms when they return from an absence. Districts like Spokane Public Schools in Spokane, Washington have found increased attendance of students experiencing homelessness with [Check & Connect](#), which builds a trusting relationship between students and caring, trained adult mentors, who commit to get to know and support the child or youth for at least two years.
- “Tier 3” – when students miss 20% or more of school days, collaborate with other agencies to intervene (truancy courts, housing agencies, child welfare and juvenile justice departments, and case management programs). [Community-based, positive strategies](#) are more effective than punitive measures.^{vi}

5. Collect data and implement early warning systems that are specifically and intentionally responsive to students experiencing homelessness.

A growing number of schools and school districts use early warning systems to track attendance and other indicators of potential academic problems. Early warning and other attendance-monitoring systems should be coordinated with McKinney-Vento Act programs and homeless education personnel in order to identify homelessness and appropriate interventions for homeless students.



Nevada’s Washoe County School District’s (WCSD) Children in Transition team tracks chronic absenteeism data, and noted that 42% of students experiencing homelessness missed 10% or more of days enrolled during the 2017-2018 school year—more than English Language Learners, low-income students, Special Education students and students in foster care. Attendance data is captured in school-wide reports and sent to the students’ counselors, who then reach out to the student and/or his or her family, assess any unmet needs, and connect them with resources or make referrals. WCSD shows that collecting real-time attendance data—and tracking historical data of services provided—can improve both attendance rates and graduation rates for students experiencing homelessness.

6. Take a team approach to attendance.

Since students experiencing homelessness confront many different barriers to attendance, it takes a team of professionals to overcome those barriers and help students get to school. Building rapport with teachers, office staff, paraprofessionals, the school nurse, bus drivers, and the food service department can ensure that the whole school is working together to increase attendance. All education practitioners who interact with students are in a position to provide support before a child enters an entrenched pattern of absences.

Educators and communities who are approaching attendance with creativity and dedicated attention are celebrating increased attendance and graduation among students experiencing homelessness. When students like Tina feel valued, respected, and cared for in school, the whole community benefits.

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

ⁱⁱ <https://consortium.uchicago.edu/publications/what-matters-staying-track-and-graduating-chicago-public-schools>

ⁱⁱⁱ https://voicesofyouthcount.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/ChapinHall_VoYC_NationalReport_Final.pdf

^{iv} <https://mailchi.mp/schoolhouseconnection/greatest-risk-factor-chapin-hall>

^v <https://www.schoolhouseconnection.org/mckinney-vento-act-two-page-summary/>

^{vi} <https://k12engagement.unl.edu/strategy-briefs/Ttruancy%20Reduction%203-11-2014%20Print.pdf>