



# The District's Dime

Going Beyond the Budget Book

*The DC Fiscal Policy Institute blog*

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## Removing Educational Barriers for Homeless Students

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Over 4,000 homeless students in DC public schools and DC public charter schools are homeless, a number that has grown 60 percent in four years. Being homeless adds stress and challenges that make it hard for children to succeed in school. The spike in family homelessness makes it especially important that publicly funded schools have the tools and resources needed to provide educational continuity to homeless children, and a thorough review of DC's services for these students is in order.

Homeless students come to school with challenges that can distract from learning. They are often moving from place to place, which is stressful and makes regular school attendance difficult. Many of the places they stay expose them to unhealthy conditions, leading to frequent illness.

The federal government requires all school districts, including DC, to meet the many needs of students who are homeless, including a timely enrollment process, access to transportation, and in-school services. The federally funded McKinney Vento program, managed here by DC's Office of the State Superintendent for Education, requires each public school to have a homeless liaison to help students and their families. Often, a school social worker or counselor serves this role.

Families or students have to self-identify as homeless to receive services, although staff are also trained on signs to look for in potentially homeless students. However, some may still go unidentified because homelessness can be difficult to spot, in part because families may be unwilling to admit they are homeless.

One of the major decisions faced by homeless students is whether to remain in their "school of origin"—the school they attended when they became homeless—or enroll in the school closest to their temporary living situation. If they decide to stay in their initial school, a transportation plan must be created. In addition to transportation, the program assists students with before and after care and financial assistance with costs for uniforms, field trips, and graduation fees.

Given DC's family homelessness crisis, providing educational continuity to homeless students is critical to ensuring that all students can succeed in school. McKinney-Vento funds often are not enough to cover all the costs that schools face in trying to assist students who are homeless. As the District starts deliberating the city's budget for next year, a careful review of the adequacy of services to students who are homeless is in order. DC's leaders should assess the capacity of homeless liaisons at schools, ensure the state level coordinator at OSSE is able to effectively support liaisons, and that transportation and other direct supports to students are adequate. And the District should be prepared to add local funds if federal funds are not enough to meet those needs.