



UNLOCKING OPPORTUNITIES: SERVICES THAT HELP POOR CHILDREN SUCCEED IN THE CLASSROOM

Part 3: Helping Students Who Are Homeless

By Soumya Bhat and Jenny Reed

High housing costs lead many low-income families to move frequently, which often means their children move from school to school or have difficulty keeping up their attendance. This lack of educational continuity negatively affects a child's ability to learn, and it makes it hard for schools to identify and provide ongoing services needed to support student achievement.¹ Homelessness also causes particular stress that leads to poor academic outcomes. Children who are homeless are much more likely to experience anxiety, depression and withdrawal. They are four times more likely than other children to show developmental delays and twice as likely to have learning disabilities.²

"...[T]he school is a place where most children spend a significant portion of their time; for homeless children, it may represent an important source of continuity in the midst of residential instability, thus making it an important place for services aimed at improving academic success, social and emotional well-being and physical health."

Cunningham, Mary; Harwood, Robin, and Hall, Sam, "Residential Instability and the McKinney-Vento Homeless Children and Education Program: What We Know, Plus Gaps in Research." Urban Institute, May 2010, available at: www.urban.org.

three quarters –were living in doubled up situations, while the remainder were living in shelter or motels.³

This means that meeting the special needs of homeless students is an important part of improving school outcomes in the District. The federal McKinney-Vento program provides financial assistance and sets requirements for services schools must provide to help children who are homeless continue their education and access the same services as other children. Yet funding is woefully inadequate, and has been falling in recent

years while the District's population of homeless students has skyrocketed. In fiscal year (FY) 2014, the program will provide just \$35 for services per homeless student.

Over 4,000 students were homeless in DC Public Schools in school year 2013-14. (See **Figure 1**, next page.) This is a 37 percent increase from school year 2011-12. In some schools, as many as one-fourth of the students are homeless, and one in eight schools has a student homelessness rate of more than 10 percent. Most of DC's homeless students during the 2011-12 school year – about

The District should increase services and funding for students who are homeless, including additional support and resources for school-based homeless liaisons. In addition, a system-wide needs assessment is needed to identify possible gaps in services, so that DC can develop a comprehensive set of tools to help schools remove

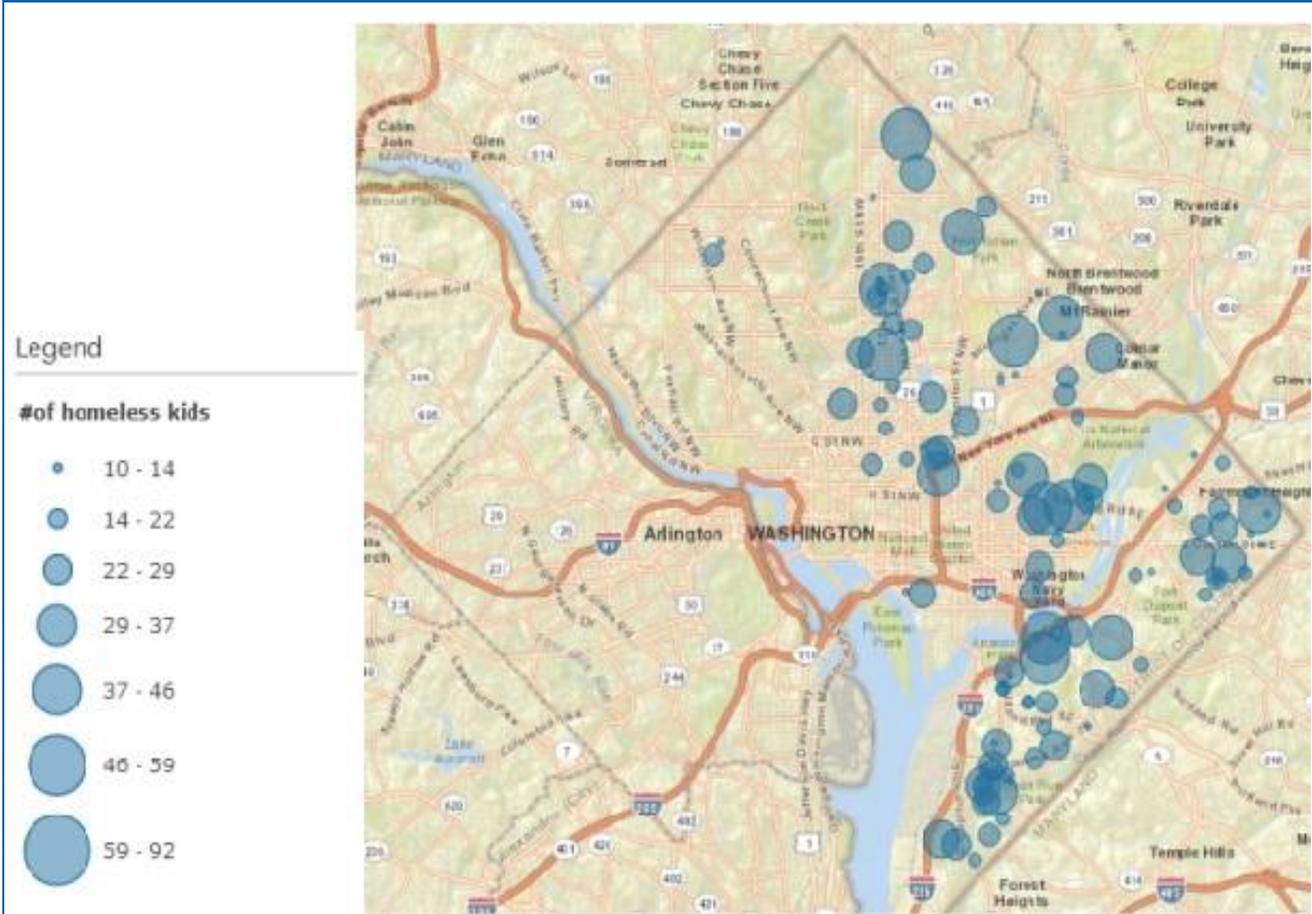
¹ Turner, Margery Austin & Berube, Alan, "Vibrant Neighborhoods, Successful Schools: What the Government Can Do To Foster Both," Urban Institute, July 2009.

² The National Center on Family Homelessness.

³ National Center for Homeless Education, District of Columbia: Consolidated State Performance Report, available at: http://nchespp.serve.org/profile/DC?residence_year=2011-12

Figure 1

Number of Homeless Students in DC Public School and DC Public Charter Schools, School Year 2013-14



Source: Created by students from Capitol Hill Montessori at Logan and BASIS DC schools using data from OSSE.

barriers for homeless children. Moreover, the District should expand outreach to ensure students and families who become homeless know of the assistance that is available to them. The FY 2015 budget takes a step in that direction, but it is not clear whether or not that will be sufficient. Lastly, the District should focus on homelessness prevention programs that help families with school-age children avoid the trauma and disruption of homelessness.

What DC Does to Help Students Who Are Homeless.

Schools provide services for homeless students primarily through the federal McKinney-Vento program, which was created in

1987 to help ensure children who are homeless are able to continue their education and that they receive the same services and education as non-homeless students. The federal law distributes funds to each state, which then sub-grants a portion of the funds to local education agencies (LEAs), and sets requirements that schools must meet.

The federal program requires that each LEA, but not every school within the LEA, have a homeless liaison to coordinate services for students and families who are homeless. Often, the liaison is the school social worker or counselor. Some LEAs, like DCPS, have a homeless liaison at every school.

Table 1: Number of Schools with More than 10 Percent of Students Who are Homeless, By Ward (As of February 2013)

Ward 1	2
Ward 2	0
Ward 3	0
Ward 4	1
Ward 5	1
Ward 6	2
Ward 7	3
Ward 8	5

Source: DC Alliance of Youth Advocates

While each charter school LEA has a homeless liaison, some charter schools with multiple locations do not have a homeless liaison at each campus.

Services required under the McKinney-Vento program include: transportation to and from the school of origin or school of choice, immediate enrollment assistance (including immunizations and assistance obtaining records), identification of homeless youth, awareness of services, and ensuring equal opportunity to participate in all programs and services available to non-homeless students at the school. For example, schools may provide uniform assistance, assistance with costs for field trips, and/or help with graduation fees. The LEA homeless liaison is responsible for ensuring homeless students at the school have access to these services.

States may also use up to 25 percent of their McKinney Vento grant award to establish a state office to provide coordination, data gathering and technical assistance to schools on the education of homeless children. In DC, the Homeless Children and Youth program within the Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE) provides the coordination of services for

homeless students. The program provides enrollment dispute assistance, training and technical assistance, and coordination across agencies that interact with homeless student.

In FY 2014, DC is estimated to receive a total of \$189,814 in federal McKinney Vento funds. DC uses 25 percent of the funds for the statewide coordinator and sub-grants out the remaining 75 percent. **Table 2** displays the approximate sub-grants in FY 2014. The FY 2014 award is 18 percent less than the award in FY 2012 of approximately \$230,110, after adjusting for inflation. Yet over that same time period, DC saw a 37 percent increase in the number of homeless students. The FY 2015 award is anticipated to be approximately one percent less than FY 2014, after adjusting for inflation.

Table 2: Approximate McKinney Vento Sub-Grant Awards, by Local Education Agency (LEA), FY 2014

DC Public Schools	\$47,000
AppleTree Public Charter School	\$1,000
Cedar Tree Public Charter School	\$10,000
Cesar Chavez Public Charter School	\$20,000
Friendship Public Charter School	\$3,100
Imagine SE Public Charter School	\$12,000
LAMB Public Charter School	\$5,400
Shining Stars Public Charter School	\$600

Source: Office of the State Superintendent of Education

Homeless students can also be served with federal funds under Title I, Part A, which are targeted on high-poverty schools. These funds can be used to provide individual services to students or to support programs to remove barriers and improve the education of homeless students. For example, they can fund items like eyeglasses or counseling services.⁴ By law, DCPS must set aside Title I, Part A funds for services for homeless students who are enrolled in non-Title I schools.

⁴ National Center for Homeless Education, "Serving Students Experiencing Homelessness under Title I, Part A," available at: <http://center.serve.org/nche/briefs.php#mvlip>.

Improving Services for Children Who Are

Homeless. With the complexities of barriers facing homeless students it is important that the District assess the adequacy of these services and expand them if needed. This includes additional support for homeless liaisons in schools so that they are better able to meet the needs of a rising homeless youth population. In addition, a system-wide needs assessment is needed to identify gaps in services and allow the city to develop a comprehensive set of tools to help schools quickly remove barriers for homeless children. Moreover, the District should expand outreach to ensure students and families who become homeless know of the assistance that is available to them. The FY 2015 budget takes a step in that direction, by adding two staff positions, but it is not clear whether that will be sufficient.

Programs like the Family Stability Program in Baltimore locate staff on site at the school to help families at risk of homelessness with financial assistance and case management services focused on both the child's educational outcomes and on parent's life skills to keep them stably housed and help prevent a future housing crisis.

Additional Funding to Help Improve and Increase Services for Students Who Are Homeless:

The amount of funding granted to DC under the federal McKinney-Vento program is not sufficient to meet the needs of homeless students in DC. Despite a 37 percent rise in homeless students since FY 2012, funding for the program has fallen by 18 percent over the same time period. This means that in FY 2014, DC has about \$35 per homeless student for services.⁵ It is hard to imagine how the full needs of a student who is homeless could be met with this amount.

DCPS received approximately \$47,000 to serve all of the homeless students in their system and just seven public charter schools received funds totaling \$52,100. This means that schools often have to scrape together other funding to provide the services required under McKinney-Vento such as transportation, school uniforms and field trip fees.

Additional funding can help support expanded outreach and training, support for homeless liaisons in schools, and services for homeless students.

Additional Outreach and Training: One of the challenges to serving homeless students is identifying them in order to help ensure they receive the services to which they are entitled. Families and/or students can self-identify as homeless to receive services, but both schools and the statewide homeless coordinator also are required to conduct outreach to help identify families in need. Each school is required to provide information on services available to homeless students, including at the time of enrollment for the school year. In addition, information is made available at the Virginia Williams Family Resource Center homelessness intake shelter, other shelters, the Department of Health, and other relevant locations. The Office of the State Superintendent of Education has a staff person located at the Virginia Williams family intake center one day per week.

Yet with very limited resources, it is often the case that some staff in shelters and in community-based organizations are unaware of the homeless liaison at the school and the services available to students and families who are homeless. The local

⁵ This Figure does not include any funds through the Title I program that may have been spent on homeless services.

funding that was added to the FY 2015 budget, \$200,000, would more than double the current funding available and should help OSSE conduct more outreach and education about the services available to homeless students.

Additional Support for Homeless Liaisons: School homeless liaisons are often the school counselor or social worker. These positions have many demands beyond homeless liaison duties, which means they may not have enough time to both serve homeless students and meet the other needs of the school population.

Particularly for schools that have a high share of students who are homeless, the District should consider funding an additional full or part-time homeless liaison position for someone whose sole focus can be homeless liaison duties or who can assist the homeless liaison with providing services to students that are homeless.

Assessing and Identifying Needs of Homeless

Students: Homeless liaisons need a comprehensive set of tools to help address the unique needs of each homeless child and their family. The National Center for Homeless Education (NCHE) recommends that each state and LEA conduct an assessment of their services for homeless students – to identify what services are being provided, how well they work, and what gaps in services remain. Conducting a system-wide needs assessment could help DC determine how many additional resources are needed to adequately serve homeless students and how best to allocate those staff and resources. For example, many homeless families at DC General have indicated that it would be helpful if they could receive more than one or two uniforms for their children because they have great difficulty accessing laundry facilities (laundry facilities are not available onsite at DC General Family Shelter).

A needs assessment can help identify areas such as this that are not currently being met.

The District has not conducted a recent system-wide assessment of services provided or students who are homeless, although DCPS and OSSE have conducted assessments of their own programs.

A more comprehensive needs assessment process should be conducted by a committee comprising a broad range of stakeholders, including the OSSE coordinator for the McKinney-Vento program, school level homeless liaisons, teachers, shelter providers, school nurses, homeless families and others who are homeless or who work on services for homeless students. The NCHE suggests that the needs assessment focus on the following areas:

- Awareness of homelessness among students;
- Policies and procedures in place under the McKinney-Vento act;
- Identification of, and outreach to, homeless youth;
- Enrollment in schools and access for students to in school services;
- Student success outcomes;
- Collaboration with other government agencies and community organizations that serve homeless youth;
- Resources and capacity for addressing homelessness within the school; and
- Guidance and monitoring of programs.

In addition, the NCHE recommends building in a system for program evaluation during the needs assessment process to help review programs and look for ways to strengthen them. NCHE provides several guides for schools who want to do program evaluation but notes that one of the more thoughtful ones uses the Data Standards and Indicators Guidebook that lists 10 standards for evaluation. (See **Table 3**, next page.) These standards range from ensuring all homeless

students demonstrate academic progress to all homeless accompanied youth enroll and are in school. Schools can decide how to measure and what progress they aim to achieve each year.

Table 3: National Center for Homeless Education Suggested Standards

Standard 1	All homeless students identified and enrolled at the time of the state assessment take the state assessment required for their grade level
Standard 2	All homeless students demonstrate academic progress
Standard 3	All children in homeless situations are identified
Standard 4	Within one day of an attempt to enroll in school, homeless students are in attendance
Standard 5	All homeless students experience stability in school
Standard 6	All homeless students receive specialized and comparable services when eligible
Standard 7	All preschool-aged homeless children enroll in and attend preschool programs
Standard 8	All homeless unaccompanied youth enroll in and attend school
Standard 9	All parents (or persons acting as parents) of homeless children and youth are informed of the educational and related opportunities available to their children and are provided meaningful opportunities to participate in their children's education
Standard 10	LEA's help with the needs of all homeless children and youth through collaborative efforts both within and beyond the LEA.

Source: National Center for Homeless Education, available at: <http://ftp.serve.org/nche/>

Promoting Family Housing Stability and Preventing Families from Becoming Homeless: In addition to providing services at the school to help homeless children succeed, steps to prevent homelessness can help children have a safe and stable home and limit the need for specialized services.

One example is the Siemer Institute for Family Stability (SIFS), which was created in June 2011 to help reduce student mobility and prevent homelessness. The program, operated largely through area United Way Foundations, now operates in 34 cities and has plans to expand to at least 50 cities by 2014.

The programs vary from city to city, but all provide case management and financial assistance to families who are on the verge of a housing crisis. The programs work in partnerships with schools and with local service providers to provide direct financial assistance and to improve life skills such as budgeting to help families avoid a future housing crisis.

One of programs that SIFS supports is the Family Stability Program (FSP) in Baltimore County, operated through the United Way at five sites. To be eligible, families have at least one school-age child, and be on the verge of homelessness. In addition, families must also have the capacity to sustain themselves after the assistance ends.

Families in FSP receive six to nine months of case management, and financial assistance up to \$2,500. Typically, financial assistance is given for rent and utility payments, but the funds are flexible and can be used for needs such as work clothes or cell phones. The services focus both on the child's education and on the parent's life skills. After six to nine months, families receives some "after-care" services for up to one year, but they are less intensive.

Some Family Stability Programs are located in schools, but most are community-based. Placing the program in the school has demonstrated early advantages, because they have direct access to families and because school personnel are more aware of the program.

DC has an emergency rental assistance program that provides similar financial services, but they are not specifically tied to families with school-age children and do not offer services beyond financial assistance. A group of 25 non-profit organizations, including the DC Fiscal Policy Institute, recently recommended modifying this program to include case management and to better target families at risk of becoming homeless, as is done in New York City's Homebase Program. Families served by Homebase were half as likely to apply for shelter as a control group of families not provided with assistance.

If DC were to implement the Homebase or Family Stability program, it should consider locating some staff at schools on a regular basis to help promote awareness of the program and to target families with school-age children. By helping to prevent the destabilizing impacts of homelessness, DC can halt the damage that would be created for a child's educational progress in the first place.