



# California's Students Experiencing Homelessness: Conditions, Outcomes, and Policy Considerations

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## Abstract

Students experiencing homelessness are a growing population in California and nationally. These students experience multilayered challenges to achieving their educational aspirations, often due to the cumulative effects of poverty and the instability associated with high mobility. Using statewide data, this study found that California students experiencing homelessness achieve and graduate at lower levels and experience more exclusionary discipline than their peers. And while staying in the same school in the face of housing instability makes a positive difference, 20% are unable to do so. High rates of school mobility and attending high-poverty, poorly staffed schools were also associated with lower achievement. Policy recommendations focus on actions that federal, state, and local decision-makers can take to address the multiple challenges that these students face.

This brief is based upon and updates an earlier report, which can be found online at <https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/students-experiencing-homelessness-report>.<sup>1</sup>

## Acknowledgments

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## Introduction

Many experts have characterized homelessness in California as a crisis, with 28% of the nation's homeless population<sup>2</sup> and 1 in 5 of the nation's students identified as experiencing homelessness residing in the state.<sup>3</sup> The incidence of student homelessness in California has been rising steadily both in absolute numbers and as a percentage of the total student population. In 2018–19, nearly 270,000 students—or approximately 1 in 23 (more than 4%)—were identified as experiencing homelessness, and these figures likely represent an undercount.<sup>4</sup> The increasing number of students in California identified as experiencing homelessness mirrors a pattern seen in most U.S. states.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, evidence suggests that the number of families experiencing homelessness has increased during the COVID-19 pandemic due to growing unemployment,<sup>6</sup> even though identification of student homelessness decreased while schools were operating virtually.<sup>7</sup>

The greater incidence of homelessness among communities of color is particularly alarming. In California, more than 7% of African American students, 6% of Native American or Alaskan students, and 6% of Pacific Islander students were identified as experiencing homelessness in 2018–19. Students experiencing homelessness in the state are also more likely to be English learners and eligible for special education services.

Students experiencing homelessness hold educational aspirations like those of their peers—to graduate from high school and go on to college. What separates students experiencing homelessness from their peers are the challenges of their circumstances, often due to the cumulative effects of poverty and the instability and disruption of education and social relationships associated with high mobility.

# Background and Context: Students Experiencing Homelessness in California

## Who Are Students Experiencing Homelessness?

Students experiencing homelessness are not a single homogeneous group. They include students across a range of grades, from different racial and ethnic backgrounds, and in both urban and rural areas. They also include students in a range of different temporary living arrangements (see “The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act,” below). They may also be unaccompanied youth—students experiencing homelessness who are “not in the physical custody of a parent or guardian.”<sup>8</sup> The complexity and vulnerability of their economic conditions and their often high mobility means these students may be underidentified and thus at risk of being underserved.

Poverty is the strongest predictor of homelessness for families. Contributing factors, such as a lack of affordable housing, also play an important role.<sup>9</sup> Some students are disproportionately likely to be impacted by homelessness. Without adequate supports, youth such as teenage parents and those who have faced family conflict or abuse are at greater risk of experiencing homelessness.<sup>10</sup> In addition, the incidence of homelessness is higher among those who identify as LGBTQ, with lack of understanding and discrimination, inside and outside the home, cited as issues.<sup>11</sup> Rates of homelessness also tend to be higher among students of color, owing to factors such as inequitable access to housing and economic opportunity.<sup>12</sup>

## The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act

The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act is the primary federal law that establishes certain protections for children and youth experiencing homelessness and the responsibilities of districts and states in serving this student group.<sup>13</sup> The law defines homeless children and youth as those “who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence,” including those who are:

- sharing the housing of others due to loss of housing or economic hardship;
- living in motels, hotels, trailer parks, or camping grounds;
- living in emergency or transitional shelters or who are abandoned in hospitals;
- sleeping in public or private places not designed for or ordinarily used for sleeping; or
- living in cars, parks, public spaces, abandoned buildings, substandard housing, bus or train stations, or similar settings.

Notably, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) uses a different definition of homeless that does not capture individuals living doubled up or in motels. The differing definitions can complicate efforts to ensure students who qualify for educational supports under McKinney-Vento also have access to HUD services, including housing. In California, over 80% of the student population experiencing homelessness does not qualify for HUD services.<sup>14</sup>

## McKinney-Vento Protections

McKinney-Vento requires school districts to ensure that students experiencing homelessness “have access to the same free, appropriate public education” as other children.

The law provides limited funding to states and local education agencies—including districts, county offices of education, and charter schools—and specifically protects the ability of students experiencing homelessness to, among other things, immediately enroll in school, regardless of typical document and deadline requirements, and to continue to attend a school, even if relocating to an area outside of the district, including by providing transportation if needed.

To administer McKinney-Vento funds and programs, states must staff a homeless coordinator, and districts must maintain a homeless liaison position to ensure identification, access, and support for students experiencing homelessness.

## **How Do Districts Receive Resources to Support Students Experiencing Homelessness?**

Under McKinney-Vento, states receive limited federal funding to support students experiencing homelessness. In California, the majority of McKinney-Vento funds are distributed as a competitive grant for which districts must apply. Just 73 districts were awarded these funds in 2018–19,<sup>15</sup> and thus, the majority of students experiencing homelessness in California are enrolled in districts with no federal funds dedicated to the implementation of McKinney-Vento’s provisions.<sup>16</sup> Students experiencing homelessness are also eligible for assistance under Title I, Part A of the federal Every Student Succeeds Act, regardless of what school they attend.

In California, districts also receive state funding under the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF), which can be used to support students experiencing homelessness. Homelessness is not a stand-alone category under the LCFF, but once identified as experiencing homelessness, these students are categorically eligible to receive free meals and are included in a district’s unduplicated pupil count of high-need students.

## **Identification of Students Experiencing Homelessness Is Challenging**

Identifying students experiencing homelessness remains a significant challenge for many districts for several reasons. Students experiencing homelessness are a highly mobile student population, and disruption of living arrangements may mean that some students have to move schools and districts multiple times in a single school year, complicating identification. Students can experience homelessness for various periods and at different times during the year, and students and parents may fear stigmatization from identifying themselves as experiencing homelessness.

Other identification issues may result from limited school or district capacity. In most districts, homeless liaisons serve in multiple capacities, limiting the time they have available to identify and support students experiencing homelessness and to provide professional development to school staff for the same purpose. For example, one study found that around two thirds of liaisons in California spend less than 5 hours a week on their liaison role.<sup>17</sup> Implementation can thus be uneven, and many school staff members may not have sufficient training to identify the signs of homelessness.

Identification problems may have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, which has had severe economic consequences for many communities.<sup>18</sup> With the loss of employment and housing security for many families, the incidence of homelessness is likely to have increased.<sup>19</sup> However, the closure of many school sites to in-person instruction for much of the 2020–21 school year may have complicated the identification of student homelessness, as suggested by emerging evidence showing that identification has declined since the pandemic began.<sup>20</sup>

## How Does the Experience of Homelessness Impact Students?

All students have the capacity to develop resilience and persevere in the face of adversity. However, while many students experiencing homelessness can and do succeed in school, the educational outcomes for this student group are concerning. Students' educational achievement is negatively associated with the experience of homelessness. Moreover, homelessness and high mobility are risk factors for lower achievement beyond that of poverty alone. The experience of homelessness is also negatively associated with other measures of educational achievement, including grade repetition and lower graduation rates.<sup>21</sup>

Homelessness can impact youth in many ways. Housing instability can separate children from family and school and neighborhood friends, with consequences for students' social and emotional well-being. Students and families experiencing homelessness are also more likely to have endured trauma and to experience depression and anxiety.<sup>22</sup> Absent supportive interventions, this combination of challenges to student well-being can impact students' opportunity to learn.<sup>23</sup>

The experience of homelessness also increases risks to students' physical health. Housing instability and acute poverty can lead to food instability and an increased likelihood of experiencing hunger.<sup>24</sup> High mobility among families experiencing homelessness can also complicate efforts to receive needed health services.<sup>25</sup>

## Findings

Using enrollment and assessment data from the California Department of Education, this brief examines the demographics and characteristics of students experiencing homelessness and how the experience of homelessness interacts with student attendance, graduation, college-going rates, discipline, mobility, school environments, and student achievement.

### Demographics and Student Characteristics

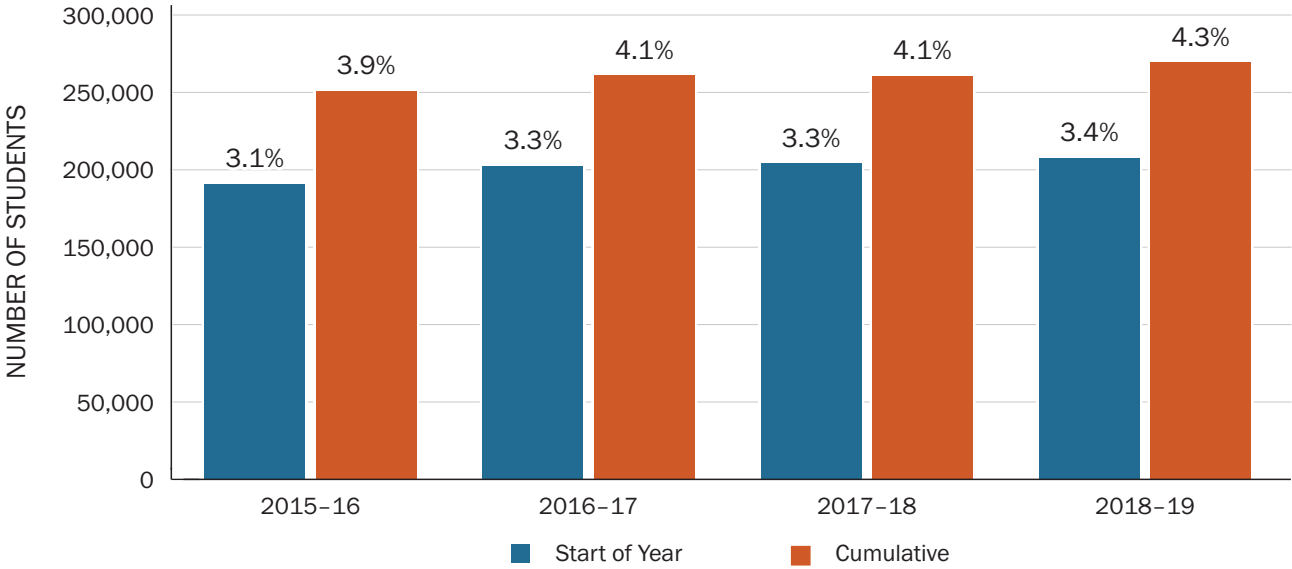
**The number of k–12 students identified as experiencing homelessness in California public schools is large and growing.** The number of students identified as experiencing homelessness increased by more than 7% over 4 years, from 251,000 in 2015–16 to nearly 270,000 in 2018–19. (See Figure 1.) This increase occurred even as the total number of students in the state decreased slightly over the same period. This number likely represents an undercount due to challenges with identifying students experiencing homelessness, as described above, and due to the economic stresses that many families have experienced during the pandemic, which may have increased the incidence of homelessness.

**Students of color, particularly African American and Latino/a students, are more likely to experience homelessness.** For example, we found that while Latino/a students represented around 55% of all students in grades k–12, nearly 70% of all California students experiencing homelessness were from Latino/a backgrounds. Similarly, African American students represented less than 6% of all students in grades k–12 but represented 9% of all students who were experiencing homelessness.

**Students experiencing homelessness are also more likely to be eligible for special education services and are significantly more likely to be English learners.** In 2018–19, nearly 31% of students experiencing homelessness were classified as English learners, compared with just 20% of all students in grades k–12.

The majority of students experiencing homelessness are living temporarily doubled up. Using enrollment data for students in grades 3–8 and 11 from 2015–16, our analysis found that the majority of California students (84%) experiencing homelessness stayed in temporarily doubled-up living arrangements, that is, staying with others due to economic hardship, loss of housing, or a similar reason.

**Figure 1**  
**Students Experiencing Homelessness in California**  
*(2015–16 to 2018–19)*



Note: Cumulative enrollment is the total number of unduplicated students who experienced homelessness at any time during the academic year (July 1 to June 30).

Data source: California Department of Education, DataQuest. <https://data1.cde.ca.gov/dataquest/>.

**Chronic Absenteeism, Graduation Rates, and College-Going Rates**

Housing instability can result in irregular or interrupted school attendance patterns, and chronic absenteeism is associated with decreased educational and social engagement, lower achievement, and lower graduation rates.<sup>26</sup>

**Students experiencing homelessness are more likely to be chronically absent than the overall student population.**

The rate of chronic absence among students experiencing homelessness in 2018–19 was 25%—double the state average (12%). The rates are higher among some racial and ethnic groups: More than 40% of African American students and Native American or Alaskan students experiencing homelessness were chronically absent.

**Students experiencing homelessness are less likely to complete high school.** Only 69% of California high school students in 2017–18 who experienced homelessness completed high school in 4 years, compared to the statewide average of 83%. While economically disadvantaged students also graduate at rates below that of their more affluent peers, graduation rates for students experiencing homelessness are markedly lower still.<sup>27</sup>

**Among high school completers, students experiencing homelessness are less likely to be enrolled in college the year following completion compared to all students.** Among all California students, 64% of high school completers were enrolled in college the following year.<sup>28</sup> For students experiencing homelessness, this was just 50%.

## Discipline, Mobility, and School Environments

Using enrollment data for students in grades 3–8 and 11 from 2015–16, our analysis found that **students experiencing homelessness are more likely to receive disciplinary action than other students**. This pattern holds for all three of the disciplinary actions recorded: in-school suspensions, out-of-school suspensions, and expulsions. Suspension rates are highest for African American, Native American or Alaskan, and Pacific Islander students experiencing homelessness.

**One in five students experiencing homelessness changed schools at least once during the school year—triple the rate of other students—and a quarter of these changed schools twice or more.**<sup>29</sup> High mobility is more common among African American, Native American or Alaskan, and White students experiencing homelessness. Frequent school moves can impact opportunities to learn; disrupt key relationships with teachers, peers, and the community; and require changes in schedules and transportation, leading to absenteeism and loss of learning time.

**Students experiencing homelessness are more likely to be enrolled in high-poverty schools.** Approximately 57% of students experiencing homelessness in the tested grades were enrolled in those schools in which the percentage of students eligible for free or reduced-price meals was greater than 80%. This compares with just 34% of all students.

The concentration of students experiencing homelessness in high-poverty schools also means that they are more likely to be in schools with greater resourcing challenges. High-poverty schools tend to have higher teacher turnover and higher proportions of inexperienced (2 years or less) and underprepared teachers compared to low-poverty schools.<sup>30</sup> High teacher turnover negatively impacts learning for all students, and research finds that novice and underprepared teachers are less effective than fully qualified and experienced teachers.<sup>31</sup>

## Student Achievement on CAASPP

We examined the learning outcomes, and the factors associated with them, for students experiencing homelessness using the 2015–16 California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress (CAASPP) and enrollment data for students in grades 3–8 and 11.

Using descriptive statistics and regression analyses controlling for individual, school, and district characteristics,<sup>32</sup> we found that **the experience of homelessness is associated with lower student achievement, regardless of living arrangement**. Statewide, 48% of all students met or exceeded state standards in English language arts in 2015–16, and 37% did so in mathematics. For students experiencing homelessness, those outcomes were 29% and 19%, respectively. Compared to students experiencing homelessness overall, English learners and students with disabilities experiencing homelessness had even lower outcomes.

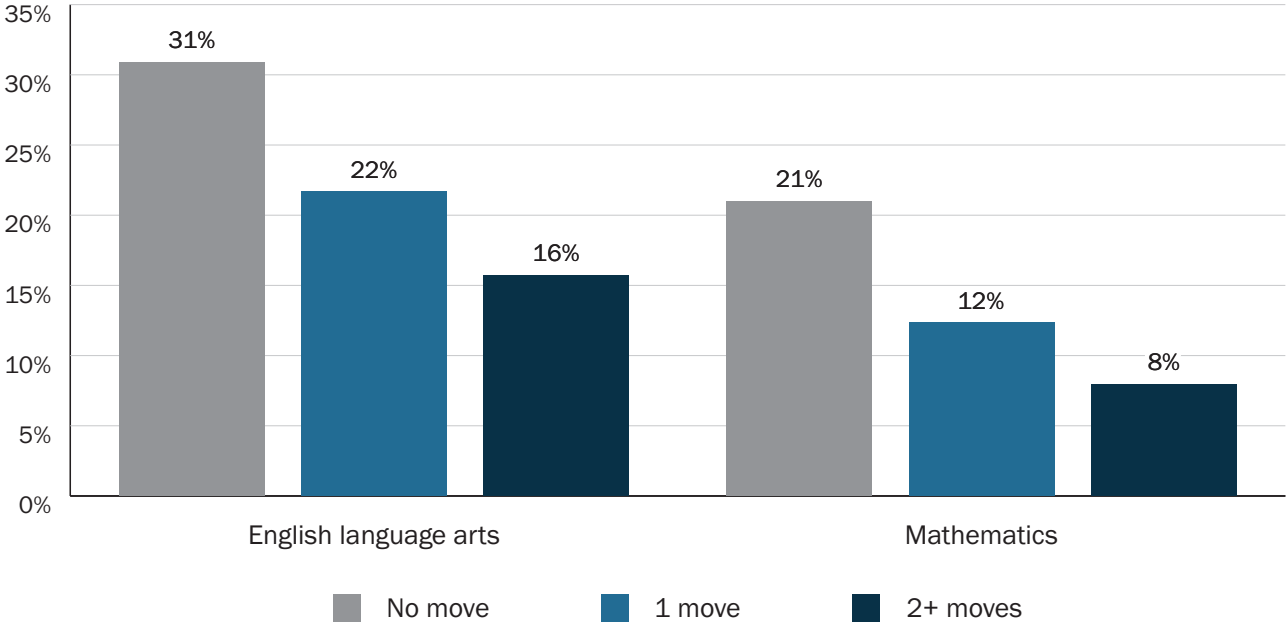
**School mobility is associated with lower average educational achievement** in both English language arts and mathematics, especially for students who move multiple times in a single school year. (See Figure 2.)

**There is a strong and negative correlation between learning outcomes and being enrolled in a high-poverty school.** The factors underlying this association are likely complex, involving a range of elements, from school resources and allocation, to staff training and capacity, to family and peer effects.



Schools with high teacher turnover and a large proportion of underprepared teachers are negatively associated with student achievement in English language arts and mathematics, even after accounting for other student- and school-level factors. This negative association holds both for all students and for those experiencing homelessness.<sup>33</sup>

**Figure 2**  
**Achievement on CAASPP Among Students Experiencing Homelessness, by School Mobility**  
(2015–16)



Notes: Figure shows the proportion of students meeting or exceeding state standards. Percentages are calculated for 97,740 and 98,671 students experiencing homelessness with scores in CAASPP English language arts and mathematics, respectively.

Data source: Data provided by the California Department of Education through a special request.

## Policy Considerations

The findings above underscore the need for comprehensive policy and practice strategies that address the multiple challenges that students experiencing homelessness face.

Recognizing California’s growing crisis of homelessness, state policymakers have invested in several programs designed to reduce housing insecurity and mitigate the impacts of homelessness. For example, in 2021, California invested \$2 billion in the Homeless Housing, Assistance, and Prevention Program, of which 10% is reserved for youth experiencing homelessness; \$50 million in the Homeless Youth Emergency Services and Housing Program to expand access to housing and crisis intervention services for youth experiencing homelessness; and \$40 million to address family homelessness by providing grants and technical assistance that support local housing and cross-system collaboration efforts. With the emergence of COVID-19, the state has also launched initiatives designed to quickly house individuals and families experiencing homelessness.<sup>34</sup>

While these investments will be critical for addressing the overall crisis of homelessness, additional steps are needed to mitigate the impacts of homelessness on students and improve educational outcomes. Decision-makers working to address these challenges should consider the following strategies, organized by federal, state, and local levels of governance.

## **Federal Actions to Support Students Experiencing Homelessness**

Federal action is needed to address two major challenges for improving outcomes for students experiencing homelessness: inadequate federal funding and barriers to cross-system collaboration, which can impede the provision of wraparound supports. To help address these issues, federal policymakers should:

- **Increase federal funding under the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act and revise the formula to target funds based on the enrollment of students experiencing homelessness.** Federal McKinney-Vento funds are limited and not distributed based on homeless student counts;<sup>35</sup> as a result, in 2018–19 California received only \$41 per student experiencing homelessness, compared to \$64 nationally. One-time funding through the federal American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) will infuse states and districts with much-needed resources to increase supports for students experiencing homelessness, but it will not provide a long-term solution to these funding challenges. Federal policymakers should increase long-term investment in McKinney-Vento and revise the formula so that funds are targeted to states based on their enrollment of students experiencing homelessness.
- **Increase federal funding for community schools and wraparound supports.** Housing insecurity, school instability, and the experience of homelessness can negatively affect multiple aspects of students' lives, including their academic achievement, social and emotional well-being, mental health, and physical health. Access to wraparound supports across multiple sectors is vital, including education, housing, health, and social services. However, local collaboration can be complex and may require partners to overcome barriers, such as between-system differences in priorities, funding and reporting requirements, and program eligibility rules.<sup>36</sup> Community schools can help bring together funding streams and resources by establishing partnerships across the education system, nonprofits, and local government agencies.<sup>37</sup> Federal policymakers should build on ARPA's one-time support for community schools by increasing funding for the federal Full-Service Community Schools Program and by investing in specialized instructional support personnel, including social workers, school counselors, and psychologists.
- **Align definitions of “homeless” used by federal housing and education programs.** Different definitions of “homeless” used by federal education and housing programs can make it difficult for local agencies to provide comprehensive wraparound supports to students and their families experiencing homelessness. Federal policymakers should align HUD's definition of “homeless” with that established by McKinney-Vento, to ensure that students living in motels or doubled up can access housing and homeless assistance, administered under HUD.



## State Actions to Support Students Experiencing Homelessness

California policymakers can help improve outcomes for students experiencing homelessness by elevating the visibility of these students in the state's accountability system, establishing infrastructure to support local collaboration, and supporting educator training.

In July 2021, after the companion report to this brief was initially published,<sup>38</sup> California passed the 2021–22 state budget, which made multiple historic investments in education, including funding for community schools and professional learning for educators and other school staff. As California moves forward on implementing these new investments and on considering additional actions to support students experiencing homelessness, state policymakers should:

- **Elevate the visibility of students experiencing homelessness in the state's accountability system by adding them as a stand-alone category under the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF).** Underidentification and low visibility of students experiencing homelessness can prevent them from receiving much-needed services and supports. Although these students are already considered part of the LCFF weightings (they are included in unduplicated pupil counts due to their categorical eligibility for free or reduced-price meals), the state's main Local Control and Accountability Plan template does not prompt districts to specify how they will increase or improve services for these students, as they are required to do for students who are in foster care, from low-income families, or English learners.<sup>39</sup> State policymakers should consider adding students experiencing homelessness as a stand-alone category under the LCFF, which would elevate their visibility in the state's accountability system and help ensure that resources are targeted toward this student group.
- **Support strong implementation of community schools to provide wraparound supports that meet students' multiple needs.** In 2020, the state invested \$45 million from the federal Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund to establish the California Community Schools Partnership Program (CCSPP) to support and expand existing community schools. Demand for grants exceeded capacity: Applications totaled \$168 million in requested grant funds, more than three times the amount allocated for the program. Out of 102 applicants, only 20 received awards. In 2021, California invested an additional \$3 billion into the program and made the establishment of new community schools, along with expanding existing schools, an allowable use of funds. This level of investment is designed to expand the community school model to all schools in communities with high levels of poverty (about 3,000 schools) over the next several years. Of the total amount, \$141.8 million will support the establishment of at least five regional technical assistance centers.<sup>40</sup> To support local collaboration, the state should ensure strong implementation of the program by developing a robust, coordinated technical assistance infrastructure that builds upon lessons learned from existing initiatives and helps identify and disseminate best practices among grantees.
- **Create a state-level children's cabinet to identify and address barriers to state and local cross-system collaboration.** California should also consider creating a children's cabinet composed of key state agencies that administer programs serving children and families. The cabinet's tasks

should include (1) strengthening collaboration among state agencies to support the development and implementation of policy that is grounded in shared goals for California’s families and children; (2) identifying barriers to interagency collaboration and issuing recommendations, informed by insights from the state’s new Cradle-to-Career Data System; and (3) leveraging the expertise of state and local stakeholders engaged in cross-system initiatives, including recipients of grants from the CCSPP, to inform state efforts to support local collaboration.

- **Through state technical assistance, help districts provide training that prepares school staff to support students experiencing homelessness.** Students experiencing homelessness are more likely to experience stressors outside of school and to have suffered trauma. In addition, students experiencing homelessness are more likely to be African American or Latino/a, experience exclusionary discipline, and identify as LGBTQ. Especially with schools reopening for in-person learning, the state should support training that prepares educators and support staff to work with vulnerable student groups, including students experiencing homelessness. To increase their sensitivity to the issues these students face, teachers, principals, counselors, and other specialized instructional support staff should receive training framed around social and emotional learning and trauma-informed practice. Training should also include strategies for implementing restorative practice and creating identity-safe classrooms.<sup>41</sup>

Recent state investments in school staff training and technical assistance could support this work. In 2021, California invested \$1.5 billion to establish the Educator Effectiveness Block Grant, which will issue funds to districts to provide professional learning to school staff who interact with students, including teachers, administrators, and paraprofessionals. In addition, using ARPA funds, the state will establish at least two Homeless Education Technical Assistance Centers to ensure county offices of education are equipped to support districts with implementing McKinney-Vento.<sup>42</sup> As districts face many challenges with reopening and reengaging students in the 2021–22 school year, the state’s technical assistance efforts should help districts identify and leverage federal and state funding opportunities, such as the Educator Effectiveness Block Grant, to ensure school staff are prepared to support students experiencing homelessness.

## Local Actions to Support Students Experiencing Homelessness

Over the course of 2021, California’s school districts have received an unprecedented infusion of federal and state funds, including \$13.5 billion under ARPA.<sup>43</sup> Through ARPA, California will also receive \$98.8 million in targeted funding to support the identification, enrollment, attendance, and school participation of students experiencing homelessness; 75% of each allocation (\$24.7 million, issued in April 2021, and \$74.1 million, which will be issued after states submit an application for funding and receive federal approval) must be distributed to districts.<sup>44</sup> In addition, in March 2021, California appropriated \$4.6 billion in COVID-19 relief funding to provide students with expanded learning time; accelerated learning opportunities; and integrated student supports, including mental health services. From this fund, districts received \$1,000 per student experiencing homelessness.<sup>45</sup> In the state’s 2021–22 budget, California also invested an additional \$1.1 billion through the LCFF to help districts hire staff who provide direct student services, including counselors, nurses, teachers, and paraeducators; \$3 billion to support community schools; and \$50 million to support school- and

districtwide implementation of multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS).<sup>46</sup> Districts should invest these resources in capacity building to help them meet the needs of students experiencing homelessness. Specifically, districts should:

- **Support identification and reengagement of students experiencing homelessness by dedicating more resources to liaison responsibilities.** Particularly in the wake of COVID-19, when large numbers of students experiencing homelessness may have become disengaged during school closures, districts should invest resources in identifying and reengaging these students. Homeless liaisons play an important role in coordinating these activities. Specifically, among their multiple responsibilities, liaisons are required under federal law to ensure that students experiencing homelessness:
  - are aware of their educational rights;
  - are identified by school personnel through outreach and coordination activities with other entities and agencies;
  - are enrolled in school and have a full and equal opportunity to succeed; and
  - have access to and receive educational services as well as referrals to health care, mental health, and housing services.

Despite their key role in coordinating the complex work of identifying and serving students experiencing homelessness, liaisons in California often serve multiple roles and lack the time, capacity, or resources—including effective cross-system partnerships—to accomplish their jobs effectively.<sup>47</sup> Districts should examine the demands placed on staff serving as homeless liaisons and, if needed, dedicate additional resources to liaison responsibilities. This can include ensuring that district liaisons have the necessary time to carry out their duties, as well as designating school-site liaisons—a nationally recommended best practice in which school-level liaisons collaborate with the district liaison—to serve as a school-site point of contact and help school staff understand the needs and rights of students experiencing homelessness.<sup>48</sup> As described below, districts should also consider coordinative strategies, such as community schools, that can help organize the cross-system partnerships that liaisons need to refer students experiencing homelessness to a ready web of supports, including health care, mental health, housing, and social services.

- **Create enrollment and transportation strategies that reduce barriers to student engagement.** Even once students are identified as experiencing homelessness, districts must employ strategies that ensure these students can attend school and access learning opportunities. However, students experiencing homelessness face significant barriers to school engagement, including high rates of chronic absenteeism and school mobility. As districts work to support students' return to in-person learning, they should increase access to services and supports that help reengage them and remove barriers to enrollment, attendance, and participation. This should include (1) updating district websites and enrollment materials to ensure they contain information about students' rights under McKinney-Vento, in multiple languages that represent a district's

linguistic diversity; (2) ensuring that enrollment systems allow students to indicate their living situations and provide students experiencing homelessness with pathways for enrolling without needing to provide a parent or guardian signature, proof of residency, or other documents; and (3) providing transportation options that ensure students can get to and from their schools of origin and participate in learning opportunities, including after-school, summer learning, and early learning programs.

- **Wrap around students with supports through relationship-centered community schools and MTSS.** Although homeless liaisons are charged with coordinating with other agencies to ensure that students experiencing homelessness are identified and receive referrals to critical supports and services, in many cases a single individual cannot accomplish all of these tasks alone. By building or expanding MTSS structures and community school initiatives, counties and districts can organize the infrastructure needed to wrap around students by securing and coordinating supports across systems, without cumbersome procedures in the way. Schools implementing these strategies should go beyond service provision and also focus on organizational designs that foster strong, trusting relationships, which can support identification efforts and buffer against the stresses that arise when students are experiencing poverty or homelessness. Studies find that student achievement, attachment, attendance, behavior, and graduation rates increase when schools create personalizing structures that enable each child to be well known and each family to be connected. Examples of such structures include looping, in which teachers remain with students for multiple years; teaching teams that share students; and advisory systems, in which each student belongs to an advisory group that meets each day with a teacher who supports students' social, emotional, and academic learning and is a point of contact with the family and other adults in the school.<sup>49</sup>

## Conclusion

Student homelessness in California is of urgent concern and may increase further still in the coming months due to the impacts of COVID-19 on already vulnerable communities. While California has made recent investments to reduce housing insecurity and address overall homelessness, additional steps will be needed to mitigate the impacts of homelessness on student experiences and outcomes. To address the multilayered challenges that students experiencing homelessness face, policymakers at multiple levels of governance must pursue comprehensive policy and practice strategies to achieve the state's promise of a high-quality public education system for all students.

## Endnotes

1. The 2021–22 California state budget became law in July 2021, after the companion report to this brief was published. The policy recommendations in this brief have been updated to reflect new state investments.
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