COMMENTARY

Serving Students Experiencing Homelessness During the Pandemic



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The aim of this commentary—released as part of a series on expanded learning partnerships and learning hubs in the context of the pandemic—is to provide actionable guidance for districts, schools, and expanded learning providers interested in best serving students experiencing homelessness. We seek to answer the question: How can expanded learning be leveraged to support pandemic recovery, specifically for students and families experiencing homelessness, who face compounding challenges of not having the tools and supports to participate in distance learning as well as the emotional and logistical consequences of economic and housing insecurity?

COVID-19 has magnified equity concerns and exacerbated challenges faced by students and families experiencing homelessness. Before the onset of the pandemic, a record-high 1.5 million K–12 students were identified as homeless in the United States, with California at the forefront with almost 265,000 students. Not surprising, but nonetheless distressing, is the disproportionate rate at which Black and Latinx students are overrepresented among students known to be legally homeless.

In March 2020, when the first statewide stay-at-home order was issued in California, some social services and motel vouchers were offered under Project Roomkey—a state funded program established that same month and administered by local County Welfare Departments to ensure that individuals had access to safe shelter. However, these temporary housing supports did not explicitly address the needs of many transitional-age youth and their families, such as access to distance learning and other learning resources and services. Transitional-age students—youth between the ages of 16 and 24—are particularly vulnerable to housing insecurity as many no longer receive assistance from public systems of care that previously provided resources and support.

Nearly a year later, when more and more families are experiencing housing insecurity, resources are stretched thin and the existing fragmented system of care is still not equipped to simultaneously and seamlessly address issues of access to learning opportunities and support. Schools and expanded learning partners are uniquely situated to work together and leverage their unique relationships with students and families to respond quickly and effectively to the challenges facing students experiencing homelessness.

Collaboration across agencies, multigenerational support services, and "integrated care" are not new concepts in school social work; nonetheless, collaboration across agencies is neither mandated nor consistent throughout public education and public health.

Education systems and community partners must work together to ensure that every family gets the targeted support they need, with the difficult work of coordinating across agencies not borne by students or families themselves. The pandemic and increasing attention to systemic racial inequities has opened an opportunity for heightened interest in school-based support services and the ways in which schools can work with expanded learning partners to more effectively meet student needs.

We offer some guidance around how to best support these partnerships with an eye to planning for recovery from the pandemic.

Develop multigenerational trust and support.

Students' access to instruction depends on the stability of their guardians. To best support a student, schools and expanded learning partners should consider the needs and experiences of the family unit and network. By collaborating and by leveraging the relationships and community trust that expanded learning providers often have earned, educators are more likely able to identify the strengths and challenges of students and families experiencing homelessness, and to develop individualized plans that include shorter and longer term resources and support.

Seek to understand the unidentified educational needs of youth experiencing homelessness and actively counter deficit-based stereotypes.

Many youth experiencing homelessness or frequent housing mobility transfer often to different schools and, sometimes, to different districts and counties. The lack of consistency across systems can result in students' underidentification for specialized support services (through an individualized education plan or IEP). Sometimes even well-intentioned and compassionate educators have lower expectations of such students, recognizing that their home situations are not conducive to supporting high academic rigor. Expanded learning partnerships should consider how to increase students' (and caregivers') confidence and engagement in their learning, in spite of the barriers that are beyond their control. When students experience small academic wins, their pride in themselves for mastering learning soars, as does their desire to succeed.

Increase access to learning through one-on-one visits or personal connections combined with learning hubs.

Trial and error suggest that building trusting relationships throughpersonalized visits (with COVID-19 precautions) can increase trust and help to address barriers to accessing instruction during distance learning for students experiencing homelessness. Repeated and respectful outreach is needed for students and families who might fear or not trust public agencies,[1] including school personnel. Schools should collaborate with compassionate and empathy-focused expanded learning partners to ensure families feel safe, validated, and supported.

Centralize support in order to ensure compliance with the law (McKinney-Vento Homelessness Assistance Act) and make interagency collaboration more effective.

A district-wide program combined with school-based support is especially helpful for unaccompanied minors who change schools and need specialized support. Berkeley Unified School District's McKinney-Vento office (which provides federally mandated support to ensure the educational rights and protections of children experiencing homelessness) is referred to as the Homeless Outreach Program for Education (HOPE), to reduce stigma associated with language around housing insecurity. Berkeley HOPE staff work with eight child-serving agencies, city government, and faith-based communities to provide emergency shelter, food, and clothing to housing insecure students and their caregivers. Working to address urgent medical needs as well as physical and mental health concerns, these partnered organizations have been able to establish and retain the trust of students and their families.

Similarly, Mount Diablo Unified School District's HOPE is working to improve collaboration among agencies and to allow students and families to more seamlessly access resources. This system was the central coordinating mechanism between schools and community partners as the district transitioned to distance learning; it offered Wi-Fi access, laptops, and other resources such as mental health supports and peer-to-peer programs.

County Offices of Education are also uniquely positioned to support school and community partnerships because they straddle many school districts, can offer centralized professional development, and can serve highly mobile student populations such as students who are homeless or in foster care.

Leverage expanded learning partners to help identify students experiencing homelessness.

Across the state, leaders have not done well identifying students who are experiencing housing insecurity. Many counties and districts incorrectly report having zero youth experiencing homelessness. Districts should ensure their housing questionnaire is compassionate and inclusive, and that it recognizes the many forms of housing instability defined under the McKinney-Vento Act. Expanded learning staff are often from—and reflect the culture and demographics of—the communities they serve and may be able to develop trusting relationships with students and families by being seen as accessible advocates and allies. Such trust is invaluable for creating supportive and responsive relationships.

Reimagine student transportation to address the lived realities of students and families.

As educators and leaders talk about moving small cohorts back to school or creating more learning hub sites—and as we shift our sights toward full reopening in fall 2021—schools and expanded learning partners should think proactively and collaboratively about transportation. During the pandemic, schools have served as important access points for free meals, learning packets as an alternative to online school, and other resources. However, for many people without reliable transportation, there remains inconsistent access to these essential resources. In reimagining what student transportation looks like, schools and expanded learning partners should ask students and families what they envision would work best for their individual circumstances, and then plan accordingly.

The ability of schools to offer support explicitly to students and families experiencing homelessness or housing insecurity will likely fall short of the need, especially as the population of such students in California continues to grow. It is important, therefore, to build and strengthen intentional partnerships across all schools and expanded learning partners to reimagine what support can and should look like, both in and out of the classroom, whether in person or online.

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1 Detterman, R., Ventura, J., Rosenthal, L., & Berrick, K. 2019. *Unconditional education*. Oxford University Press. See p. 47.

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