

LEARNING EXCHANGE:

*Showcasing Education
Innovation and Research for
Students Experiencing
Homelessness*

October 27, 2023

CONVENING REPORT



Berkeley Center for
Cities + Schools

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California's Investments in Innovation Already Showing Progress

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In October 2023, more than 100 practitioners, professionals, and students gathered at UC Berkeley to share insights and discuss research on the growing crisis of student homelessness in California. With short-lived yet historic federal funding to support this population set to expire in September 2024, the convening encouraged researchers and practitioners to compare notes, share findings and explore paths forward. This brief summarizes highlights and insights and makes the case for state education leaders to bridge this looming gap with sustained financial commitments.

Multiple panels and discussions focused on recent innovations at the local level funded by the Homeless Innovation Program (HIP) grants. Representatives from sixteen of twenty funded local educational agencies (LEAs) shared best practices and insights gathered from new interventions to support students and families experiencing homelessness. Their resulting toolkits centered on three core priorities: community engagement, comprehensive wraparound services (e.g., community schools), and housing.

A central highlight of the convening was a fireside chat with seven youth speakers with lived experience of homelessness. These students shared their own stories and accomplishments, identified resources and roadblocks to their progress and pointed to a lack of agency as a primary barrier for young people, regardless of housing status. Youth and adult researchers noted persistent gaps in research on students experiencing homelessness, including a general lack of data and dearth of nuance, as well as confusion caused by differing definitions of homelessness in federal statutes.



The afternoon session, a “Spotlight on Research,” featured researchers sharing emerging data and studies seeking to fill in these gaps in knowledge, including a newly released report from the California Department of Education built from newly available dwelling-type data. Particularly striking, researchers found that soon-to-expire federal funds from the American Rescue Plan (ARP) had increased the reach of dedicated funding for student homelessness tenfold – from 6.2% of LEAs in California to 62%.

This brief concludes with a preview of the upcoming “Catalyzing Action Exchange” at UC Berkeley on September 27, 2024, and a call to action, urging state education leaders to implement insights from researchers and practitioners at this convening – to deepen understanding and alignment within education, create new and sustained funding streams dedicated to student homelessness, implement successful models into systems within schools and districts across the state, and engage youth experiencing homelessness and their peers in these processes at every step of the way.



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**SPECIAL THANKS TO
OUR PROGRAM
PARTNERS:**



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I. INTRODUCTION

“While there has historically been recognition of the crisis of visible adult homelessness, we have yet to truly reckon with the less visible crisis of homelessness among children, youth and families. This crisis threatens their future and ultimately puts young people at risk of experiencing homelessness as adults.”

- Barbara Duffield, School House Connection ED

Student homelessness is a growing crisis in California. During the 2022-23 school year, 4.1% of students were identified as experiencing homelessness¹ with a cumulative total of 246,480 students (California Department of Education, 2023a). This follows an increasing trend, with a 48% increase over the previous decade noted in 2022 (California Department of Education, 2022). Students experiencing homelessness have higher rates of chronic absenteeism and suspension and are substantially less likely to graduate than their peers (California Department of Education, 2022), with housing insecurity cited as a primary factor in their dropping out of school (Berstein & Foster, 2008).

Passed by Congress in 1987, the McKinney-Vento Act (MKV) protects the rights of and guarantees services to students experiencing homelessness so they can participate fully in K-12 public schooling. The MKV definition of youth homelessness encompasses students who “lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence,” (California Department of Education, 2024a) thereby including those who are unhoused, doubled up, or living in precarious settings such as motels/hotels, trailer parks, or cars. The federal legislation requires each school district to designate a liaison, who is charged with ensuring students experiencing homelessness enroll in school and have full and equal opportunity to succeed.

These children and youth are often identified by school personnel through outreach and coordination with other entities and agencies. Yet, over the nearly four decades since MKV’s passage, inadequate levels of state and federal funding have frequently made it difficult to staff these programs sufficiently to meet all the needs of students experiencing homelessness and their families.

“While there has historically been recognition of the crisis of visible adult homelessness, we have yet to truly reckon with the less visible crisis of homelessness among children, youth and families. This crisis threatens their future and ultimately puts young people at risk of experiencing homelessness as adults.”

-Barbara Duffield,
School House
Connection

¹SchoolHouse Connection recommends using the term “experiencing homelessness” over “unhoused” or “housing insecure.” See: [“Why We Use the Phrase ‘Experiencing Homelessness.’”](#)

A. A MOMENT OF CRISIS AND OPPORTUNITY

Even in the best of times, the resources and services guaranteed in MKV often go unfulfilled due to a historic lack of state and federal funding. An annual \$14 million federal grant is currently the only funding stream explicitly dedicated to MKV programming statewide. These funds are distributed as subgrants to LEAs to which they must apply on a competitive basis and thus most LEAs don't receive any MKV funding. In fact, a UCLA study found these funds only reached 36% of students experiencing homelessness in California (Bishop et al., 2020).

However, this bleak funding landscape experienced a seismic shift over the last three years. Since 2022, California has released \$98 million in federal grants – a sevenfold increase from federal MKV funding – from a one-time pot of funding stemming from the American Rescue Act Plan (ARP) to fund school districts and county offices of education to support the education of students experiencing homelessness. Local Educational Agencies (LEAs) across California embraced this opportunity to improve systems for students experiencing homelessness, many of which could serve as models to be systematized across the state.

Unfortunately, federal ARP funds are set to expire on September 30, 2024. Without new state commitments to expand or sustain these programs, California schools will be forced to return to the status quo – with less than \$57 on average per student experiencing homelessness,² among those who receive grant funding from the annual Education for Homeless Children and Youth (EHCY) federal grant program.



²Calculated by dividing the annual \$14 million in federal MKV funding by the 246,480 students experiencing homelessness in California during the 2022-23 school year.

B. AN UNPRECEDENTED GATHERING

On October 27th of 2023, the Center for Cities + Schools (CC+S) partnered with the California Department of Education, Homeless Education Technical Assistance Centers (HETACs) and the UC Berkeley 21st Century California School Leadership Academy (21CSLA) to hold a full-day learning exchange entitled **“Showcasing Education Innovation and Research for Students Experiencing Homelessness.”**

More than 125 practitioners, professionals, researchers, policymakers, and students gathered at UC Berkeley to share and discuss innovative strategies and research emerging today, with sixteen Homeless Innovation Program (HIP) grantees sharing best practices.

The purpose of this report is to offer a window into research highlights and practice-based insights shared on October 27th, as well as consider various paths forward explored by participants in a multigenerational community of practice. In particular, we want to consider the perspectives of young people, who are key to designing insightful and community-driven solutions to the growing crisis of housing insecurity affecting them and their peers.

II. RECENT INNOVATIONS IN POLICY AND PRACTICE

“We are so excited to collaborate in this work because we know that silos exist. You get so involved in the work that you're doing, it's very hard to see over the walls, and yet if you look over the walls, things that you're doing are enhanced by connecting with and collaborating with others who are often close at hand.”

-Jabari Mahiri, Professor, UC Berkeley School of Education

California Department of Education (CDE) Chief Deputy Superintendent Nancy Kim-Portillo opened the event with her own story of experiencing homelessness as a young person and why this critical issue is a priority for CDE. *“It is an honor to be here to discuss something so critical to our State and myself, personally,”* Kim-Portillo shared.

“We are so excited to collaborate in this work because we know that silos exist. You get so involved in the work that you're doing, it's very hard to see over the walls, and yet if you look over the walls, things that you're doing are enhanced by connecting with and collaborating with others who are often close at hand.”

*-Jabari Mahiri,
UC Berkeley School
of Education*



The morning continued with panels and interactive roundtable discussions with “Homeless Innovation Program - HIP” grantees – local leaders funded by CDE to create toolkits detailing their efforts to “improve educational stability, access, support, and academic achievement of children and youth experiencing homelessness.”

Representatives for sixteen out of the twenty funded LEAs were in the room for this convening, sharing best practices and insights on local implementation of MKV requirements. A range of thematic areas emerged throughout these sessions, centered around three core priorities: community engagement, comprehensive wraparound services (e.g., community schools), and housing.

The morning panel, Spotlight on Practice, fostered discussion among six HIP grantees, four of whom centered on building trust, connection, partnership, and collaboration:

- [Building Bridges: Torrance Unified School District](#)
- [SAFE \(Services Affirming Family Empowerment\) System of Care: San Luis Obispo County Office of Education](#)
- [Building Equitable Support through a Tiered System \(BESTS\): Monterey Peninsula Unified School District](#)
- [Strategies for Building Brighter Futures: Cotati-Rohnert Park Unified School District](#)

The remaining two grantees on this panel had a special focus on housing:

- [Stay Over Program \(SOP\) A School-Based Emergency Shelter: San Francisco Unified School District](#)
- [Creating Sustainable Solutions for Homelessness with Tiny Homes: Latitude High School](#)

CDE’s [website](#) offers brief summaries with links to all twenty HIP toolkits.



A. COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

A common refrain across HIP grantees was the importance of listening and trust-building, noting the specific need to overcome barriers of shame and privacy, as well as the often constant fear and stress under which families experiencing homelessness live. Several presenters identified the need for personalized attention, rather than merely offering a general set of services or resources assumed to be helpful.

Nancy Gutierrez, Community Engagement Coordinator of Torrance Unified School District's Homeless Innovative Programs, urged "*starting where [families] are.*" Her district conducted a thorough analysis of what their students and families needed, and their resulting toolkit includes strategies to leverage limited resources through collaboration, innovation, and multi-disciplinary efforts to get the most out of McKinney-Vento Programs.

Identifying allies and mapping out existing local resources, as well as where resources are lacking, is key: "*We wanted to be where parents already go, so it'd be easy to find us. And it's a resource desert,*" explained Jessica Headington, Human Resources Director of Cotati-Rohnert Park Unified School District's partner organization, Child Parent Institute. "*We staffed it with people who were from or lived in that area who had been to those schools, were bilingual, bicultural, and represented the neighborhood.*"

With patience and dedication, being able to deliver on promises and show results allowed LEAs to build trust with families. Headington reported that, once school became a safe place where people felt comfortable, they became trusted members of the community. This also led to students and families encouraging their friends and neighbors to pursue these resources as well, eventually serving the whole district.

B. WRAP-AROUND SUPPORTS AND COMMUNITY SCHOOLS

A second major theme that emerged was the need for coordinated and comprehensive wrap-around services and partnerships, reflective of the best of California's Community School Partnership Program (CCSPP) model.



California state leaders recently invested a historic \$4.1 billion in community schools, launching the CCSPP. Because many HIP grantees also participate in CCSPP, several speakers offered insights on how to “braid and bundle” these resources with MKV services into an integrated framework. The work of these HIP grantees lights a path forward, offering tangible and replicable examples of what this system-level integration can look like in practice.

John Acosta, HIP Coordinator for the San Luis Obispo County Office of Education, called attention to the need for partnership between school districts and counties when systems are too rigid and frustrating for families: He explained this shared vision resulted in the district’s SAFE System of CARE, where all children, adults and families in the county have access to a streamlined system of care tailored to meet their needs and circumstances. His district’s [toolkit](#) offers resources and protocols to tailor SAFE team meetings to the family’s individualized goals and priorities.

Nancy Gutierrez of Torrance Unified School District offered an intergenerational approach, with a focus on mental health services to families. Support for parents led to positive impacts on their children. She also pointed to the importance of sharing this work with decision-makers, particularly at the district level, “because they’re the ones who hold the funding ... if we can’t get our leadership behind us to be able to support these ideas they won’t go anywhere.”

Jessica Headington of Cotati-Rohnert Park Unified School District shared another approach to support McKenney-Vento liaisons with high caseloads and limited resources. *“We braided funding from another workforce development program for community health workers, and we opened that family resource center at John Reed Elementary.”* Headington described how the program leverages the entire community: *“We’re connecting with local businesses. We’re creating that positive feedback loop where workforce development pipelines create pathways to family stability and efficacy.”*

“If we can't get our leadership behind us to be able to support these ideas they won't go anywhere.”

-Nancy Gutierrez,
Parent/Community
Engagement
Coordinator,
Torrance USD

C. HOUSING

“The worlds of housing and education policy are frequently siloed from one another, leaving unhoused students to fall through every crack in our system – these fields must be better aligned.”

- Dr. Deborah McKoy, Executive Director of the Center for Cities and Schools at UC Berkeley, in a recent [UCLA journal](#) article

Two HIP grantees focused their toolkits on housing interventions, tackling the root cause of student homelessness. After building trust with students experiencing homelessness and their families, school social worker Nicholas Chandler of the San Francisco Unified School District found their struggles were straightforward – they needed a safe place to sleep and a pathway to stable housing. In response, his district launched a first-of-its-kind Stay Over Program where the school opened its gymnasium at 7:00 PM every day and allowed any student experiencing homelessness and their family to stay the night.

Chandler explained that they keep the school open 365 days a year so that students in need are surrounded by folks who understand what they're going through, connect them to resources, and help plan next steps. His district's [toolkit](#) assists LEAs to provide a school-based emergency shelter for middle school students and their families leading to the first step towards stable housing.

Chandler recounted that district staff did not like this idea at first, as it put increased risks on them to have to think about housing and homelessness. In response to Board Members concerned “*about having homeless families in our schools*” he responded, “*they're in our buildings. They're here already.*” In the end, SFUSD has had over 1200 families stay in their gymnasium. Even better? Two-thirds of these families moved on to more stable housing.

“The worlds of housing and education policy are frequently siloed from one another, leaving unhoused students to fall through every crack in our system – these fields must be better aligned.”

-Dr. Deborah McKoy, Executive Director of the Center for Cities and Schools at UC Berkeley, in a recent [UCLA journal](#) article



Rather than opening up their facilities as temporary housing, Latitude High School Charter in Oakland focused on building longer-term housing in the form of tiny homes. ***“We had to brainstorm a project that was interesting, to engage the students ... if we're gonna put in this much time and energy, why not make it something that's actually useful?”*** explains Rafael Castro, a physics teacher at Latitude. Every year, he and a group of students build two tiny homes that get donated to a local tiny home village, a project his students have found to be authentic and meaningful.



Their district's resulting [toolkit](#) is full of realistic and practical resources and step-by-step curriculum guides to empower LEAs and arm them with the knowledge and tools to build tiny house villages that provide shelter and community for youth experiencing homelessness.



While both of these innovative examples are inspiring, it is also true that even with these detailed toolkits other districts may face some resistance to replicating these models. Another innovative strategy comes from Monterey Peninsula Unified School District (MPUSD), which has established a unique agreement with a local motel (Motel 6) to provide short-term housing for MPUSD students and families experiencing homelessness. They also provide a rental assistance program to help families with funds to pay for the first and last months of rent and deposit. In addition, MPUSD is working on a safe parking program at Monterey Adult School in Seaside so families who live in their cars can park there overnight. All of these innovative programs are greatly needed as MPUSD faces one of the largest homeless student populations, estimated at 22% of all students (2,087 of 9,295 in 2021).



III. A DEEPER DIVE INTO THE DATA

A. QUALITATIVE IMPACT: LIVED EXPERTISE OF STUDENTS

"I believe that we should start referring to young people who come and share their stories with us as young people with lived expertise over lived experience."

- Susie Terry, McKinney-Vento Liaison for the San Diego County Office of Education

A major highlight of the convening was a fireside chat featuring seven youth speakers with lived experience of homelessness, moderated by Pixie Popplewell, Project Director of the California Homeless Youth Project. The panel opened with these youth sharing their recent accomplishments, with celebrations of school success and college scholarships, making change in their communities, and building safe spaces for their peers. One student emphasized that their greatest accomplishment is ***"just being here right now...there are some who don't get to make it this point, who aren't here with us today."***

When asked about resources, services, or people who have been supportive in their journey, the speakers identified specific policies and programs, such as free school lunches, mentorship with Give Something Back, social bonds formed in the Youth Ambassadors, and empowerment through Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR). One student remarked that ***"the saving grace for me, at least in my life trajectory, was the teachers that I felt comfortable confiding in, who allowed me to grow in my own space."***

The youth speakers went on to identify barriers to getting support, with some naming conflict within biological families followed by struggles in the foster system and others pointing to financial hardship leading to housing insecurity. Some students also cited a lack of supervision and support from parents forced to take on multiple jobs, struggling with substance abuse, or being stuck in another country due to migration issues.

Several students identified a lack of information and access to resources as their central barrier, underscoring the importance of staff training.

*"I believe that we should start referring to young people who come and share their stories with us as young people with ***lived expertise*** over lived experience."*

-Susie Terry,
McKinney-Vento
Liaison for the San
Diego County
Office of
Education



“Had my teachers known from the start what McKinney-Vento was or what the Ed definition for homelessness was, I could've had access to resources so much sooner than two weeks before my 18th birthday.”

- Youth Panelist

A major theme of the panel was lack of agency for youth: *“Now 18 to 24 is [designated] as a “youth”, but if you're under 18, your rights don't belong with you.”* One speaker went on to name one of the biggest barriers to youth advocates *“is being told, ‘Oh, well that's a great idea, but we'll get to that another time’...it's the minimization of our imagination.”*

Starting with the opening speaker, Nancy Kim-Portillo, Chief Deputy Superintendent of CDE, some speakers and participants offered reflections on their own lived experiences throughout the day, which echoed many of these same themes.

“Growing up, my research was to find out which was the last bus that was going on San Pablo Road all the way to Richmond. And getting there after midnight ... the only day that I had it off was to find out the cheapest stores that we could find so we could buy some groceries. And then I, 'cause I was the adult, I was 18 years old, I literally had a paper and pencil with me and I would just go like, okay, the bananas, 25 cents, and then go to a different store, 21 cents ... I knew every Goodwill store [and] which days they were getting supplies. I was just on time.”

- Hamed Razawi, Education Administrator for the California Department of Education Community Schools Office

B. QUANTITATIVE IMPACT: PRESENT LANDSCAPE OF POLICY & DATA

i. DEFINITIONS AND MISSING DATA

The youth went on to identify three core challenges, including differing definitions of homelessness among federal policies, student identification, and nuances within these populations:

- **Differing Definitions of Homelessness**

McKinney-Vento considers any child or youth who lacks fixed and adequate nighttime residence as homeless and thus eligible for its guaranteed support and services.

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-Hamed Razawi,
Education
Administrator for the
California
Department of
Education
Community Schools
Office

This definition includes students who live in hotels or motels or who may live “doubled-up” with others due to financial hardship. In California, approximately 85% of students who qualified for McKinney-Vento services during the 2019-2020 school year lived in doubled-up situations and 5.2% lived in hotels or motels (National Center for Homeless Education, 2022).

The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), however, does not classify any of these groups as homeless, leaving over 80% of California’s students experiencing homelessness ineligible for HUD services. **These differing definitions make it difficult to identify students experiencing homelessness and connect them to community resources – making adequate funding and training for school-based staff critical.**

Cultural and media representations of homelessness also play a key role, as noted by one of the youth speakers:

“I ended up couch surfing...but I didn’t know that I was homeless because I still had a roof over my head, right? Even if it was only for like a day or two, I wasn’t on the street. I wasn’t under a tunnel. I wasn’t that normal picture of what homelessness is depicted in our society.”
- Youth Panelist

- **Student Identification Challenges**

MKV legislation relies on liaisons to individually identify, enroll, and support all students experiencing homelessness within their district while supplying less than an average of \$57 of federal funds per student for the entire program via the US Department of Education. The under-resourced nature of MKV implementation, often resting on a single staff member whose time is often split with non-MKV duties, inevitably leads to incomplete or imperfect data on this vulnerable population (Piazza & Hyatt, 2019). If students experiencing homelessness are not identified, they may miss out on the rights to which they are entitled under MKV and the support they need to help them achieve their educational potential.

“I ended up couch surfing...but I didn’t know that I was homeless because I still had a roof over my head, right? Even if it was only for like a day or two, I wasn’t on the street. I wasn’t under a tunnel. I wasn’t that normal picture of what homelessness is depicted in our society.”

- Youth Panelist

As Dion Burns, a Senior Researcher at Learning Policy Institute, noted, ***“We know that we don't identify all students who are experiencing homelessness ... For example, studies using the Youth Behavioral Risk Survey data find that among high school students, we may miss between one and two thirds of our students experiencing homelessness.”***

Mallory Logan, Social Studies Teacher at Oakland High School, offered her perspective as an educator – who often takes on a crucial, though informal, role in student identification: *“Most of the time we have no idea who is experiencing this in our classroom unless they reach out to us.”*

Victor Diaz, an Oakland High School graduate and current freshman at UC Berkeley, shared findings of the 2022 Y-PLAN (Youth - Plan, Learn, Act Now) research project he participated in, focused on student homelessness at his school: *“We also learned that our peers like to remain anonymous ... There is tremendous shame felt by students experiencing homelessness.”* (Matthews, A., Reconoco, E., & Diaz, V., 2023)

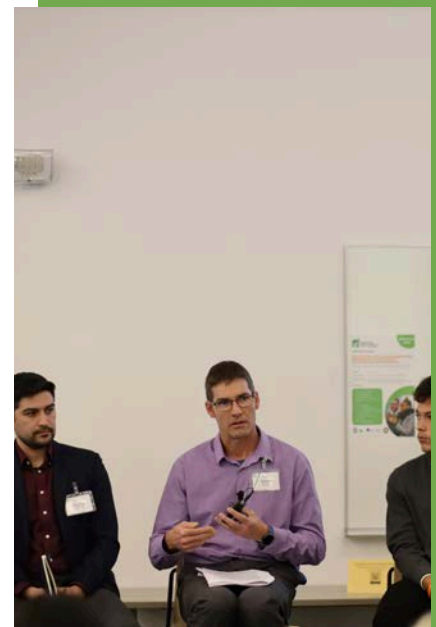
It should come as no surprise, then, that despite record levels of housing insecurity in the 2020-2021 school year, approximately 180,000 fewer students were enrolled in McKinney-Vento programming nationwide than in the previous year (Espinoza et al., 2023). This sharp decrease likely reflects the added difficulty faced by already over-worked and under-resourced liaisons to identify and support students experiencing homelessness in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, rather than an actual decline in homelessness.

Undercounting MKV-eligible students not only harms these youth directly, it perpetuates the under-resourced system that missed them in the first place. As Dr. Auerswald highlighted, *“If there's an appropriation bill or someone wants to figure out how to appropriate money for these young people, they'll go and look at the numbers, the official federal numbers, and they'll find there's no one who needs the money.”*

Political pressures frequently compound these challenges. There is little incentive for municipal and county elected officials to show an increase in homelessness to their constituents and residents. As a speaker shared, this likely leads to a significant undercount.

“We know that we don't identify all students who are experiencing homelessness ... For example, studies using the Youth Behavioral Risk Survey data find that among high school students, we may miss between one and two-thirds of our students experiencing homelessness.”

-Dion Burns,
Senior Researcher,
Learning Policy
Institute



- **Nuances within these Populations**

While an accurate count is crucial, this number alone offers only a vague shape rather than a detailed snapshot of youth experiencing homelessness or housing instability. To understand the full scope of the crisis and address its underlying causes, researchers also need accurate data on the nuances within this population related to both their demographics and circumstances. Speakers described the inclusiveness of data in the HUD system as “*extremely poor*,” explaining that “*youth of color, youth who are couch surfing, immigrant youth, LGBTQ youth tend to get left out of those systems.*”

Lacking this range of background information inhibits our ability to understand the root causes of youth homelessness. Dion Burns, a Senior Researcher at Learning Policy Institute named “*lack of housing affordability and availability [as] key economic drivers*,” while also emphasizing that “*there is no one single pathway to homelessness.*” He went on to cite a recent study that found the precipitating instance of homelessness among adults could be anything from a change in income or employment, change in housing cost, or social reasons such as family/household conflict, addiction issues or illness (Kushel et al., 2023).

Not accounting for these differences inevitably leads to a misunderstanding – and likely a dramatic underestimation – of the problem. Victor Diaz, the Oakland High School graduate, explained that his Y-PLAN team found “*nearly half of our peers have directly experienced housing instability or at least know someone who has.*” Another student leader shared that there is not enough research on unaccompanied minors, especially since it is a growing population in great need of attention. *This again points to the need to recognize how diverse this student population is and calls for more holistic and targeted support response systems.*

ii. KEY INSIGHTS FROM EMERGING RESEARCH

The afternoon portion of the convening shined a “Spotlight on Research,” to explore the emerging work seeking to bridge these gaps in our data. An especially exciting new set of data came from researchers at the California Department of Education (CDE), who set out to improve efforts to identify and collect data on youth experiencing homelessness in the state.



“Nearly half of our peers have directly experienced housing instability or at least know someone who has.”

-Victor Diaz,
Oakland High
School Student
Researcher

As described by Sarajeon Zocklein, Homeless Youth Data Steward in the Analysis, Measurement and Accountability, Reporting Division for CDE, their newly-released report explores dwelling data, including “where students are sleeping at night, whether they were in a hotel or motel, whether they were doubled up or unaccompanied youth.” This comprehensive data will allow researchers to “drill down statewide” to target where support is needed.

- **Effect of Homelessness on Students**

Many studies have shown that youth homelessness is associated with adverse academic outcomes (Burns et al., 2021). There is now data showing these effects have worsened in the last few years, as chronic absenteeism for both students experiencing homelessness and their peers increased significantly from 2018 to the present (California Department of Education, 2023c). ***“This isn’t unique to California,”*** noted Zocklein. ***“We are seeing this across the nation, the chronic absenteeism rate being quite a bit higher for our homeless population.”***

While homelessness greatly increases youth’s risk of dropping out of school, Barbara Duffield, Executive Director of SchoolHouse Connection, noted that this becomes a vicious circle later in life, when *“lack of a high school degree or GED is the single greatest risk factor associated with homelessness as a young adult.”*

This also seems to be the case for another risk factor for adult homelessness that can manifest in housing instability as a youth: increased drug use. Dr. Auerswald cited her research, which found that 11% of all youth experiencing homelessness (regardless of enrollment status) who were not injecting drugs at the time started injecting drugs within six months of homelessness. Dr. Auerswald emphasized, *“This is really shocking because less than half a percent of our country have ever injected drugs even once.”* She shared that ***“the hopeful thing that we found, however, was that the sole protective factor, the one vaccine, was having had any high school education. Not even a high school diploma – if they had attended high school at all, their risk of an issue of drug use was 92% lower.”***



“This isn’t unique to California. We are seeing this across the nation, the chronic absenteeism rate being quite a bit higher for our homeless population.”

-Sarajeon Zocklein, Homeless Youth Data Steward, California Department of Education

- **Funding Today**

Researchers next mapped out the financial state of McKinney-Vento (MKV) programming, noting both the increased reach achieved with the federal ARP investments rolled out in 2022, but also highlighting the need for sustainable funding as these dollars end in 2024. Barbara Duffield, Executive Director of SchoolHouse Connection highlighted that ***“while it's true that ARP-HCY support represents less than 2% of overall [ARP] education funding, it is still more funding in a single allocation than the previous 10 years of federal homeless education funding combined ... ARP funds increased the reach of dedicated funding for homeless students from 6.2% of local educational agencies in California to 62%.”***

Dr. Coco Auerswald underscored ***“the fact that every dollar we spend towards ending youth homelessness comes back sevenfold. Our community gets \$7 for every dollar we spend toward youth homelessness, so we will make money.”*** (Belfield et al., 2012). Hamed Razawi, Education Administrator, Community Schools Office, Career and College Transition Division at CDE added that the \$4.1 billion state dollars invested in community schools also help by sustaining and deepening the current investments at each school site through community school comprehensive services.

The importance of sustainable funding was underscored by Daniel Espinoza, Researcher and Policy Advisor at the Learning Policy Institute, warned against ***“just dump[ing] money on [MKV] liaisons”*** who are already overwhelmed. Instead, he suggested that hiring additional staff has to be part of the conversation around funding. Adding her perspective as McKinney-Vento Liaison for the San Diego County Office of Education, Susie Terry reminded the panel that ***“we're all facing a cliff of funding that's gonna drop off in September of 2024. And then a lot of the stuff we're hearing about isn't going to be as possible, unless we also think about sustainable ways to get that done.”***

- **Potential Paths Forward**

The session closed with researchers offering specific ideas for improving outcomes for youth experiencing homelessness. Because lower educational attainment can be both a consequence of homelessness and a risk factor for future homelessness, multiple speakers highlighted education’s central role in disrupting the cycle. (Kull et. al, 2019)

“Every dollar we spend towards ending youth homelessness comes back sevenfold. Our community gets \$7 for every dollar we spend toward youth homelessness, so we will make money.”

-Dr. Collette “Coco” Auerswald, Pediatrician, UC Berkeley Professor, and Co-Director of i4Y (Innovations for Youth)



Dr. Coco Auerswald noted that, despite their struggles, the vast majority of youth experiencing homelessness were eager for additional schooling: *“Only 6% of these young people were happy with a GED or high school diploma. 14% wanted to get an associate's degree, 36% on a bachelor's degree 23% or master's degree, and 7% wanted a PhD.”* (Auerswald, 2023)

Barbara Duffield, Executive Director of SchoolHouse Connection, implored school officials to intervene early and urgently to help combat chronic absenteeism: *“so if a student has missed a couple of days just in the first month of school ... step in and intervene with supports and services specifically for our homeless population.”* Dion Burns, Senior Researcher at the Learning Policy Institute, also stressed that housing instability can lead to changing schools, disrupting supportive relationships, including those with fellow students and educators, as well as access to services.

Victor, the student who participated in the Y-PLAN research project at Oakland High, again emphasized that students themselves should be encouraged to participate in research and policy change: *“Young people in Oakland are scared. If they are not homeless now, they and their families often face housing instability, living at the edge of homelessness.”* He emphasized that engaging youth in Participatory Action Research (YPAR) honors their experience and trains them to work towards solutions to solve that problem.

It is clear that our schools hold the key to improved outcomes for students experiencing homelessness. However, to unlock their full potential, education leaders must first build alignment among all levels of schooling, commit to new and sustained funding streams, build effective MKV service models into systems at every school and district in our state, and empower our students to participate meaningfully in this transformation. These proposed paths forward are explored in more detail in the following section.



“Young people in Oakland are scared. If they are not homeless now, they and their families often face housing instability, living at the edge of homelessness.”

-Victor Diaz,
Oakland High
School Student
Researcher

IV. CALL TO ACTION

As September 30, 2024, marks the end to three years of unprecedented funding under the federal American Rescue Plan, we must build together across educational systems to sustain the change and systematize our lessons for the decades to come. This October 2023 convening brought together California’s homeless education policymakers, educators, liaisons, administrators, and youth to share their research, learn from one another’s experience, and contemplate paths forward.

While the 2023 gathering was crucial to advance our shared understanding, as one 21CSLA leader remarked, “just sharing toolkits and data points” alone is not enough. We need state and local education leaders to enact systematic reforms to tackle student homelessness and provide our districts and schools with the resources and personnel to carry out long-term policy change.

Emerging from the convening were four themes for systemic improvement that would enhance the supports available to students experiencing homelessness: building alignment within education, new and sustainable funding streams, moving from models to systems, and engaging youth in policy and practice. Each of these is discussed below.

A. BREAKING THE ISOLATION AND BUILDING ALIGNMENT WITH EDUCATION

While Congress enacted MKV in 1987, the legislation’s guarantees remain under-resourced – and thus under-recognized – at schools across the country. This disconnect was noted most poignantly by one of the youth leaders, sharing that they weren’t identified until their senior year of high school: *“All the teachers I told a little piece to, if they knew what the McKinney-Vento Act was, maybe I could have gotten help sooner.”*

As articulated by Trish Anderson, MKV Liaison for Oakland Unified School District, there is a need to extend homeless education work beyond the district level to support on-the-ground efforts at local school sites as well.

Call to Action:

1. Breaking the Isolation and Building Systems Alignment with Education
2. Creating New and Sustained Funding Streams
3. Making Models into Systems
4. Engaging Youth in Policy and Practice

Federal legislation only mandates one homeless education office per district, regardless of the population or magnitude of the problem. Particularly in large districts serving multiple schools, it is difficult for a single liaison to identify students experiencing homelessness and check in with their families from centralized district offices rather than interact regularly with clients locally at the school site.

The broader need for understanding and alignment beyond the school and district level is reflected in UCB [21CSLA](#)'s support and collaboration in organizing this convening. The 21CSLA works in partnership with CDE, California Collaborative for Educational Excellence (CCEE), State Board of Education (SBE), California Subject Matter Projects (CSMP), and Regional Academies to “develop a robust, equity-forward approach to expand the capacity of California leaders at all levels.”

Attracting participants from all levels of education across the state, this convening was a crucial first step for the mainstream professional education community to take greater ownership of students experiencing homelessness – who are so often isolated, marginalized, and rendered “invisible.”

- **Creating New and Sustained Funding Streams**

Trish Anderson also pinpointed the need for more organized advocacy efforts on behalf of students experiencing homelessness, citing the “*huge advocacy network*” behind foster youth as a model. While state policies toward foster youth and the system itself are far from perfect, Anderson suggested that a coordinated and consistent advocacy presence has fueled significant growth in funding, programs, and development of a robust statewide infrastructure with shared data and coordinated school response systems.

After \$98 million in federal support for homeless education in the American Rescue Plan expires in September 2024, California schools will go from an average of nearly \$400 in dedicated funding for each student experiencing homelessness to less than \$57. Recognizing this looming deadline, community school leaders and homeless education advocates need to raise their voices. Together, we must call on the state to match – if not go beyond – current federal funding levels and build dedicated support for these students now and into the future.

This convening was a crucial first step for the mainstream professional education community to take greater ownership of students experiencing homelessness – who are so often isolated, marginalized, and rendered “invisible.”

- **Making Models into Systems**

To carry the momentum of this convening forward, we must put these findings and insights to work, as blueprints for transforming models into systems. Participants widely agreed there should be one definition of homelessness across state and federal programs. In addition, the real-world best practices outlined by Homeless Innovation Program (HIP) grantees offer discrete and workable prototypes that could be implemented as systemic reforms across schools statewide – particularly those offering robust systematic practices for identifying students experiencing homelessness.

At the close of the youth panel, student leaders recommended their own ideas for systems shifts to prevent and end youth homelessness, starting with better education and efforts to destigmatize homelessness. One speaker noted the “importance of educator training and things like trauma-informed practices, restorative practices,” while another suggested “investing in outreach resources for hard-to-reach populations” like youth experiencing homelessness.

Several students offered concrete innovations to explore, including guaranteed income for parents with kids and more targeted and subsidized housing options for youth. One speaker explored the idea of a Youth Bill of Rights that would guarantee certain protections and resources to those under 18, regardless of housing status.

- **Engaging Youth in Policy and Practice**

“I’m going to ask you to keep in mind what we heard from young people...as we’re thinking about what our next steps are in light of the innovative programs and research that’s been presented.”

- Susie Terry, McKinney-Vento Liaison for the San Diego County Office of Education

As California education leaders contemplate new funding streams and consider systematizing best practices to support students experiencing homelessness, our state also has an opportunity to harness the tremendous capacity of adolescents by reimagining their role throughout our educational and civic systems.

“I’m going to ask you to keep in mind what we heard from young people...as we’re thinking about what our next steps are in light of the innovative programs and research that’s been presented.”

*-Susie Terry,
McKinney-Vento
Liaison for the San
Diego County
Office of
Education*

Structural support for students experiencing homelessness can and should involve young people themselves – both those facing housing insecurity as well as their peers. Youth perspectives are not only key to understanding this complex and growing crisis of housing insecurity but also to designing insightful and community-driven solutions.

The Center for Cities and Schools' twenty years of youth-led action research initiative, Y-PLAN (Youth - Plan, Learn, Act Now), offers another structure for student leadership, as detailed in *Engaging Young People and Schools in City Planning: Forging Justice-Generating Joy* (McKoy, Eppley and Buss 2022).

A group of Y-PLAN students working to address student homelessness at Oakland High School recently authored an [article](#) in a UCLA journal detailing their experience and the solutions they offered which were taken up by the district: *"This project allowed us to go beyond our textbooks to understand an issue plaguing our community. We were trusted as youth leaders with opportunities to affect real change—and we did. One month after our presentations, the district hired three new case managers and immediately scaled up resources for unhoused students."*

As demonstrated by the many brilliant youth leaders who presented at this convening, those closest to the problem of student homelessness deserve to be active participants in seeking solutions at every level. In addition to providing valuable real-world experience to support college and career readiness, opportunities for true youth leadership would strengthen MKV resources within schools and create another layer of accountability and peer support for students experiencing homelessness. After all, who better to forge our path to a more just and joyful world than the generations who stand to inherit it?

On September 27, 2024, California Homeless Education Technical Assistance Centers (HETACs), the 21st Century School Leadership Academy (21CSLA), and the Center for Cities + Schools will host a second convening at UC Berkeley, "Catalyzing Action Exchange," to reflect on all that has been accomplished, build together across educational systems, and set the course to sustain the change and systematize our lessons into 2025 and the decades to come.



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