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Opinion: How California can give unhoused students a helping hand

Y-PLAN's success shows what is possible when we entrust young people to lead



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The holiday season invites us to pause and appreciate our daily lives — the people at our side, the food on our tables, the roofs over our heads — and offer a helping hand to those who lack these comforts. When it comes to our growing homelessness crisis, those struggling most may be much younger than we imagine.

The number of unhoused K-12 students in California has jumped 48% in ten years, with more than 244,000 identified in 2019-2020. On top of higher absenteeism and suspension rates, housing insecurity is a primary factor in unhoused youth dropping out entirely.

Fortunately, state leaders already have the funds and tools to address this crisis head-on. They just need to ensure that unhoused students get a slice of the pie.

The federal McKinney-Vento Act of 1987 guarantees certain rights and services to unhoused students so they can enroll, attend, participate fully and succeed in school. Yet inadequate state and federal support has made it difficult to staff programs that serve students and their families.

As Oakland Unified School District's homeless student liaison and academic researcher at UC Berkeley, we have experienced this strain on services firsthand. When a family needs a place to stay or a crib for their newborn, often our best bet is a frantic text to friends and colleagues. Yet for long-term solutions to student

homelessness, our most powerful and underused tools are the perspective and insights of students themselves.

While adults frequently run from crisis to crisis, young people take a preventive, public health approach. Youth also brings a renewed sense of urgency to pressing public policy decisions. Four years may seem like a short time to measure progress — less so when they span your freshman to senior years.

Between 2020-2022, we partnered with more than 100 11th-grade Oakland High students to improve their district's program for unhoused students using an award-winning civic engagement model, Y-PLAN (Youth – Plan, Learn, Act Now). Working alongside local leaders, students surveyed their teachers and peers to identify central challenges. Rather than short-term services such as transportation assistance, youth identified a need for the district to deepen relationships so students feel comfortable self-identifying as unhoused and accepting help.

As a team of one liaison tasked with serving every unhoused student in a large school district, the creative and passionate advocacy of Y-PLAN students was invaluable. Though slightly under half had personally experienced homelessness or knew someone who had, they built policy ideas from shared experiences of vulnerability and hard-earned local knowledge. One month after these students presented final recommendations to key leaders, the district hired three new case managers and immediately scaled up resources.

Amid efforts to restructure educational systems in support of linked learning and community schools, Y-PLAN's success shows what is possible when we entrust young people to lead: We can bring applied learning into the classroom, expand career pathways for youth, and dramatically improve conditions for our most vulnerable.

California's historic \$4 billion investment in community schools presents a rare opportunity to build out resources crucial to the success and well-being of unhoused students. Though a limited funding stream, we can greatly expand support services by dedicating even a small percentage to the growing student homelessness crisis — and mobilize our youth as powerful problem solvers and agents of change statewide at the same time.

In the spirit of the holidays, state leaders must ensure unhoused students get their share before anyone else goes in for seconds. While housing insecurity will not

disappear overnight, we can support young people to build a future where there is more than enough to go around.

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