

Forging New Pathways: Mobilizing Youth as Agents of Change in California's Homeless Education Policy



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Executive Summary

Through the work of Y-PLAN (Youth - Plan, Learn, Act, Now) youth-led action research, the UC Berkeley Center for Cities + Schools (CC+S) has focused its research on youth experiencing homelessness in California public schools. This research analyzed the McKinney-Vento Act from system-wide implementation perspectives, as well as direct, lived experiences of young people, highlighting three core challenges:

- (1) Insufficient funding at both the state and federal levels, leading to inadequate implementation, under-identification, and insufficient services for unhoused students.
- (2) Poorly coordinated systems at local or regional levels to align policies and resources; and
- (3) Lack of engagement of one of the greatest stakeholders in this policy area: the students themselves

This white paper presents a case study of Y-PLAN work at Oakland High School that engaged students within the Law and Social Justice Career Pathway directly in the policy-making process to improve the district program for unhoused students. More than 100 students researched and proposed actionable policy solutions to support unhoused peers, which centered on basic needs and career development centers, academic programming assistance, and financial literacy and independence. This white paper makes the case for local educational agencies (LEAs) to harness the state's \$3 billion investment in community schools and other significant educational investments in career pathways to mobilize youth as agents of change and improve McKinney-Vento implementation in the midst of a growing student homelessness crisis.



Y-PLAN at Conference in Austin, Texas. 2022.

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II. Background & Challenges

Student homelessness is a growing crisis in California. During the 2019-2020 school year, more than 244,000 students were identified as homeless throughout the state – a 48% increase over the previous decade (California Department of Education, 2022a; U.S. Department of Education, 2018; Bishop et al. 2020). Recent challenges of distance learning in the COVID 19 Pandemic make it harder for already under-resourced schools to identify unhoused students, let alone provide the services guaranteed to them under federal McKinney-Vento legislation. Despite record levels of housing insecurity, 300,000 fewer students were officially enrolled in McKinney-Vento programming nationwide in the 2020-2021 school year (Burns et al 2021). “It is likely this decrease reflects challenges that districts have had identifying and engaging these students, rather than an actual decline in homelessness” (Burns et al pg V).



Rachael Allamby and her son, Naseem, 10, spend nearly two hours getting to his Oakland elementary school, much of it on BART. The fares cost her nearly \$400 a month. Credit Lee Romney; KALW Public Media. Published September 13, 2017.

Students experiencing homelessness have higher chronic absenteeism and suspension rates than their peers and are significantly less likely to graduate (California Department of Education, 2022a). In addition to being more likely to be English Language Learners and eligible for special education services, 7% of African American students, 6% of Native American or Alaskan students, and 6% of Pacific Islanders students in California were identified as unhoused in 2018-19 (Burns et al V). In a comprehensive survey of unhoused youth, the California Research Bureau found the primary reasons respondents dropped out of school were associated with homelessness. A great majority of respondents said they would return to school if they could (Berstein & Foster, 2008).

The McKinney-Vento Act of 1987 guarantees certain rights and services to ensure unhoused students are able to enroll, attend, participate fully and succeed in school. However, school districts face substantial hurdles to its full implementation, such as:

- **Historic inadequate levels of funding at both the state and federal level.** While California receives over \$10 million annually in federal funding to support McKinney-Vento, this is the only funding stream explicitly dedicated to this legislation state-wide. These limited funds do not reach the majority of unhoused students, as the California Department of Education only awards McKinney-Vento subgrants to a small percentage of the many local educational agencies (LEAs) throughout the state. One study found federal funds only touched 36% of students experiencing homelessness (Bishop et al., 2020).

- **No dedicated state funding stream for unhoused students.** Under California's Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF), LEAs receive funding based on total student enrollment. Agencies may receive supplemental and concentration grants based on the number of enrolled students designated as English Language Learners, foster youth, or low-income. Unhoused students are considered low-income (and may also fall in either of the other categories) but **are not a distinguished category with a dedicated funding stream.** Because LCFF does not allow for duplications, a student who is designated as both low-income and a foster youth will only be counted once, even if being unhoused greatly increases their financial need (California Department of Education, 2022b).

- **Inadequate funding results in under-resourced homeless liaisons.** The McKinney-Vento Act requires all LEAs to designate one homeless liaison to identify unhoused students, train school-based staff, and provide services to unhoused students. Due to insufficient funding, homeless liaisons often have other primary duties and are unable to fulfill their responsibilities under McKinney-Vento. Two-thirds of homeless liaisons surveyed by the ACLU and California Homeless Youth Project reported spending fewer than five hours a week on these duties. They further reported being unable to effectively train school staff, which leads to under-identification of students experiencing homelessness (Piazza & Hyatt, 2019).

- **Differing federal definitions of homelessness fuel confusion and under-identification.** Under McKinney-Vento, homelessness applies to any child or youth who lacks fixed and adequate nighttime residence. 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, so over 90% of California's unhoused students are ineligible for HUD services. These differing federal definitions make it difficult to identify students experiencing homelessness and connect them to community resources – making adequate funding and training for school-based staff all the more critical.

III. Youth-led Solutions

California’s historic \$3 billion investment in community schools in 2022, along with unprecedented levels of one-time federal funds for McKinney-Vento programming from the American Rescue Plan (ARP), present a rare opportunity to build out resources we know are crucial to the success and well-being of unhoused students. These state funds represent a seven-year investment that can greatly expand the reach of McKinney-Vento services and the capacity of LEAs to implement them by dedicating even a small percentage to this growing crisis. **This moment also presents an opportunity for our state to harness the tremendous capacity of adolescents by reimagining their role throughout our educational and civic systems.** As we emerge from this global crisis, we must allow those closest to the problem of student homelessness be active participants in seeking solutions.

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. Y-PLAN (Youth - Plan, Learn, Act Now) is an award-winning, civic learning strategy developed by UC Berkeley’s Center for Cities + Schools (CC+S). For the past two years, CC+S has worked in partnership with one of its leading Y-PLAN school teams in Oakland to focus their collaborative research on youth experiencing homelessness in public schools.



Oakland High School Students Preparing Poster Boards. Credit: Y-PLAN.

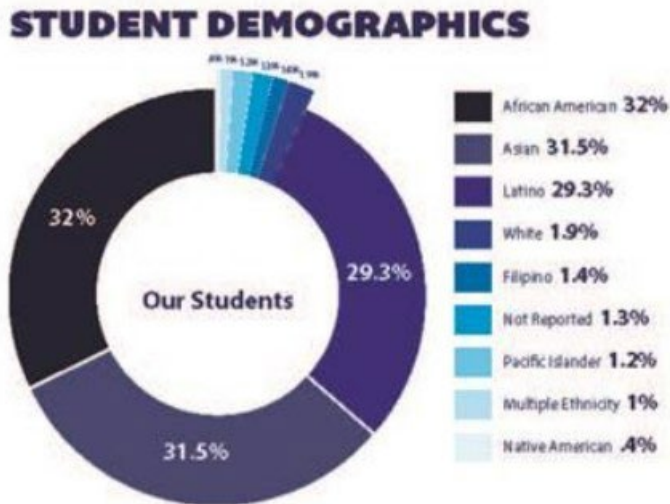
Research shows that when youth collaborate with adults in meaningful decision making, it not only promotes their social-emotional and academic development but also their civic and community engagement (Shah et al., 2018). For over twenty years, we at CC+S have invited young people into public policy and city planning, providing them with the tools and platform needed to tackle real-world challenges in their communities. The power and reach of this methodology were recently detailed in a book, *Engaging Young People and Schools in City Planning: Forging Justice-Generating Joy* (McKoy, Eppley and Buss 2022).

Amid state and national efforts to restructure educational systems in support of career pathways and community schools – including a \$700 million investment in K-12 career pathway development – we can mobilize youth as powerful problem-solvers and agents of change. Y-PLAN’s proven model demonstrates what is possible when we entrust young people to lead; we can bring applied learning into the classroom, expand opportunities and career pathways for youth, and reimagine the future of our cities and state.

Below, we examine a case study of how Oakland Unified School District (OUSD) leveraged its Linked Learning Law and Social Justice pathway to allow students to actively participate in policy making to better support students experiencing homelessness. This white paper will demonstrate how engaging students in meaningful policy research and development can change the trajectories of young people’s lives, as well as the material realities of unhoused youth in our schools and communities.

IV. Case Study: Oakland High School

Oakland High School (also known as O-High) is a highly diverse public high school in Oakland, California. Out of 1,800 students, 32% are African American/Black; 31.5% are Asian, including students of Chinese, Vietnamese, Cambodian, Filipino, Mien, and Laotian descent; 29% of students are Latino or Hispanic; 1.9% are white; and 1% are of two or more ethnicities.



Student Demographics. Credit: Oakland High School (2016-2017 Academic School Year)

Like many schools across California, Oakland High School offers specialized College and Career Pathways that prepare students for success in college, career, and community. The Law & Social Justice (LSJ) pathway – one of five offered – informs and prepares students for careers in law, social work, community organizations, and education with a focus on social justice and current events. Through experiential learning opportunities, exposure to a variety of careers, and structured academic support, students become active participants in advocating for positive social change in their communities.

Y-PLAN (2020-2022)

From 2020 to 2022, OUSD identified an annual average of more than 1,100 unhoused or unaccompanied youth in need of housing services and support from local institutions. Of the unhoused students, 64% of those were Newcomers, which are defined as or students who have been in the U.S. for less than 3 years and speak a language other than English at home. Of the non-Newcomers, more than half of the unhoused students were Black, reflecting national demographic patterns. District leaders and the McKinney Vento Liaison asked students engaged in this project to make recommendations for how to better meet the needs of these students.

Following the Y-PLAN five-step research and action methodology, over 100 LSJ students worked directly with policy leaders in the school district and city of Oakland.



Step One: Start Up



The main Y-PLAN project client for the Law and Social Justice Pathway students at Oakland High, McKinney Vento Liaison Trish Anderson, posed a set of key questions to the student researchers:

Overall, how can we best improve the support & outcomes for unhoused youth in OUSD?
Specifically,

- What are academic solutions to increase college readiness?
- How can we create career opportunities and greater access to transportation networks?
- How can we increase financial literacy and independence for students and families?
- How can we support basic needs through youth-development centers?

Each year, all 11th grade pathways engaged in this Y-PLAN project, act as “consultants for change.” After breaking into small groups and getting to know each other’s strengths, the students formed a community of practice, working with their client and other community partners for six weeks to research the issue and explore opportunities for change.

Step Two: Making Sense of the City



Step Two: Making Sense of the City of Y-PLAN's 5-Step Methodology. Source: Y-PLAN

The second step in the Y-PLAN action research methodology is to conduct research through community mapping, interviews, and neighborhood analysis. The student teams examined OUSD’s McKinney-Vento student data, news articles, and interviewed the OUSD McKinney-Vento liaison to learn more issues impacting their unhoused peers. To better understand the roots driving the current homeless situation in Oakland, students also gathered primary and secondary source data and surveyed local youth and their families to identify barriers to stable and affordable housing. They found that rising costs of housing, displacement, and years of gentrification profoundly impacted housing stability for Oakland youth.

To better understand the experiences, needs, and key issues facing their unhoused peers, the Y-PLAN students designed and conducted an extensive survey of **177 OUSD students and 18 OUSD teachers** in Spring 2022. **Key insights included:**

- 40.1% of student responders either experienced or know someone who has experienced staying with other people due to housing instability
- 84.7% of student responders are unaware of the McKinney-Vento Law or its available resources
- 67.6% of students don’t know of any program or services for unhoused youth
- 88.9% of teacher responders have never received training on how to support students experiencing homelessness



Sol Messeguer who works with Fighting Back Santa Maria, a non-profit agency that provides services to homeless youth and families in Santa Maria. Credit: Iris Schneider; EdSource. October 2020.

After mapping, interviewing, and conducting site visits to different community programs and sites seeking to support unhoused youth, such as the Oakland Tiny Home Village, students analyzed their data and identified the following as central challenges facing unhoused students:

1. Lack of Mental Health Resources

- Unhoused students have a higher probability of developing mental health disorders stemming from financial and housing instability
- **46%** of unhoused students suffer from chronic health problems; **45%** of them have psychiatric or emotional conditions, including depression, addictions, and anxiety; and **36%** have PTSD

2. Housing Instability & Lack of Basic Needs

- Food and housing instability can lead to harsh living and learning conditions. Lack of personal space, hygiene, and support services can also lead to absenteeism and difficulty forming connections with teachers and peers
- Approximately **37.2%** of unhoused youth drop out of high school (with only **13.4%** were A-G ready)

3. Lack of financial literacy and independence

- Many families have low wage employment, often minimum wage
- High costs of living and rent make it difficult for families to save money, and many are unaware of how to prioritize expenses and budgeting



Trish Anderson, McKinney-Vento Liaison. Credit: The Rotary Club of Oakland

The Y-PLAN civic client Trish Anderson proudly stated how that **“Students noted many of the same structural challenges to the district’s full implementation of McKinney-Vento that were identified in research studies and policy briefs”** as referenced above: difficulty identifying and tracking unhoused students, insufficient training and resources for teachers and staff, and unstable financial support for these programs from the California Department of Education. The students’ survey also revealed that a majority of unhoused students surveyed prefer to stay anonymous.

Step Three: Into Action



Step Three: Into Action of Y-PLAN’s 5-Step Methodology. Source: Y-PLAN

In this third phase, student teams begin to brainstorm solutions based on the data collected. They learn about real-world models to address the needs of unhoused people and their families, study best practices, and develop a plan of action to improve local implementation of McKinney-Vento. Students were inspired by UC Berkeley's Basic Needs Center, The Hub in San Jose, and Larkin Street in San Francisco for the comprehensive nature of these services as well as the peer-oriented, youth-to-youth driven focus in these organizations.

Nearly all Y-PLAN student teams identified the challenge of the “stigma” about being homeless and recognized that youth-to-youth services can break through this barrier. Teams also called for school members to use more inclusive language as a way to destigmatize the unhoused community and highlighted the need to raise awareness about the number of people in Oakland facing housing insecurity.

By the end of the second year, over 100 Oakland High School students generated 35 recommendations to respond to the issues facing unhoused students in OUSD, many of which align closely with district goals for community schools with wrap-around services. OUSD was one of the first districts in the nation to announce its intent to become the first Full Service Community School District in 2011, “ensuring that every student gains the skills and knowledge they need to succeed both in and out of the classroom” (OUSD website). They are also the largest recipients of Community School Partnership funding in the State securing \$46 million in the 1st round of funding from this new statewide \$3 billion initiative.

Y-PLAN student recommendations to policy makers fall into three main categories: **(1) Basic Needs and Career Development Centers; (2) Academic Programming Assistance; and (3) Financial Literacy and Independence.**

“We are supposed to be a community school district, aren't we? So many of our recommendations can be funded and staffed by OUSD Community Schools, can't they?”
- Y-PLAN 2022 Student Scholar

1. Basic Needs and Career Development Centers



UC Berkeley's Career Internship Fairs. Credit: UC Berkeley Career Center.

Project teams all agreed that resource centers for unhoused students were critical. Some teams suggested working with existing OUSD wellness centers such as the one at Oakland High School, while others recommended off-site centers. They recommended the district allocate funds from the CARES Act to support new programs and identified the following as key components for such these resource hubs:

- One Case Manager Per 5-10 Unhoused Students: Case managers should meet weekly with students and have their own office to protect student privacy
- On-site Career Coaches: Offer adult and peer-led resources to help students create resumes and practice job interviews and other career skills
- Community Resource Stations: Ensure food, water, clothes, and soap are accessible on campus throughout the school day
- Free Access to Basic Needs: Build partnerships with youth organizations (such as EBAYC, La Clinica, First Place for Youth) to provide primary care, dental care, birth control, menstrual hygiene products, mental/behavioral health services, life skills training/courses, and internship/job support or referrals
- Affordable Transportation Options: In addition to bus passes, students may need free Clipper Cards with BART Access, rideshare credits, OUSD van share, and student driver education training



UC Berkeley Basic Needs Center: Food Pantry. Credit: UC Berkeley Basic Needs Center.

2. Academic & College Solutions

Y-PLAN student teams recognized low expectations of unhoused students as a core issue and identified an opportunity for housed peers to advocate for better conditions. They explored strategies to improve unhoused students' academic development and college readiness, and recommended the following:



Y-PLAN Mentor with Oakland High School Students. Credit: Y-PLAN.

- Create a “McKinney-Vento Academic & College Branch” with case managers focused solely on academic support and development, especially college readiness (e.g., helping unhoused students meet California’s A-G requirements for UC and CSU enrollment).
- Targeted after-school programming to provide a safe space for all students and helping unhoused youth earn their high-school diplomas with:
 - Tutors and study sessions with teachers as well as peer-to-peer support for youth struggling to keep up with their assignments due to housing instability
 - Access to college and career preparation, i.e., college/job application guidance and interview practice
 - Internships with the option for unhoused youth to come back to work as a case manager themselves for the program after high school

3. Financial Literacy & Independence

Many student teams focused on teaching unhoused students and their families about financial planning and management, after their client presented this as a critical need. They recommended a range of solutions, including:

- Financial Literacy Classes and Electives: Tailor existing OUSD financial literacy classes to target and better support unhoused students.
- Partnerships with Community-based Organizations: Provide basic financial literacy courses to students on campus or at community hubs
 - Students created prototype pamphlets for the McKinney-Vento Coordinator to distribute to students and families

- Financial Networking and Internships: Connect unhoused students with professionals in the field of finance to foster career networking relationships while they gain financial literacy

Step Four: Going Public

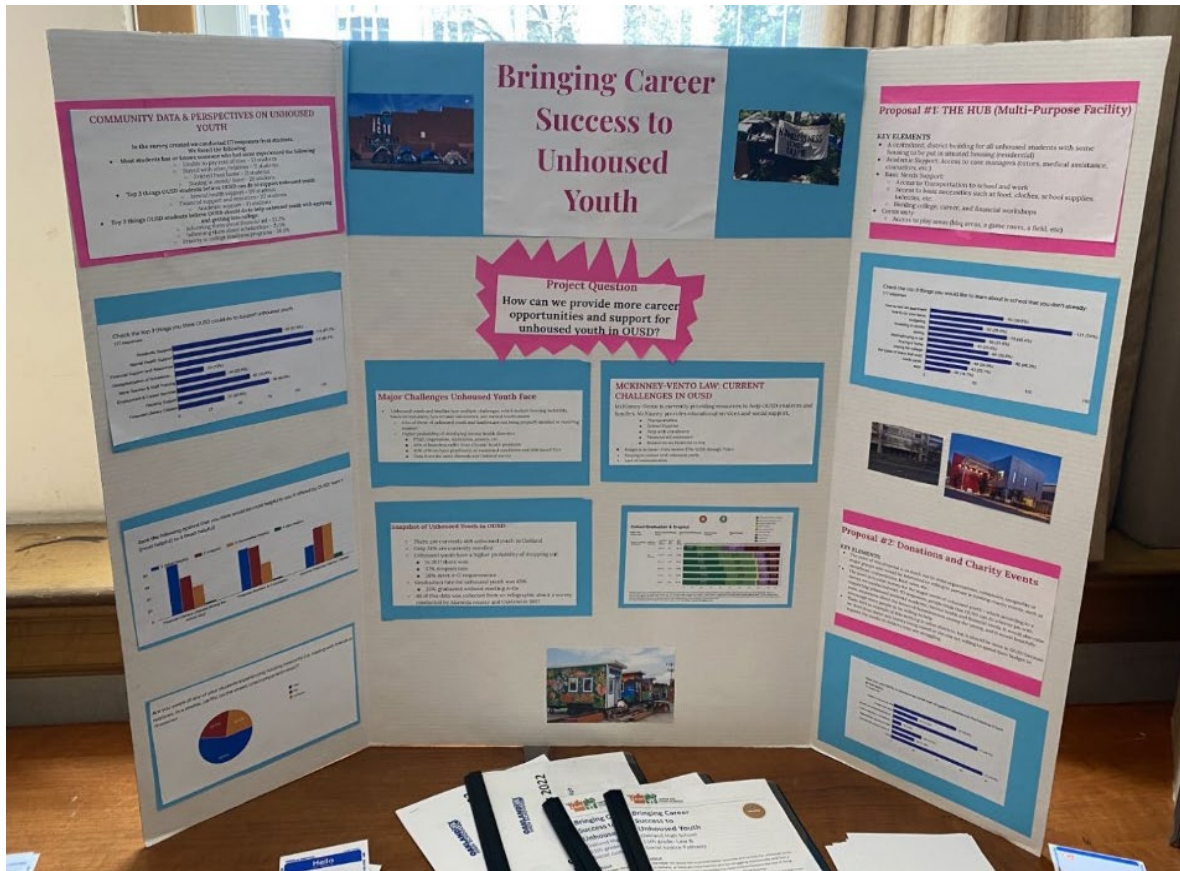


Step Four: Going Public of Y-PLAN's 5-Step Methodology. Source: Y-PLAN

As students finalized their visions for change, they prepared to present their recommendations to their client and other stakeholders at the district and city at large. Y-PLAN final representations often take place in a number of different ways depending on local resources, time and teacher preference. Some projects opt for in-school poster sessions while others pull together a more local and interactive civic roundtable and others choose a more elaborate setting bringing all the students to city hall to meet with local leaders in places of power and citywide decision making.

As the first year took place during distance learning, the 2021 cohort of student teams presented on a virtual roundtable to over 30 adults including their project client, two school board members, OUSD's Chief Academic Officer, and a range of city and community leaders. In the second year, all 10th grade LSJ Academy students presented at a public poster session at their school as well as a smaller leadership cohort at the Y-PLAN Summit at Oakland City Hall. Student teams summarized their recommendations on professional planning posters and distributing two-page policy briefs engaging with civic and community leaders from school administration to Oakland Mayor Libby Schaaf. This is a critical part of the Y-PLAN research process, as student teams must not only present their recommendations and visions for change but also be ready to discuss and defend their ideas, reflective of the oral exam process for graduate students at UC Berkeley and many colleges.

Educational and civic/community leaders all lauded the students' recommendations, as well as all their diligent work over the semester. Their client, McKinney-Vento liaison Trish Anderson, told the students, ***"Your work gives voice to those who are so often forgotten or unable to speak for themselves. All your ideas are powerful and I will be taking them to the school board as we fight for more resources and support."***



2022 Y-PLAN Summit Tri-fold Presentation. Credit: Y-PLAN.

One school board member commented, “We are so incredibly grateful for your work and insights. I am almost embarrassed to hear some of the data you shared. These kids, all our students, deserve more. It is critically important that we respond quickly to many of your recommendations.”

Step Five: Looking Forward and Back



Step Five: Looking Forward and Back of Y-PLAN's 5-Step Methodology. Source: Y-PLAN

In the final stage of the Y-PLAN process, students and adult partners reflect on the overall process and the impact their projects had on them personally as students, on their clients, and more broadly as they work toward a more just and joyful city for all. Y-PLAN is grounded in twenty years of research on career academies, offering a framework of academic development and outcomes for student learning. Pathway teachers and other academic leaders recognized significant growth among the majority of Y-PLAN students in (a) critical thinking; (b) collaboration and teamwork; (c) communications; and (d) connection to community. OUSD district leaders specifically celebrated students' college-level research to develop, implement, and analyze their own surveys in small teams as a uniquely powerful academic outcome.



Student Presentation at 2022 Y-PLAN Summit. Credit: Y-PLAN.

"I was so proud of my students, these junior really dug into the research recognizing there was so much as stake for them and their peers." Mallory Logan, Y-PLAN LSJ Academy Teacher Lead

In terms of impacting their client and city, the McKinney-Vento Liaison was amazed by the swift response of the panel who attended the students' presentation. OUSD provided funding within one month for Trish Anderson to hire three new case managers to immediately scale up resources to serve hundreds of unhoused students. Since the April 2022 presentation, student recommendations to fund McKinney-Vento programs with recent investments in community schools is already being taken up by local and statewide leaders. Their work ignited many school-level discussions about how to better support students through an academic and basic needs hub. It also inspired a fall roundtable at UC Berkeley with the California Department of Education's Homeless Education Department focused explicitly on aligning new statewide \$3 billion investment in community schools and other education programming with McKinney-Vento program funds and services.

IV. Immediate Next Steps

The California Department of Education (CDE) Homeless Education Services, as well as local leaders and liaisons, have a key opportunity to build on insights presented in this white paper by engaging young people in McKinney-Vento policy improvement and implementation. The process led by over one hundred of OUSD Law and Social Justice Academy students to bring changes in (a) **basic needs and career development centers**, (b) **academic & college solutions**, and (c) **financial literacy and independence** to unhoused students can be adapted and catalyzed in school districts across the state. To move this forward, CDE and local leaders can take the following steps:

1. CDE can share white paper findings with three funded Homeless Education Technical Assistance Centers (HETACs) in Contra Costa, Alameda, and San Diego counties. HETACs were created in 2021 to provide regional support and technical assistance to other county offices of education (COEs), to “ensure they have the capacity, resources, and tools required to support their LEAs with the implementation of the Education for Homeless Children and Youth (EHCY) Act.” Key to this is offering best practices and new, impactful methods of providing services. As demonstrated in this paper, youth can play a powerful role in changing the status quo and improving local practices.

a. The Center for Cities and Schools could co-host a webinar with CDE and one or more HETACs in early September sharing these findings and facilitating a dialogue on how to support more youth engagement across LEAs.

2. Cross agency alignment: CDE and local school districts can connect with other academic and service oriented offices that could further support local youth engagement by aligning with both academic and service delivery programming. CDE’s current reorganization presents an ideal moment to better align unhoused student educational services and programming with other state office priorities, goals, and recent initiatives. For example, the state just released over \$700 million in funding to expand Career Pathways and improve educational outcomes and opportunities for all students. Models such a Y-PLAN offer an in-school and academically-aligned strategy to engage students in meaningful research and project-based learning that also supports academic development and college readiness. The OUSD case study is an inspiring model of what is possible.

a. Offices for potential partnership include: College and Career Readiness/Career Pathways, the Youth Councils, Research office and the California State Library’s Homeless Youth Project, and others who already expressed interest in participating.

3. Engage directly as a “project client” for continued LEA Y-PLAN unhoused student research in the 2022 – 2023 academic year. Two district-led Y-PLAN research projects are already underway at OUSD and Sacramento City Unified School District (SCUSD) Law and Social Justice Career Academies.

a. CDE can play the critical and mutually beneficial role of presenting student research teams with: (a) specific project questions to tackle; (b) research and data priorities for students to collect; and (c) key state, regional, and local level policy leaders to incorporate as key stakeholders and partners/users of this research.

4. Convene webinars on Y-PLAN youth civic engagement methodology for teachers and provide mini-grants for participation. Facilitating students through a Y-PLAN process is a significant lift for teachers, many of whom are already stretched thin. Providing educators with clear materials for instruction, as well as funding to cover additional work hours, spurs greater participation and more successful outcomes.

For twenty years, Y-PLAN has moved young people beyond an awareness of the world's many problems by offering them the tools and agency to craft their own solutions. When given a platform for their voices to be heard, youth of all ages and backgrounds speak of the important role of home, connection to place, and social ties that bind their communities. Though most Y-PLAN students at Oakland High School had not personally experienced homelessness, shared experiences of vulnerability mobilized students to build new policy from hard-earned local knowledge.

The CDE has its own opportunity to shift to a more localized policy approach that encourages LEAs to enlist students in meaningfully improving conditions for themselves and their unhoused peers. Housing insecurity is a multifaceted issue to which there is no easy or universal answer. Who better than our youth to forge justice and generate joy for all young people, their schools, and communities?

IV. Immediate Next Steps

CITATIONS

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