

Crisis in Washington State: Thousands of Homeless Students Slipping Through the Cracks

SCOPE OF CRISIS

Since 2005, the number of homeless students identified by schools has steadily increased.¹ This is largely due to the lack of affordable housing and schools improving their identification practices. Yet, thousands of homeless students are still likely unaccounted for.

Unidentified and Underserved

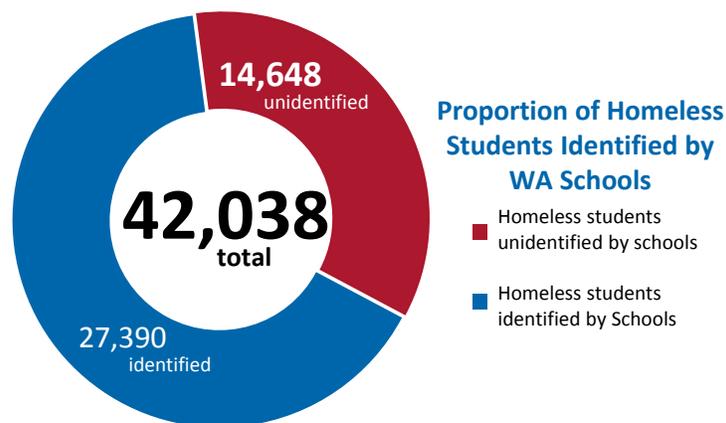
In January 2015, the Washington Department of Social and Health Services prepared a report for the Department of Commerce entitled “Homeless and Unstably Housed K-12 Students in WA State” (“the report”).

Its findings illuminated a crisis: **42,038 students (4.0% of all enrolled students) experienced homelessness** in Washington State during the 2011-12 school year.²

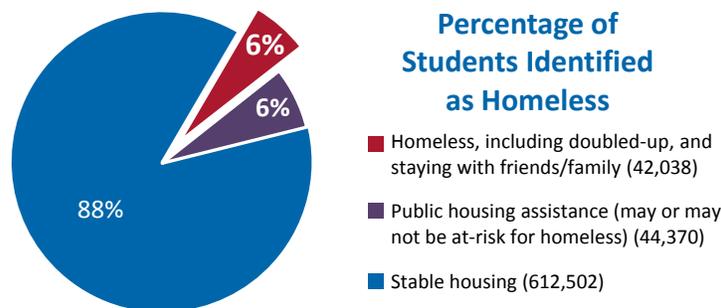
That’s enough students to fill 584 school buses.³



These findings are particularly alarming considering schools only identified 27,390 homeless students (2.6% of all enrolled students).⁴ Thus, in 2011-12 **schools only identified two out of every three students experiencing homelessness.**



Combining data from multiple sources, including housing, social services, and schools, the report accurately depicts housing statuses among Washington’s school-aged children and youth.⁵



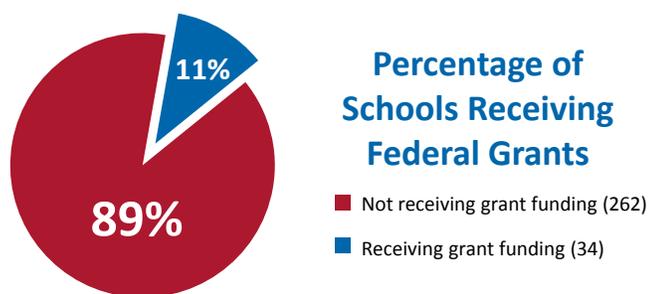
Students that are identified as homeless have a set of legal protections that ensure they receive a quality education; because of this, schools are required to be proactive in identifying students that may qualify. However, the program is desperately underfunded.⁶

RECOMMENDATIONS

To adequately serve this population, three fundamental investments are required.

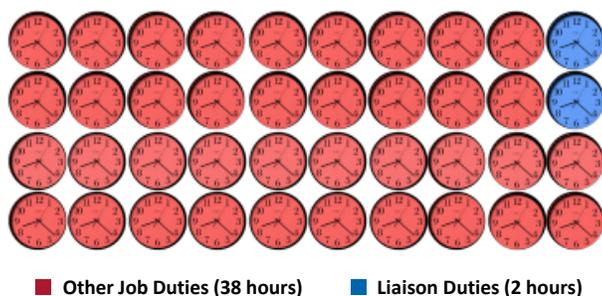
1. Immediate Funding Increase

Washington is composed of 296 school districts, but only **34 school districts are receiving federal funding** to serve homeless students.⁷ If spread across all districts this funding would amount to about \$29 per student experiencing homelessness.⁸ This sum is insufficient to properly serve students, provide staff training, and in most cases, employ full-time homeless liaisons. Washington state provides no additional funding specifically for the educational needs of students experiencing homelessness.



Every school district is legally required to designate a homeless liaison, a staff member who is responsible in aiding the needs of students experiencing homelessness. However, with insufficient funding, most homeless liaisons perform these duties in addition to their existing positions (e.g. nurse, librarian, coach). The U.S. Government Accountability Office found that **liaisons are only able to devote about two hours per week** to serving students experiencing homelessness.⁹

Homeless Liaison: Where Their Hours Go



Columbia Legal Services also surveyed Washington’s liaisons and found **two thirds of those who responded faced difficulty meeting the demands of their position** within allotted hours.¹⁰

A fulltime liaison is critical to ensuring students receive immediate enrollment, transportation to and from their school of origin, educational opportunities comparable to services provided to other students (e.g. books, field trips, sports), free meals, and referrals to housing and social service programs.¹¹

2. Training for Service Providers

Providers in social services and housing programs need additional training to fully understand the protections legally guaranteed to their clients by the homeless education program. Additional training would increase the likelihood that providers would encourage their clients to self identify as homeless and receive support from their schools.

3. Interagency and School Collaboration

Children and youth experiencing homelessness move through many different forms of unstable housing, involving one or more state and local agencies. For many students homelessness isn’t just the absence of a roof over their head, but a total lack of social safety nets. Therefore, a holistic approach to interagency and school collaboration is needed.

\$29 per student

is the only designated funding for the educational needs of homeless students

A holistic approach to interagency and school collaboration would recognize that children and youth experiencing homelessness need every opportunity afforded to them. Agencies, schools, and community resources effectively serve this population by working together to capitalize on the strengths of one another’s programs.

A model of this kind would cross conventional lines, and provide innovative solutions, such as the Tacoma Housing Authority’s McCarver Housing Program. This project partnered a local elementary school with a housing authority to provide rental assistance to families experiencing homelessness in their schools. This innovative solution effectively saved money on transportation and stabilized the entire community.¹²

With these investments, Washington can help thousands of children and youth exit homelessness by achieving a quality education.

Notes & Resources

1. Columbia Legal Services, "Student Homelessness in Washington State: What We Know" (2014).
2. Calculations: Students identified as experiencing homelessness in the Commerce report in 2011-2012 (42,038) divided by the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction's May 2012 Enrolment Student Count (1,043,536). $42,038/1,043,536=0.040$ or 4.0%
3. Calculations: Divide the maximum capacity of a standard school bus (72 passengers) by the students identified as experiencing homelessness in the Commerce report (42,038). $72/42,038= 583.8$ or 584
4. Calculations: Students identified as experiencing homelessness by the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction's in 2011-2012 (27,390) divided by the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction's May 2012 Enrolment Student Count (1,043,536). $27,390/1,043,536=0.026$ or 2.6%
5. The perimeters of this report were school-aged children between five and twenty, who had valid housing data. Students outside this age bracket, or that did not have valid housing data, were excluded from this study. Since students experiencing homelessness and housing instability move fluidly through many different living situations, this report avoided counting each of the 689,000 students twice by organizing them into one of five categories: not homeless, homeless, staying with friends or family, doubled-up, or living in public/permanent housing. The data systems used in this report were: Department of Human Service's Automated Client Eligibility System (ACES), the Department of Education's Comprehensive Education Data and Research System (CEDARS), Homeless Management Information System (HMIS), and the Public Housing Authority's information Systems (PA).
6. McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act (42 USC 11434a(6), 2001) defines homelessness as "individuals who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence." Including: children and youth who are sharing housing due to loss of housing, economic hardship or a similar reason, living in motels, hotels, trailer parks, or camp grounds due to lack of alternative accommodations, living in emergency or transitional shelters, abandoned in hospitals, children and youth awaiting foster care placement, children and youth whose primary nighttime residence is not ordinarily used as a regular sleeping accommodation, living in cars, parks, public spaces, abandoned buildings, substandard housing, bus or train stations, and/or migratory children and youth living in any of the above situations.
7. Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction, "2013-14 Consolidated State Performance Report" (2015).
8. Calculations: Students identified as experiencing homelessness by the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction's in 2013-2014 (32,539) divided by the approximate federal funding the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instructions receives to provide training, technical assistance, and monitoring, as well as federal funding to support school district programs that serve homeless students (\$950,000). $950,000/32,539= 29.20$
9. U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO), "Education of Homeless Students: Improved Program Oversight Needed" report (2014).
10. Columbia Legal Services, "In School But Out of Help" (2015).
11. McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act (42 USC 11434a(6), 2001).
12. GEO Education and Research, "Tacoma Housing Authority McCarver Special Housing Program Evaluation Report" (2012).
13. School bus image source public domain.