STUDENT HOMELESSNESS IN WASHINGTON STATE: What We Know

SCOPE OF CRISIS

One Homeless Student in Each Classroom
30,609 students in Washington State are homeless, or 3.1% of all students enrolled in our K-12 schools.¹ Experts believe many homeless students remain uncounted due to the stigma that prevents them and their families from self-identifying as homeless.² Currently, 1 out of 32 schoolchildren in Washington are identified as homeless by their schools, or roughly 1 per classroom in many areas. In some school districts, as many as 10% of all students are homeless.

More Students Identified Each Year
Washington’s homeless student count grew by 12% during the 2012-13 school year. Since 2006-07, the total has increased by 82% as the U.S. faced an economic recession and schools improved at accurately identifying homeless students.³

Homeless Without a Parent
We estimate 4,622 homeless students are unaccompanied; they face homelessness “while not in the physical custody of a parent or guardian.”⁵ This group represents roughly 15% of all homeless students enrolled in K-12 schools.⁶

This estimate includes unaccompanied youth enrolled in school, identified as homeless. It does not include youth not enrolled in school. Thus, the true number of unaccompanied homeless youth in Washington is likely to be higher.

A Problem in Towns Big and Small
Many assume homelessness is a big city problem, but roughly 33% of Washington’s homeless students live in rural areas.⁷

Homeless Children & Families
The vast majority of homeless students in K-12 schools are children below the age of 14. Elementary students comprised 49.1% of all students identified as homeless in 2012-13. By contrast, 20% were in middle school and 31% were high school students.⁴
Gap in Testing Proficiency

Washington’s homeless students are struggling to achieve proficiency on state tests due to instability at home and challenges outside of the classroom. **Only 37% of homeless students are proficient in math**, compared to 64% among their housed counterparts. Similar learning gaps exist across reading and science.

Low Graduation Rates

Homeless students have the second lowest graduation rate of any group of students the state tracks, and perform far worse than students with stable housing. In the class of 2012-13, only **45% of homeless seniors graduated** on time. By contrast, 75% of housed seniors graduated. Last year, 2,238 seniors who experienced homelessness during high school were unable to walk across the graduation stage.

Importance of Stability

Link Between Stability, Education Progress

Homeless families and students are highly mobile, moving often from place to place to find shelter or pursue job opportunities. Many of these kids change schools as a result of these frequent moves. Research shows that students lose 4-6 months of academic progress each time they move schools.

Reduce Criminal Justice Involvement

The less at-risk students move and change schools, the more likely they are to avoid difficult barriers to success, such as entanglement in the criminal justice system. In one major study, Washington State’s Department of Social and Health Services (DHS) analyzed data on school moves for over 35,000 student clients. **48% of students who moved 3 or more times were involved in the criminal justice system**, compared to 7% of students who didn’t move.

Role of Liaisons: Identify and Support

Federal law (the McKinney-Vento Act) requires school districts to designate a liaison responsible for identifying students who are experiencing homelessness and meeting their needs.
Figuring out which students lack a home of their own is a challenge due to the stigma that prevents homeless students from disclosing their true living conditions. However, these caring adults often connect families with resources and get kids who otherwise might fall through the cracks the support they need to succeed academically. Many liaisons train other school staff to spot the signs a child might be homeless. They then connect families with resources, such as:

- Tutoring or academic support
- Fast-tracked enrollment
- Shelters or housing services in the community
- Transportation to school
- Enrollment in free and reduced lunch
- School supplies, clothes, etc.

For many homeless children, these services, and the presence of a caring adult at school can make the difference between graduating or dropping out. For kids who face so much volatility, liaisons help make school a place of stability.

Q: Why are homeless children struggling academically if each district has a liaison?

SCHOOLS LACK CAPACITY

Liaisons Only Devote 2 Hours Per Week

Some school districts can afford to hire a full time liaison. These staff are able to devote their full workweek to identifying homeless students and meeting their needs. Far too often, however, liaison duties are simply “tacked on” to the job of an already busy administrator, secretary, counselor, transportation director, or even superintendent. On average, liaisons are only able to devote about 2 hours per week to their job duties, according to a 2014 analysis by the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO), which examined districts in four states (including Washington). Assuming these staff work a full 40-hour week, only 5% of their time is spent on the critical task of supporting homeless students. According to the GAO report, 35% of liaisons cite their limited availability as a major barrier to identifying homeless children and getting them through school.

Lack of Federal, State Funding

Some school districts do not need a full time homeless liaison. However, to properly meet the needs of homeless children, many districts need at least a half-time liaison. When liaisons are essentially unable to do their jobs due to financial constraints, homeless students don’t get the support and services they need. The federal government provides dedicated funds to help schools carry out the McKinney Vento Act, but these dollars are extremely limited. Only 24 of Washington’s 295 school districts received McKinney Vento grants last year.

Districts were recently given flexibility to use some Title I funds for homeless liaisons. However, Title I funding is already burdened, thus many districts must use scarce local funds. With targeted state investment, schools could dramatically expand the capacity of liaisons to identify and serve homeless students.
Q: How do we know liaisons have a positive impact on kids experiencing homelessness?

A snapshot of SHELTON, WA

POPULATION: 9,866

School District Size: 4,038
Free and Reduced Lunch Rate: 68%
Homeless Students: 409 (10.1% of all students)

THE IMPACT OF ONE

Homelessness in Shelton
Shelton is a small community near the Puget Sound whose main industries are shellfish and forestry. 10.1% of Shelton students are identified as homeless, with many being unaccompanied homeless youth. These youth often must sleep on friends’ couches, in tents, abandoned buildings, substandard housing or shelters – all while attempting to go to school.

How Liaisons Make a Difference
Miles Nowlin is the Shelton School District’s full-time homeless liaison. Miles explains that, “there is never enough time or capacity,” to fully support Shelton’s 409 homeless students, but his ability to focus on that task full-time allows him to:

- Train teachers and school staff on how to identify and support homeless students
- Provide case management, resource referral, and mentoring to students and families
- Collaborate with community partners to boost services available in Shelton

THE PROMISE: KEANDRA’S STORY

One Adult Can Make All the Difference
Miles met KeAndra Radchenko when she was a 9th grade student living in a dilapidated trailer. She had been homeless due to the impact of her family’s struggle with drugs and mental illness.

“I was her mentor and advocate for five years,” says Miles. “At first, I helped her access the basics like food, clothing, and school supplies. I referred her to our HOST program in Shelton where she finally got housing. KeAndra impressed me with her intelligence and public speaking skills so I connected her to the 4H Leadership Program and she became a Youth Advocate. It was a thrill to watch her graduate last year and give a speech to the class about overcoming struggle.”

“KeAndra is now renting her own apartment and has adopted her 10-year-old sister. She has plans to go to college.”
Q: Why will providing housing to homeless students help them succeed in school?

HOUSING MAKES A DIFFERENCE

Housing Means Stability

We know that students with housing perform better in reading, math, and science and graduate at higher rates than homeless students. We also know students with greater stability perform better in school and are less likely to face challenges such as involvement in the criminal justice system. Now, schools across Washington are launching programs which provide housing supports to homeless students in an effort to give these highly mobile kids a greater chance at success. The Homeless Student Stability Act would make additional funds available for these innovative partnerships.

A Case Study: McCarver Housing Program

McCarver Elementary School in Tacoma launched such a housing program in 2011 in partnership with the Tacoma Housing Authority. Homeless families receive temporary housing assistance and academic support in exchange for a promise by parents to keep their kids enrolled in school, take an active role in their children’s education, and work to improve their job skills. The program just wrapped up its third year and more data will be available soon, but initial results are promising and illuminate what’s possible when we invest in housing stability for homeless students.

Decrease Turnover, Increase Attendance

McCarver is one of the highest poverty schools in the state and before the program had a turnover rate of over 100%. In the first two years of the housing program, turnover at McCarver has dropped substantially, to its lowest level in at least 10 years. Officials and evaluators attribute at least part of this trend to improved stability among homeless students in the housing program.19

Improved Reading Scores

In the second year of the program, class attendance for program students was 94%, compared to 87% for homeless students across Tacoma Public Schools.20 Thus, students given housing support were more likely to make it to class than their peers without housing.

Mean DIBELS Reading Scores (1-3 Range)

When homeless students at McCarver were given stable housing, their reading scores improved and were higher than other homeless students in the district.21
NOTES & SOURCES

1. Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) (2012-13)

2. National Center on Family Homelessness, “America’s Youngest Outcasts” report (2014), estimating over 60,000 children in Washington State are homeless

3. Washington Alliance for Students Experiencing Homelessness (WASEH) analysis, WASEH.org (re-launching as SchoolHouseWA.org in December, 2014)

4. See #3

5. Definition from the McKinney Vento Homeless Assistance Act (42 U.S.C. 11434(a)(6), 2001)


7. WASEH, Rural County Analysis, WASEH.org

8. OSPI proficiency data (2012-13)

9. OSPI annual graduation rate report (2012-13)

10. CLS analysis using OSPI 2012-13 graduation rate report

11. See #10

12. National Center on Homeless Education (NCHE)


14. OSPI Homeless Education Office website


16. CLS estimate based on GAO data, assumption of 40-hour work week for liaisons. This number is a nationwide estimate based on GAO’s interviews of 20 school districts across 4 states and may change over time, may not apply to any given school district

17. CLS calculation of data from OSPI Homeless Education Office website

18. School districts in Spokane, Vancouver and Highline are partnering with local housing providers to provide housing and other services to homeless students and their families


20. See #19

21. See #20

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Columbia Legal Services
Children & Youth Project (CYP)
101 Yesler Way | Suite 300
Seattle, WA 98104 | (206) 464-5933
www.ColumbiaLegal.org
www.SchoolHouseWA.org

Questions? Visit CYP’s website, send us an email at cyp@ColumbiaLegal.org, or visit SchoolHouseWA.org.