

## → ESSA and Homeless Youth

By Ace Parsi and Barbara Duffield

**As state and district leaders evaluate characteristics of their student populations, many will find one number particularly startling: The number of homeless students has doubled in less than a decade.<sup>1</sup> States can take several actions to serve these students better, some of which are incorporated in the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). Some of these provisions in ESSA kick in immediately.**

Homeless children and youth represent 2.3 percent of all school-aged children, and for other low-income students, who according to the Southern Education Foundation make up the majority of all students, a family member's lost job, health emergency, or other unexpected circumstance invokes the fear of homelessness.<sup>2</sup> In addition to the stresses of an average K-12 student's experience, homeless youth face hunger, threats to their physical safety, frequent mobility, human trafficking, trauma, and physical and mental health issues. These needs call for a system of support rather than a single intervention.

ESSA makes several changes to the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, (42 U.S.C. §11431 et seq.), the underlying law that incorporates accountability, resources, and support to meet the needs of homeless students and, with these ESSA changes, preschool children as well. These new provisions seek to increase the capacity of coordinators and liaisons to connect homeless youth to needed services and supports, ensure these students receive a quality education, and hold schools more accountable for homeless student outcomes. While states have until 2017–18 to fully implement most

major components of ESSA, key provisions related to homeless students are to be implemented by the start of the 2016–17 school year (box 1).

While ESSA addresses key challenges facing homeless students, it is insufficient to meet all of them. States are rightly approaching the ESSA provisions as a starting point rather than a road map for creating systems of support. Efforts in successful states center on five best practices in identifying and serving homeless students and holding actors accountable.

### IDENTIFY

States must first identify their homeless students, which can be challenging. ESSA requires states to use grants for activities and professional development geared toward identifying homeless students [(42 U.S.C. 11432(d)(2) and 42 U.S.C. 11432(d)(5)]. States have many ways to comply with and implement these requirements. For example, ESSA permits states to use federal funds for training local education agencies (LEAs) on how to work with community agencies to find homeless youth who are not in school as well as those who are but school staff don't know it. States can assess whether the number of identified homeless students is inconsistent with the number of children in poverty in a given district and can help LEAs gauge the effectiveness of their efforts at identification.

Once these students are identified, states and districts must adhere to the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act, which protects student records. LEAs must collect information about students' living situations, including information about the living situations of homeless youth, but states must ensure the proper and necessary precautions are in place to protect the privacy of

students whose information is collected in state databases.

### CONNECT

Once the full scale of the problem is identified, states must turn to the question of how to use federal and state resources to address individual student needs. Homeless students may need educators' support to make connections to social service providers, housing coordinators, and academic interventionists. ESSA includes provisions on the role of state and local homeless liaisons. In implementing the law and designing their own plans, states should put in place specific protocols and professional learning opportunities to help liaisons make meaningful connections to help students. At the state level, the state education agency (SEA) is charged with ensuring that professional development and technical assistance addresses homeless students' needs, and it monitors results. At the local level, districts serve as a resource for homeless children and parents, they design staff professional development opportunities, and they engage in strategic planning that takes homeless students into account.

### PROVIDE ACCESS

A student's place of residence typically dictates enrollment in schools and services—a fact often taken for granted. For homeless students and youth, the lack of a permanent residence and transportation can spell the difference between fulfilling their potential and dropping out of school altogether.

States must address these significant challenges by removing barriers to enrollment and keeping homeless K-12 and preschool students in their schools of origin when it is in their best interest—addressing paperwork, fines, and fees associated with staying in their home schools and facilitating transportation. ESSA requires school districts to reserve Title I Part A funds for homeless students and authorizes the use of such funds for transportation and to support the position of homeless liaisons [20 U.S.C. 6313(c)(3)(A) and 20 U.S.C. 6313(c)

## BOX 1. FIVE CHANGES BOARDS SHOULD KNOW ABOUT

These five issues reflect the most important changes and opportunities under ESSA related to states' preK-12 homeless populations:

- **Coordinators and Liaisons.** States must designate state coordinators to monitor LEAs, inform parents and the public of homeless students' rights, and provide high-quality training for local liaisons charged with building local capacity to implement the McKinney-Vento provisions of ESSA.
- **Stability.** LEAs must consider student-centered factors in making the best determination of schools for homeless students to attend, with a presumption that students will remain in their original schools and their wishes will be given priority.
- **Enrollment and Full Participation.** SEAs and LEAs must develop, review, and revise policies to remove barriers and create opportunities for homeless students to be identified, enrolled, and engaged in school, including in public pre-K programs.
- **Opportunity to Engage in a Rigorous Education.** Homeless students must have full access to academic and extracurricular activities, credit for full or partial completion of coursework, and counseling to help support a transition to postsecondary education and career opportunities.
- **Accountability.** States must disaggregate data on state report cards by homeless student category starting in the fall of 2017–18.

this sentiment without taking practical steps to close the gap. Homeless students—who fall within the highest level of need in our society—experience this gap in the failure to be identified and served and in low expectations for the quality of their educations. ESSA hands states a leadership role, one that many have already embraced. With new flexibility to act under ESSA, states can seize this opportunity to design a system that better meets the needs of those students falling through the cracks and help ensure that they too can graduate from high school college, career, and civic ready.

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## RESOURCES

US Department of Education, "Education for Homeless Children and Youths Program," nonregulatory guidance (July 27, 2016), <http://www2.ed.gov/policy/elsec/leg/essa/160240ehcyguidance072716.pdf>.

National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth, <http://www.naehcy.org/educational-resources/essa>.

National Center for Homeless Education, <http://center.serve.org/nche/>.

Administration for Children and Families at the Department of Health and Human Services, <http://youthhomelessness.acf.hhs.gov/>.

## NOTES

1. According to the National Center for Homeless Education federal data summary, public schools identified a record 1,301,239 homeless children and youth in the 2013–14 school year, up from 679,724 in 2006–07.

2. US Census Bureau, 2013 American Community Survey 1-year Estimates; Southern Education Foundation, "A New Majority: Low Income Students Now a Majority in the Nation's Public Schools," (Atlanta, GA, 2015), <http://www.southerneducation.org/getattachment/4ac62e27-5260-47a5-9d02-14896ec3a531/A-New-Majority-2015-Update-Low-Income-Students-Now.aspx>.

(3)(C)(ii).]. State boards of education may need to clarify regulations and exemptions for homeless students to enable them to stay in their home schools (including public preschools) and provide guidance to school districts on issues related to transportation.

## FACILITATE QUALITY LEARNING

For many students, school is a place they are forced to go to between the hours of 9 and 3 to learn and spend time with friends, but for homeless students, school may be the only place where they get a healthy meal and experience a sense of community and opportunity that can be their ticket out of their circumstances. It will be the job of state boards of education to ensure that regulations and policies ranging from standards implementation to Advanced Placement access and credit accrual to participation in summer school and extracurricular activities include specific accommodations to ensure homeless students also have access to all the facets of a high-quality education. States can use Title II funds to prepare educators to serve homeless populations more effectively or Title I to build the capacity of persistently failing high-poverty schools to engage

homeless students in high-quality learning experiences.

## ADVANCE ACCOUNTABILITY

State systems of learning should ensure the same high expectations for learning for all students regardless of their race, disability, income, or housing status. Accountability and improvement can be seen as part of one system. It is not enough to disaggregate information on graduation rates and academic achievement of homeless children and youth in state report cards. Educators must take responsibility for the success of homeless students, and policymakers and SEA and LEA staff must support their efforts. While it may be prudent for some states to incorporate measures around homeless students in their overall accountability or school accreditation systems, others can incorporate such measures in dashboards or report cards. In either case, states should explore ways to bring this often neglected group to the fore.

## CONCLUSION

South African president Nelson Mandela once wrote, "A nation should not be judged by how it treats its highest citizens but its lowest ones." Many leaders may agree with