



LESSONS LEARNED FROM PANDEMIC-ERA AID: OPPORTUNITIES FOR SCHOOLS TO IMPROVE THE IDENTIFICATION OF CHILDREN EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS

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INTRODUCTION

Funds from the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021 dedicated to Homeless Children and Youth (referred to as ARP-HCY) dramatically expanded the number of school districts in the state of New York and nationally that received dedicated dollars to identify and support children experiencing homelessness after the pandemic.¹ This new funding landscape provided a unique opportunity to learn from districts across the state about opportunities and challenges to using funds earmarked for the support of students experiencing homelessness.

The federal McKinney-Vento Act requires all local education agencies to designate a liaison to identify students experiencing homelessness and to remove barriers to participation in school. In order to better understand the impact of ARP-HCY funding on McKinney-Vento liaisons and the students they support, Poverty Solutions at the University of Michigan worked with the New York State Department of Education and SchoolHouse Connection to conduct interviews with school district liaisons from February 2024 to May 2024. The research focused on school districts outside of New York City, which were sorted based on the percent of children identified as experiencing homelessness and the school district's poverty rate for children ages 5-17 years old. Three groups of school districts were selected for interviews:

1. districts that identified no students experiencing homelessness that had more than 1,000 children enrolled;
2. districts with low identification of students experiencing homelessness, defined as being in the top quartile of the state for child poverty but identifying less than the state average of children experiencing homelessness (4.8%);
3. districts with good identification of students experiencing homelessness, defined as school districts that were in the top quartile of the state for homeless students identified regardless of child poverty rate.

These three groups included a total of 101 school districts.

KEY FINDINGS

- **Different identification and outreach practices existed among school districts that fell into the three interview categories: good identification, low identification, and no identification.** Sorting school districts into these three categories based on the percentage of students experiencing homelessness and the child poverty rate can help to identify those districts most likely in need of technical assistance.
- **Opportunities exist to strengthen the implementation of the housing questionnaire used by districts to identify students experiencing homelessness.** While all districts reported using this questionnaire, differences in the frequency of use and whether districts re-evaluated students when a change of address occurred were directly related to how effective the questionnaire was as an identification tool for students experiencing homelessness.
- **Bus drivers may be uniquely placed to identify children experiencing homelessness.** While not usually considered a part of the identification team, districts that reported training and engaging their bus drivers to recognize and report potential signs of homelessness said that this collaboration was invaluable.
- **Building trust among partners and the community is a critical part of breaking down barriers to identification.** Families often worry about disclosing lack of adequate housing and immigration status because of the risk of Child Protective Services involvement and deportation. Liaisons noted the importance of working with other organizations and providing services to families in order to address fears.

All 101 school districts were contacted, and researchers completed 18 interviews with McKinney-Vento liaisons in 17 school districts from regions across New York. While these interviews are specific to New York, because ARP-HYC was a national program, findings and recommendations may resonate with statewide coordinators and McKinney-Vento liaisons in states across the U.S. as they consider how best to serve students experiencing homelessness now that ARP-HYC funding is ending.

ORGANIZING SCHOOL DISTRICTS FOR SUCCESSFUL IDENTIFICATION

ARP-HYC funding increased the number of funded liaison positions across New York and provided liaisons with new resources to fulfill the McKinney-Vento mandate. While staffing structure and outreach for identification differed across districts, two primary structures emerged in districts with good identification. Liaisons from smaller districts with good identification reported having a high-ranking administrator who had served as the McKinney-Vento liaison for a number of years and who prioritized training infrastructure at every level of staff – particularly transportation – to support identification. They regularly tracked their identification data and shared those data with their staff to create awareness and a sense of shared urgency. As one participant noted, “[Before I started] there wasn’t a whole lot of tracking or anything much done with this [data], and it was pretty eye-opening for everybody when we saw how many students we had in this situation.”

Liaisons from larger districts with good identification noted having dedicated McKinney-Vento staff and the support of a senior district administrator to create a network of people at every school who were actively engaged in identification and outreach. This structure enabled liaisons to extend the reach of the program beyond what was possible for an individual alone.

According to those we interviewed, districts with lower identification tended to have liaisons who were covering multiple roles, in addition to the role of McKinney-Vento liaison, without having the authority or active support of someone higher in the school administration that enabled them to create a network of support. This left one or a few people to try to reach all students experiencing homelessness in the district, a structure that inevitably was limited by individual capacity and time.

Among districts that identified no students experiencing homelessness, the most basic structures to identification were often not present. Contact information for the liaison was not always correct, and district staff who answered the phone were unable to provide useful referral information. This pattern was exemplified by the fact that, despite repeated

emails and phone calls, we were only able to speak with two districts in this category, even though our original goal was to speak with five.

STRATEGIC IMPLEMENTATION OF THE HOUSING QUESTIONNAIRE

Across school districts, the required housing questionnaire was one of the first tools mentioned when liaisons discussed how their district identified students experiencing homelessness. In many cases, however, information barriers and differing district practices reduced the potential effectiveness of the form. One liaison highlighted that a lack of awareness of McKinney-Vento protections among families meant that the form was often completed inaccurately:

Part of the problem, though, is I would say a good third of the families currently on my list, when they enrolled, clicked “permanent housing.” They do not think they’re allowed to go here if they don’t have their own lease, if they’re not permanently housed. They don’t know the law. So they click “permanent housing,” and then we have to become detectives.

Another factor impacting the effectiveness of the housing questionnaire was how the district decided to implement this requirement. Across the 17 school districts, three distinct implementation approaches emerged:

1. The housing questionnaire was given to families only when they first enrolled their children in a school. This approach captured families who might transfer into a district because of homelessness, but it meant that families otherwise only completed the form when first enrolling in kindergarten/first grade, at the transition to middle school, and at the transition to high school;
2. The housing questionnaire was given to families when they first enrolled their children in the school district and whenever a change of address was identified by teachers and staff or reported by the family;
3. The housing questionnaire was completed at the start of every year and whenever there was a change of address suspected or reported.

Overall, we find that school districts that implemented the housing questionnaire more frequently and more strategically (i.e. when a potential change of address was noticed) described the form as an important tool in their identification process.

INCREASED TRAINING OF A WIDER RANGE OF EDUCATORS AND STAFF IS NEEDED

Most liaisons reported that the economic impact of the pandemic and increased resources through ARP-HYC had increased awareness of homelessness.

Additionally, they suggested that more training at all levels in the school district was needed. Successful identification required collaboration.

Our school social workers are highly involved in the process. Our counselors are highly aware and highly involved. Our building principals have an awareness... They're always ears to the ground when they're meeting with kids, talking to kids or hearing things from teachers who may be saying, "You know, something's going on with so and so. Their grades are changing. Their mood is changing."

Liaisons discussed how, despite greater awareness, without constant training and education about McKinney-Vento, school staff were often unable to recognize signs of homelessness among families. For example, when discussing the housing crisis in their community, one liaison summarized:

My colleagues have a hard time understanding, 'Well, this person's been McKinney-Vento, and they keep moving, and ... they're on year two or three.' I'm like, 'That's normal! That could be.' That's how it is, and so I'm finding that I need to do a lot of educating.

Along with counselors and social workers, the importance of the role of bus drivers in identifying and reporting signs of housing instability to liaisons was a repeated theme among districts with good identification. It was critical for the director of transportation to be trained and involved in training their staff. As a liaison from a smaller rural district described:

My director of transportation, our head bus driver ... they hear a lot because the bus drivers will come in and say, "Hey, you know so and so said something, and I'm letting you know" and then they'll be reaching out. So we've got unofficial kind of monitors that are pretty highly aware to keep an ear out for this stuff then report it back up to me.

A number of liaisons expanded on this idea and discussed how successful identification of students experiencing homelessness requires a different set of skills depending on the role of the person at the school. Bus drivers, for example, would recognize different signs than social workers or counselors, and administrators often needed to understand more about how school policy could structurally prevent access to mandated supports. Actively tailoring McKinney-Vento training to different roles allowed liaisons to maximize opportunities for identification and communication at every point of connection. While awareness of homelessness and the legal obligations was necessary, school staff benefited from understanding how their day-to-day actions fit into the bigger picture.

BUILDING TRUST TO REDUCE BARRIERS TO IDENTIFICATION

When discussing efforts to improve their district's identification of children experiencing homelessness, many liaisons mentioned the need to build trust and break down barriers related to fear and stigma, which prevented parents from informing schools about their living situations and seeking help. Fear of Child Protective Services was reported as particularly strong for families. One liaison noted:

Part of it is shame. Part of it is not knowing what the answer will lead to, fear of knowing, you know, will this affect something about my ability to have my kids living with me?

This highlights the ongoing importance of addressing the role of school staff as mandated reporters of abuse and neglect and the rights of families experiencing homelessness under McKinney-Vento in tailored ways that address both parental and school staff fears. Likewise, among recent immigrants, fears of the potential consequences of allowing school personnel to know about housing and economic challenges were particularly strong.

To break down barriers to identification, liaisons talked about building partnerships with community-based organizations, attending events and meetings outside of school, and providing direct resources, such as food or backpacks, that reached children beyond those known to be eligible for the McKinney-Vento program. Speaking particularly about outreach efforts after the pandemic, one liaison said:

[A]s an attempt really to reconnect with the community as a team, as a department, we all went out into the community to the different events to say, "Hey, we are here, you know we are available to you. The district is open."

Liaisons frequently mentioned how useful ARP-HCY funding was to outreach efforts, particularly districts that had approval to use dollars to provide families with flexible cash, usually in the form of store gift cards and gas cards. The ability to provide direct resources that were needed by families opened the doors of communication and trust.

"They do not think they're allowed to go here if they don't have their own lease, if they're not permanently housed."
- McKinney-Vento liaison

Once families received tangible support, liaisons were more likely to reach out again when problems arose, making flexible cash assistance an invaluable tool for reaching families and improving identification of students experiencing homelessness.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Across all districts interviewed, it was clear that both the pandemic and the influx of funding to re-engage students experiencing homelessness had raised awareness about the educational implications of housing instability. Even as ARP-HCY funding expires,² this greater awareness of homelessness has created opportunities to strengthen McKinney-Vento programs and improve identification of children experiencing homelessness going forward. In light of these findings, we make the following four recommendations.

Use administrative data to recognize the signs of under-identification and target outreach and technical assistance to those districts. Interviews showed that there are different identification and outreach practices taking place in districts that fall into the good identification group versus those that fall into the low identification and no identification groups. Liaisons at school districts with low identification (defined as higher than average child poverty rate and lower than average identification of children experiencing homelessness) more frequently reported lacking the institutional support of someone high up in the district to help them break through bureaucratic hurdles or being so overwhelmed with addressing emergencies that they did not have time to strengthen a broader district-wide network of identification and support to distribute the large volume of work and meet the needs of students. No identification districts (defined as those identifying zero children experiencing homelessness) often lacked McKinney-Vento supports at the most basic level, such as having inaccurate liaison contact information and minimal or no awareness at the district level of who to speak with regarding the McKinney-Vento program. Targeting these two groups of districts for outreach and support would yield the greatest increase in identification and ensure that all schools are meeting the basic requirements of the law.

Create opportunities for school districts with good identification to share their best practices with other school districts. Districts with good identification (defined as above average identification of children experiencing homelessness) reported systems and approaches to identification and support that can be shared with other school districts. Some of these practices included regularly sharing data with staff to raise awareness, having a McKinney-Vento “champion” in a position of authority to help break down bureaucratic barriers, providing tailored training at all levels of staff so there is awareness of how day-to-day activities relate to McKinney-Vento, and adopting a structure where every school has a

“point of contact” who helps with identification and outreach. Providing opportunities to learn about what works and establishing mentoring relationships across districts could be an effective approach for improving the identification of students experiencing homelessness.

Strengthen the implementation of the housing questionnaire across all school districts. The housing questionnaire was an important tool for identifying children experiencing homelessness, but districts implemented this requirement differently. The most effective implementation of the questionnaire asked families to complete the form annually and followed up with families to complete the form again during the school year every time a change of address was reported by a staff member or the family. Working across districts to adopt this best practice has the potential to increase identification in a large number of school districts with minimal additional cost.

“So we’ve got unofficial kind of monitors [bus drivers] that are pretty highly aware to keep an ear out for this stuff then report it back up to me.”
- *McKinney-Vento liaison*

Engage and train all bus drivers and directors of transportation on how to identify students experiencing homelessness and connect them to support. While most liaisons primarily discussed their work with the transportation department in terms of how to get students to school, a few respondents described how invaluable their bus drivers were in identifying children who might be experiencing homelessness. This approach was praised as highly effective, with liaisons pointing out how drivers were often the first to notice when children did not show up at their usual pick up or when families may be dropping a child off at their usual stop but no longer appeared to be living there. It also appeared that liaisons reporting this type of collaboration described fewer tensions with their transportation departments, perhaps because their interactions were not limited to when bus routes needed to be changed, which all respondents reported as challenging. Prioritizing the training and engagement of transportation directors and bus drivers in not only the transportation requirements of McKinney-Vento law but a promising strategy that should be implemented more widely.

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ENDNOTES

- 1 SchoolHouse Connection. (2024). ARP-HCY Sprint: Timeline At a Glance. ARP-HCY Sprint: Timeline At a Glance. Retrieved December 11, 2024, from <https://schoolhouseconnection.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/ARP-HCY-Sprint-Timeline-At-a-Glance.pdf>
- 2 SchoolHouse Connection. (2024). Marking the Moment: ARP-HCY Winds Down. Article. Retrieved December 11, 2024, from <https://schoolhouseconnection.org/article/marking-the-moment-arp-hcy-winds-down>