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FEATURE

ESSA brings new focus to homeless population

The law requires schools and districts for the first time to "track and improve outcomes" for these students

By **Autumn A. Arnett** • Aug. 21, 2017

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Hannah Johnson's father died when she was 11 years old, leaving her with a drug-addicted mother struggling with mental disabilities. When she turned 16, the social security benefits the family was receiving after her father's death were halved, and she found herself unable to get a job to fill the in gaps, because she had neither a birth certificate nor a social security card. The family didn't have a car and lived "out in the boondocks," making it hard to earn a steady form of income.

At school, Johnson said she "had to choose between eating lunch and doing my homework," after her teacher suggested she use the school's computer lab during lunch to complete homework assignments which required internet access. "You can't just put someone's basic needs behind a couple of math problems," said Johnson, now in college studying early childhood education, during a Capitol Hill briefing on homelessness and education hosted by America's Promise in June. Johnson added she pleaded with her teacher for paper-based alternative assignments, saying "we live 20 miles from the nearest public library, and I don't have a car."

Soon, unable to earn any income to support her family, Johnson and her mother found themselves homeless, living in motels and staying with other friends and family.

For the first time this fall, schools and districts will be required to "track and improve outcomes" for the nation's estimated 1.3

million homeless students, thanks to a provision in the Every Student Succeeds Act which strengthens 1987's McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act. According to guidance from the U.S. Department of Education updated earlier this year, states will now be responsible for:

- The identification of homeless children and youths;
- Making sure that preschool-aged homeless children have access to and receive supportive services;
- Providing professional development and technical assistance at both the State and local levels;
- Removing enrollment barriers;
- Providing school stability, including the expansion of school of origin to include preschools and receiving schools and the provision of transportation until the end of the school year, even if a student becomes permanently housed;
- Protecting privacy of student records, including information about a homeless child or youth's living situation;
- Improving the dispute resolution process for decisions relating to the educational placement of homeless children and youths;
- Increasing the emphasis on college and career readiness; and
- Establishing a new authority for local liaisons to verify the eligibility of homeless children, youths, and families for HUD homeless assistance programs.

Understanding the problem

Only five states currently track homeless students, but data from those states reveals a significant gap in the high school graduation rates for these students, compared to their housed peers. A recent report by Civic Enterprises entitled *Hidden in Plain Sight: Homeless Students in America's Public Schools* found 42% of homeless students interviewed by the researchers

dropped out of school, at some point, because of their housing instability. Eight in 10 of those said they dropped out more than once, and there was a 50-50 split between students who had been out on their own versus homeless with their families.



Credit: WalletHub

Chronic absenteeism — often because of sicknesses which can last for weeks due to a lack of healthcare, or inability to get to school thanks to lack of transportation or constantly moving around — is particularly prevalent among homeless students, and is also required to be tracked and addressed under ESSA.

Erin Ingram, one of the report’s authors, said during the June briefing, “Because of the new ESSA guidelines that are coming out, we have a great opportunity” to move the needle on outcomes surrounding this growing population of students.

“We feel like this will give us a really wonderful set of data to look at to see how we are doing: Which states are moving ahead, which states are falling behind, where can we really focus our energy as a team to really address this issue,” Ingram said.

The report found that roughly half of students had to change schools, with many changing multiple times. However, when it came time to do that, 62% of students found the process difficult to navigate due to a lack of cooperation between schools, an inability to obtain medical records, the necessity of a parent or guardian to sign forms, missing credits due to lapses in attendance, and transportation. Residency requirements also presented barriers to enrollment, as many students couldn’t

verify an address or even their own identities, as was Johnson's case in Richmond, VA.

More than just referrals

Barbara Duffield, Executive Director, SchoolHouse Connection, said while it is important to track homelessness to refer students to needed social services, "the actual education itself and its role in helping children and youth attain good jobs to not be in poverty to really definitively alleviate poverty and never experience it again, that's not always acknowledged, or prioritized or acted upon. When we frame homelessness as a housing issue, we inadvertently sideline the early care and education, which are so vital."

Duffield added it will be hard to move the needle for performance overall "if we don't address those barriers very intentionally and successfully through policy objectives."

The law requires professional development and training around how to best support these students, but the most important training is around empathy, growth mindset and providing a supportive environment — one in which students will not be forced to choose between lunch, which for these students might be their only meal of the day, thanks to the guarantees provided by the free and reduced lunch program, and school work.

Instead of punishing students for behaviors like falling asleep in class, failing to complete assignments or being regularly late or absent, educators should recognize these as potential symptoms of homelessness, according to a U.S. Department of Education tip sheet for educators.

It's also important to recognize that many of these students experienced trauma even before becoming homeless and to employ trauma-informed pedagogy to help these students succeed. Many schools are concerned about not having enough school psychologists and counselors to help students deal with outside issues, including homelessness and other traumas they may have experienced.

"Mental health issues and teen suicide were a big topic of conversation [among principals]," said National Association of Secondary School Principals Director of Advocacy Amanda Karhuse. "There is a definite need for more mental health professionals in schools. We've communicated to school leaders that the Student Support and Academic Enrichment Grants (Title IV block grant) would provide funding for schools to hire additional school counselors and psychologists."

"Unfortunately, the funding was so low in FY 2017 that very few schools will actually have access to this funding," she said.