

EDUCATIONAL EQUITY & CORONAVIRUS: STUDENTS EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS

As state leaders continue to respond to the coronavirus pandemic, public schools across Michigan remain closed for the remainder of the school year. We know that school closures exacerbate the existing inequities in our education system — presenting the most significant challenges to students and families who are underserved in normal circumstances, including students experiencing homelessness.

In the 2018-19 school year, Michigan's public schools educated nearly 35,000 students experiencing homelessness. For many students experiencing homelessness, schools not only offer access to an education, but also stability, a safe space, and in many cases crucial non-academic services and supports. With the massive instability families experiencing homelessness already face exacerbated by school closings and other community disruptions and many schools transitioning unevenly to distance learning, this period brings enormous risks for students experiencing homelessness.

Under the federal education law known as the McKinney-Vento Act, children and youth are considered homeless if they are staying in shelters, cars, motels, or sharing the housing of others due to loss of housing, economic hardship or similar reasons. Even during the pandemic, the McKinney-Vento Act and its important civil rights protections remain in effect, including those requiring school districts to designate a liaison, identify and enroll students experiencing homelessness, and remove barriers to their education. McKinney-Vento liaisons are essential personnel who link students and families with resources through schools and community organizations. Already, these liaisons and other district staff have gone to great lengths to ensure meal distribution, access to technology and other vital supports.

As state, school district and school leaders continue to plan for and respond to these uncertain times, they must prioritize the services and support students experiencing homelessness need. To ensure that prolonged school closures do not deepen educational inequities, here are 7 specific steps that the state should ensure that school districts take to promote instructional equity and preserve student well-being for students experiencing homelessness.



Additional outreach and identification efforts

School districts should prioritize outreach to students experiencing homelessness, since school closures place students experiencing homelessness at elevated health and safety risks. Students experiencing homelessness may have difficulty meeting their basic needs and may not have access to technology or a stable place to self-isolate, let alone learn. School outreach should include information on local resources and offer assistance to families in accessing services.

As the coronavirus continues to impact the economy and employment, schools should also work to identify students who may be newly experiencing housing instability due to the crisis and ensure that they receive adequate support. This outreach should be sustained and frequent, taking into account students' and families' high rates of mobility.



Ensure equitable access to learning materials

Students experiencing homelessness must have equitable access to instructional materials while schools are closed. Any school that relies on remote or distance learning should provide all students experiencing homelessness with the required materials, such as computer/tablets and a hotspot to access the Internet.

Schools should grant additional flexibility with deadlines and participation requirements, accommodating students who are highly mobile and/or cannot participate in online learning opportunities due to homeless living situations. Schools should also communicate to parents about their expectations and resources available, recognizing that many parents will not have access to personal leave or sick days to work with their children. In particular, schools should ensure that families who speak languages other than English are supported in navigating remote learning technology and helping their children learn from wherever they may be staying.

Finally, most children experiencing homelessness are not in living arrangements conducive to remote learning. For this reason, child care centers that are open to children of first responders and other essential staff should be open to children experiencing homelessness if they are under-enrolled, consistent with social distancing and public health directives.



3

Work closely with teachers, McKinney-Vento liaisons, and counselors to provide support

Schools should engage teachers in preparing instructional materials to continue students' learning. This can include providing grade- and instruction-appropriate periodicals, texts, links to instructional videos and take-home activities. McKinney-Vento liaisons should be continuously engaged in connecting students experiencing homelessness to the learning materials

that the school has made available, including identifying and providing the additional supports these students need. In addition, liaisons should ask parents if there are younger children in the household, and let parents know how to access available early learning opportunities, including how to enroll children in pre-kindergarten for the 2020-21 school year where it is offered. Schools should also work with school counselors to anticipate and meet the needs of students who rely on school counselors and psychologists for socio-emotional support, for postsecondary planning and for whom additional time away from school can itself be emotionally stressful.



4

Provide breakfast and lunch to students who rely on school meals

School districts should coordinate outreach and delivery of meals for students who qualify for school meals to explicitly meet the needs of students in temporary housing. Schools should offer grab-and-go meals at school sites and shelters and other sites in the community that serve families experiencing

homelessness, as well as provide meal delivery when transportation is a barrier. Schools should also help families understand how to access food for all family members, including infants and toddlers as well as parents and other caregivers.



5

Coordinate with trusted community partners

Schools should work with community-based organizations, faith communities, after-school providers and other trusted partners to ensure clear and consistent communication to students and families about accurate coronavirus information and the resources and supports available. Schools should also connect with local organizations that may offer programming or other services for students when schools are closed (including virtually), consistent with guidance from health officials, and make resources available through these partners. McKinney-Vento

liaisons should help coordinate services for students experiencing homelessness, including by working with shelter providers and distributing hygiene and cleaning products. All communications and outreach should be in multiple languages and include visuals to meet the community's needs.



Connect families to other services they may need

While schools cannot be expected to do everything, they are a vital and trusted hub for students and their families in a time of uncertainty. Schools should work with their local government partners so that they are able to point families to health, housing, legal, domestic violence, child abuse and neglect, and other resources — recognizing that this may be a period of additional economic hardship for families, particularly for students experiencing homelessness. Schools should also use Title I funds as needed to meet the needs of students experiencing homelessness by providing clothing, school supplies and other essential resources. All communications and outreach should be in multiple languages and include visuals to meet the community's needs.



Start planning now for when schools reopen

The state should create templates for school districts to plan now on how they will bolster and accelerate teaching and learning when in-person classes resume. These preparations should specifically address the needs of students experiencing homelessness.

Long-term district plans should outline how they will allocate resources — including staff, time and materials — for extended learning time during the summer (if possible due to the pandemic) and for the 2020-21 school year, based on student need ensuring that the most vulnerable students are prioritized for instructional and socio-emotional support and opportunities to catch up and advance academically.

This should include information on the estimated cost of implementing the Plan. The Plan should be published on the Michigan Department of Education and district websites.

Also, schools should prepare to provide intensive training to teachers and other school personnel and revisit curriculum before the 2020-21 school year in order to address learning gaps resulting from school closures while helping all students meet grade-level academic expectations. This preparation must recognize the trauma that students have experienced and address their socio-emotional needs.

