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Vermont Agency of Education McKinney-Vento Services Assessment

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Executive Summary

The U.S. Department of Education mandates that homeless children and youth receive assistance to facilitate access and to remove barriers to education. Subtitle VII-B of the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act authorizes the federal Education for Homeless Children and Youth (EHCY) Program and is the primary federal legislation related to the education of children and youth experiencing homelessness. The Act provides for the provision of services for children and youth from preschool through 12th grade, including for unaccompanied youth.

Under the Vermont Agency of Education (AOE), Vermont's EHCY program ensures that PK-12 students experiencing homelessness have equal access to the same free, appropriate public education provided to other Vermont children, with the opportunity to meet the same challenging State academic standards. Within its statutory purpose, Vermont's EHCY program seeks to identify and address the challenges that children and youth experiencing homelessness may face in enrolling, attending, and succeeding in school.

AOE's targeted support for students experiencing homelessness and their families is critical to maintaining strong educational outcomes in the state. By nearly every measure of academic success, homeless students are more likely to struggle. Students experiencing homelessness are significantly less likely to attain reading/language arts and mathematics proficiency in comparison to their peers and are about 25% as likely to graduate on time. In the 21-22 school year, about 58% of homeless students graduated in four years, compared to 83% of their peers.¹

From April to November 2023, Noonmark Services worked under the direction of the State Coordinator for Homeless Education to conduct a statewide assessment of Vermont's McKinney-Vento implementation to understand how well Vermont's educational system and stakeholders are fulfilling the federal McKinney-Vento mandates, and the extent to which children and youth experiencing homelessness have equitable educational opportunities at parity with those of students who are not homeless.

A total of 112 individuals provided quantitative and qualitative assessment information through surveys, interviews, and focus groups. All of Vermont's Local Education Agency (LEA)-based McKinney-Vento liaisons were encouraged to participate in focus groups and to complete surveys, with a 78% participation rate in the survey. In addition, the assessment included individual interviews, small group interviews, and focus groups with: superintendents and other educators; representatives from community-based organization serving homeless individuals, families, and people who have experienced sexual and domestic violence, unaccompanied and homeless youth; representatives

¹ U.S. Department of Education, EdFacts

from early childhood education entities including preschools; and state agency representatives serving families and children. A survey of parents and unaccompanied youth who were either currently or formerly homeless was also conducted.

Strengths of the Current System

The assessment identified several strengths of Vermont's current implementation of McKinney-Vento services for homeless students and their families. Every LEA in the state has a designated liaison for homeless students. Liaisons, school administrators, and community partners described a wide range of effective strategies and practices that are in place to promote the availability of McKinney-Vento services, identify homeless students, and provide them with a wide range of educational supports as well as connections to basic needs services and supports.

Most liaisons reported that in their LEA:

- Staff have been trained and regularly provide trauma-informed responses to chronic absenteeism and truancy.
- Brochures, posters and/or other materials about the McKinney-Vento Act are posted in schools and the community.
- Children under 6 experiencing homelessness are provided with priority to enroll in early childhood education programs, or the LEA has set aside early childhood slots for children experiencing homelessness, or the LEA moves children experiencing homelessness to the top of waiting lists.
- Liaisons partner with community agencies to share information about the McKinney-Vento Act.

In addition, liaisons reported that their LEA routinely provides a variety of services for homeless students and families. A majority of LEAs reported providing:

- Transportation (100%)
- Basic needs such as hygiene items and clothing (95%)
- Enrollment in afterschool programs (88%)
- Counseling, case management and/or mental health services (80%)
- Targeted academic coaching, mentoring or other academic support (70%)

Liaisons generally reported satisfaction with the professional development, training, and technical assistance opportunities that are available to them through the AOE State Coordinator for Homeless Education. Liaisons demonstrated a high level of engagement, were knowledgeable about the McKinney-Vento Act and their roles within LEAs, and provided substantive input about the ways schools are effectively engaging and supporting homeless students and families.

Shortcomings of the Current System

Federal and state data sources confirm that the number of homeless families with children, and the number of homeless students served by LEAs are growing in all regions of Vermont. All assessment participants reported being impacted by the significant increase in the number of homeless students and families across Vermont. Several significant gaps were identified, including:

- There is no statewide data system for LEAs to track and/or communicate about homeless students, making it difficult to ensure that students receive consistent support when they move within the state.
- Definitions of “homeless” differ across state agencies and programs, making it challenging for LEAs and community organizations to clearly determine which students and families are eligible for services under various support programs.
- Staffing resources to support homeless students vary widely across LEAs. Those with the most robust services for homeless students have full- or part-time staff positions such as “family specialists” or “home school coordinators.” Many (but not all) of these positions have been funded with temporary resources established in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, making it unclear whether positions will be able to be sustained in the future.
- LEAs have the greatest challenges identifying preschool children under age 6 who are homeless, as well as unaccompanied minors, who are most often older high school students. Liaisons were confident that both preschoolers and unaccompanied minors are well served once they are identified as homeless, but most reported that systems and outreach are inadequate to be certain all students in each group are identified.
- In the 22-23 school year AOE-directed funding provided LEAs with about \$668 per homeless student to provide services (with McKinney-Vento and Title 1A Homeless Reservation Funding). Especially in LEAs serving the largest numbers of homeless students, the available financial and staffing resources are insufficient in comparison to the number of students and levels of need.
- There are differences in how LEAs interpret and understand some McKinney-Vento requirements (especially related to students’ school of origin), suggesting opportunities to provide additional training resources to support more consistency across LEAs.
- Transportation is the single greatest challenge LEAs confront in McKinney-Vento implementation, with issues ranging from lack of transportation providers such as buses or taxis, costly and time-consuming demands to transport students to other LEAs, difficulty implementing the requirements when both school and community transportation systems are under-resourced, and challenges related to understanding how to implement McKinney-Vento transportation obligations effectively and efficiently for growing numbers of students.

At the local level, most LEAs are partnering well with social service agencies to help students and families as much as possible, but all stakeholders acknowledged capacity

limitations that may impede their effectiveness. As Vermont confronts a growing housing and homelessness crisis, stakeholders uniformly identified opportunities for greater cross-system coordination.

The following detailed assessment findings describe the current McKinney-Vento implementation, as well as the needs identified by school staff, homeless families, state agency representatives, and community-based organizations. This information may be of use to stakeholders at multiple points in Vermont's educational, social service, and family support systems to consider opportunities to continuously improve services that uphold equal educational access for homeless children and youth.

Introduction

Across numerous measures, homelessness in Vermont is rising, creating challenging conditions for communities, with impacts cutting across public safety, housing, social services, healthcare, and many other facets of community wellbeing. Limited affordable housing, challenging economic conditions, impacts from the COVID-19 pandemic, and numerous other factors have led Vermont to have the second highest rate of homelessness in the United States, second only to California.²

In the 22-23 school year, Vermont LEAs reported serving 1,620 students who were experiencing homelessness, or approximately 1.9% of the state's student population. By comparison, approximately 2.2% of U.S. students experience homelessness each year.³ According to the 2023 Point-in-time Count, an estimated 3,295 people experienced homelessness on a single night in Vermont in 2023, at a rate of 43.1 per every 10,000 residents.⁴ This represents a 19% increase from 2022, and a 68.5% increase since 2007 when there were 1,035 homeless people identified. The number of homeless households with children increased 36% from 857 in 2022 to 1,172 in 2023.

As the frontline access point to support children and families in most cities and towns, schools have had to respond rapidly to the rising numbers of homeless students. The U.S. Department of Education mandates that homeless children and youth receive assistance to facilitate access to education, and to remove barriers. Subtitle VII-B of The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act authorizes the federal Education for Homeless Children and Youth (EHCY) Program and is the primary federal legislation related to the education of children and youth experiencing homelessness. It was reauthorized in December 2015 by Title IX, Part A, of Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). The Act provides for the provision of services for children and youth from preschool through 12th grade, including for unaccompanied youth.

Under the Vermont Agency of Education, Vermont's EHCY program ensures that PK-12 students experiencing homelessness have equal access to the same free, appropriate public education provided to other Vermont children, with the opportunity to meet the same challenging State academic standards. Within its statutory purpose, Vermont's EHCY program seeks to identify and address the challenges that children and youth experiencing homelessness may face in enrolling, attending, and succeeding in school.

² de Sousa, T. et al. 2022. The 2022 Annual Homelessness Assessment Report (AHAR) to Congress. U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, Office of Community Planning and Development.

<https://www.huduser.gov/portal/sites/default/files/pdf/2022-ahar-part-1.pdf>

³ U.S. Department of Education. n.d. ED Facts Data Files, Homeless Students.

<https://www2.ed.gov/about/inits/ed/edfacts/data-files/school-status-data.html>

⁴ Vermont's Annual Statewide Point-in-time Count of those experiencing homelessness 2023. Chittenden County Homeless Alliance and the Vermont Coalition to End Homelessness. <https://www.cchavt.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/2023-Vermont-Point-in-Time-Report-6-6-23.pdf>

From April to November 2023, Noonmark Services worked under the direction of the State Coordinator for Homeless Education to conduct a statewide assessment of Vermont's McKinney-Vento implementation to understand how well Vermont's educational system and stakeholders are fulfilling the federal McKinney-Vento mandates, and the extent to which children and youth experiencing homelessness have equitable educational opportunities at parity with those of students who are not homeless. This report summarizes the assessment methods and findings, which can be used by stakeholders at multiple points in Vermont's educational, social service, and family support systems to consider opportunities to continuously improve services that uphold equal educational access for homeless children and youth.

Methodology

Noonmark conducted a mixed method assessment of Vermont's current delivery of and capacity to provide the federally mandated McKinney-Vento services. The three-member consultant group reviewed extant data, including publicly available data on homeless students from 2009 through 2022, provided through a public information request to the Vermont Agency on Education, as well as numerous recent reports on the current state of homelessness, impact of homelessness in schools, systems of care for unaccompanied youth, and others. The team collected quantitative data including a survey of all of Vermont's LEA-based McKinney-Vento liaisons, and a survey of parents and unaccompanied youth who were either currently or formerly homeless. Individual interviews, small group interviews, and focus groups were conducted with liaisons, superintendents and other educators, representatives from community-based organizations serving homeless individuals, families, people who have experienced sexual and domestic violence, unaccompanied and homeless youth; representatives from early childhood education entities including pre-schools; and state agency representatives serving families and children.

Surveys for school liaisons and for parents/caregivers and unaccompanied youth were developed by reviewing survey templates provided by national technical assistance providers on early care and education for homeless children and adapting survey items to address the specific scope of Vermont's assessment. Surveys were conducted using SurveyMonkey. The survey of liaisons was disseminated through the current liaison contact list maintained by the AOE State Coordinator for Homeless Education. The survey of parents/caregivers and unaccompanied youth was disseminated electronically using SurveyMonkey, and through hard copies distributed at access points where homeless parents/caregivers and unaccompanied youth receive services. Outreach to parents/ caregivers and unaccompanied youth was extensive, including emailing the survey to school contacts, social service organizations, statewide networks, and youth-serving organizations statewide.

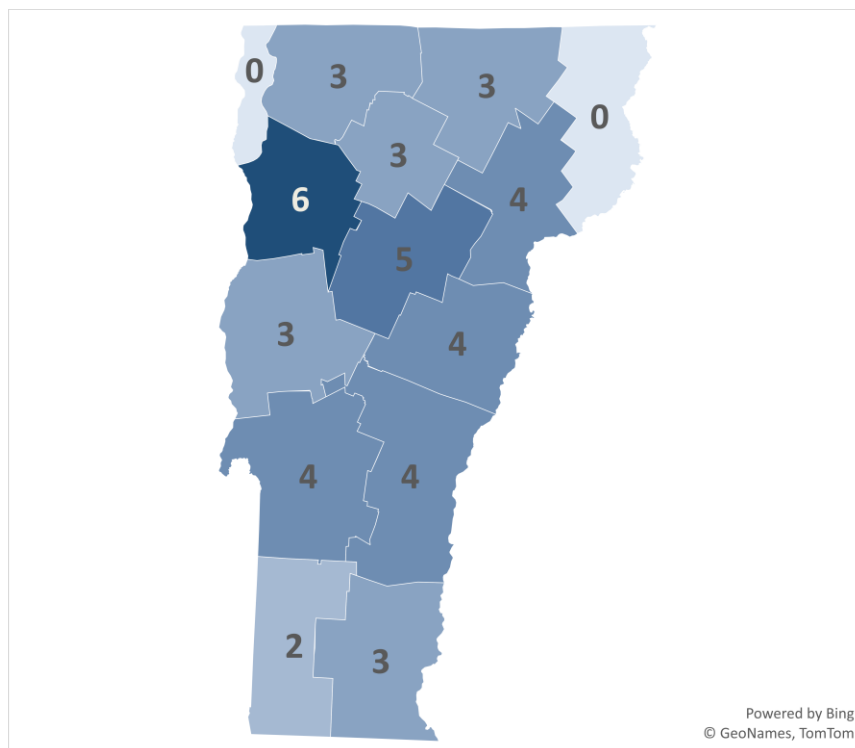
Table 1. Number of participants reached through assessment strategies

Strategy/Group	Number
Liaison interviews/focus groups	27
Liaison surveys	40
Key informant interviews (community organizations, state agencies, educators)	36
Parent/caregiver and unaccompanied youth survey	9

From these sources, Noonmark engaged with a total of 112 individuals who provided quantitative and qualitative assessment information. The number of respondents reached through each assessment method is detailed in Table 1. The liaison response rate to the survey was 78%, based on the total current pool of 51 liaisons that received the survey. The low response rate from parents/caregivers and unaccompanied youth is attributed to the numerous stresses and challenges people who are currently or formerly homeless experience, as well as the inability to provide financial or tangible incentives for participation based on current AOE policies. Notably, there is duplication in the school liaisons who participated in focus groups and those who completed the liaison survey.

Liaisons from LEAs located in 12 of Vermont’s 14 counties responded to the survey. No survey respondents indicated working in Essex or Grand Isle counties. No individuals serving Grand Isle or Essex counties participated in interviews or focus groups. The largest group of liaisons had been in that role for one to three years (40%), with 32% serving as a liaison for one year or less and 28% serving as a liaison for more than three years.

Figure 1: Map of Vermont Counties Showing Number of Respondents



Noonmark received nine completed surveys from parents/caregivers, which included one survey from an unaccompanied youth. Respondents were currently living in Addison, Bennington, Chittenden, Lamoille, Washington, and Windham Counties. Data from all sources were reviewed and summarized thematically. Qualitative data from interviews, focus groups, and open-ended survey comments was coded by keyword and theme, and grouped based on occurrence frequency. Statements were permitted to fit a maximum of two themes, meaning that some statements were counted twice when content was coded to match two separate theme clusters. The following tables detail the clustered theme groups with the frequency of each theme.

Table 2.1 Thematic clusters of qualitative assessment information – What AOE supports are working well?

Qualitative Assessment Information	Frequency
Communication from AOE, consultation with AOE staff, and problem-solving support to liaisons	24
Collaboration with other liaisons	8
State-level systems and funding	7

Qualitative Assessment Information	Frequency
Providing direct services, identification of eligible children	17
Most valued resources for homeless kids and families	22
In-school spaces	14

Table 2.2 Thematic clusters of qualitative assessment information – What AOE supports could be improved?

Qualitative Assessment Information	Frequency
State-level systems and funding	28
Increase coordinated training and responsivity across systems of care	21
Needs at the school district/supervisory union level	20
Supporting unaccompanied youth	13
Provision of direct supports for McKinney-Vento families and children	13
Liaisons’ support and professional development needs	6

Table 2.3 Thematic clusters of qualitative assessment information – Other

Qualitative Assessment Information	Frequency
Transportation	49
Resources & training	22
Strategies for identifying students who are homeless & outreach methods	66
Strategies for supporting students once they have been identified	40

Qualitative Assessment Information	Frequency
Discussion on populations affected by homelessness or not attending school	10
Data collection and sharing	49
Collaboration with community partners	68

The combination of quantitative and qualitative data from multiple vantage points provides a snapshot of current activities in Vermont to provide educational access for homeless children and youth.

Assessment Results

Comments about the McKinney-Vento Act

“One thing that's working is that the process ensures a family or student is hearing from the school, ‘We see you, we care about you, we want you to be here.’ Without the law and liaison, that might be lost.”

“McKinney-Vento addresses the problems associated with homelessness but not the broader problem of homelessness - we have students that are McKinney-Vento eligible for a long time. . . how do we address that?”

“McKinney-Vento is an entitlement. LEAs have to do that. The housing crisis response and emergency shelter aren’t entitlements. There can be sources of tension on the ground when dealing with a particular case. . . a family might be staying with friends-- they meet the McKinney-Vento definition but are not considered literally homeless and wouldn't appear in the homeless count or be able to access resources for those who're literally homeless.”

“Need to rectify the difference between McKinney-Vento definition of homelessness and the HUD definition. The state says our community has low levels of homelessness and yet we need to accept all forms of homelessness. . . schools are serving them with wraparound services.”

LEA Capacity to Deliver McKinney-Vento Act Components

Educators and liaisons described a wide range of readiness, capacity, and approaches to serving homeless students. Some districts/supervisory unions have staff in a variety of roles who identify and provide support to homeless students, and in others, the homeless liaison is the main source of services and support. In addition to the AOE-required McKinney-Vento liaison role, most liaisons (87.5%) indicated that every school within their LEA has a designated contact who works in coordination with the liaison.

Liaisons' Roles and Time Available to Provide Support to Homeless Students and Families

Most liaisons estimated spend five hours or less per week (75%), with 15 (37.5%) liaisons reporting spending one to five hours, and 15 liaisons (37.5%) reporting spending under one hour. Nine liaisons (22.5%) indicated that they spent five to ten hours per week. Only one liaison indicated spending more than 10 hours per week supporting homeless students and families.

Most liaisons indicated that their McKinney-Vento liaison duties are either in addition to another role they hold in their district/supervisory union or are one component of a larger student/family support role.

Liaisons were asked whether they typically have sufficient time to provide McKinney-Vento services within the time allotted for their role. Of survey respondents, 24 liaisons (60%) indicated that they “usually” or “always” have enough time; 11 liaisons (27.5%) stated that they “occasionally” have enough time; and five responders (12.5%) stated that they “rarely” have enough time.

Among districts represented by survey respondents, 55% have a “family specialist,” “navigator,” “home-school coordinator” or other staff member who supports children and families who are struggling with basic needs. Responders described a variety of reasons for adding these positions, including recognizing that liaisons did not have sufficient capacity to provide the needed level of support; seeking a stronger response to truancy; seeing increased needs stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic; and recognition that families, including those who are homeless, encounter numerous barriers that can become obstacles for meeting students' educational needs.

Comments about LEA Capacity

“The need for a growth in capacity of the homeless liaison is real. Our registrar does assist with some of these duties, as I do not have the capacity alone. We are following the regulations outlined, maybe not as timely as we would hope, but they are happening. We let families know what is available to them, but they are not always interested. . . We work closely with our neighboring districts to support our shared families.”

“The biggest challenge is capacity of staff throughout the district. As the liaison, I also have a wide and deep variety of other responsibilities. I rely heavily on building principals to help when I am not available due to the other responsibilities I hold.”

“Able to use McKinney-Vento grant to hire a homeless student support counselor/home school coordinator. Having a position has been great for engagement, linking to the child protection team. We added a family engagement specialist who worked closely to understand why students were not attending. We are learning more about barriers for homeless students by collecting data. There is a half-time coordinator in our local budget at the high school this year. We are trying to collect more data to prove the need for our budget.”

“I think the disservice to families occurs when registrars find out they are homeless and do not give them the correct school choice info. Many times we have families come to us saying that the other school said that since they are homeless in our district that they have to enroll. They don't give them the choice of staying at the school of origin. . . we have had families tell us the agency has told them they have school choice to any school.”

Capacity to Carry Out McKinney-Vento Act Duties

LEAs vary in the extent to which they implement McKinney-Vento services and practices related to sharing information with the community, identifying, and referring students (including those under age 6).

Most liaisons reported that the following duties are “always” met:

- Children and youth experiencing homelessness are enrolled in, and have a full and equal opportunity to succeed in, school within the district (93%)
- Children and youth experiencing homelessness have access to and receive educational services including Early Head Start, Head Start programs, early intervention services under Part C of the IDEA, and other preschool programs administered by the school district (85%)

- Parents, guardians, and unaccompanied youth are informed of the educational and related opportunities available to their children, and are provided with meaningful opportunities to participate in the education of their children (88%)
- Parents, guardians, and unaccompanied youth are fully informed of all the transportation services available to McKinney-Vento students, including transportation to the school of origin, and are assisted in accessing transportation (90%)
- Unaccompanied youth always “are enrolled in school” (88%) and “have opportunities to meet the same challenging State academic standards as other children and youth” (80%).

Liaisons were the *least likely* to agree that children and youth in their LEA always “receive referrals to health care, dental, mental health, substance abuse, housing and other appropriate services” (28%).

Practices to Promote the McKinney-Vento Act

Liaisons were the *most likely* to agree that they post information about the McKinney-Vento Act in schools and community locations (55%), provide priority placement in early childhood programs for children under age 6 (53%), and partner with community agencies to reach eligible students (50%). Liaisons were the least likely to agree that they share information about the McKinney-Vento Act in multiple languages (28%); frequently inform families and students in schoolwide communications about the McKinney-Vento Act (20%); and frequently share messages about the McKinney-Vento Act on LEA social media (13%).

Table 3. To what extent do LEAs implement McKinney-Vento services and practices

To what extent does your LEA implement the following McKinney-Vento services and practices?	Agree	Disagree	Not Sure
Brochures, posters and/or other materials about the Act are posted in schools and in the community.	55%	18%	28%
LEA provides children under 6 experiencing homelessness with priority to enroll in early childhood education programs, sets aside early childhood slots for children experiencing homelessness, or moves children experiencing homelessness to the top of waiting lists.	53%	13%	35%
LEA partners with community agencies to share information about the Act.	50%	15%	35%

To what extent does your LEA implement the following McKinney-Vento services and practices?	Agree	Disagree	Not Sure
Information about the Act and services is shared in multiple languages, and all languages spoken in the LEA.	28%	30%	43%
Information about the Act and services appears frequently in communications with families and students, using emails, texts and letters sent home.	20%	45%	35%
Information about the Act and services appears frequently on school and LEA social media.	13%	48%	40%

LEA and Liaison Professional Development and Support Needs

Liaisons provided rich information about the professional development training, technical assistance, and support they receive from the Agency on Education and other sources, as well as the ways they provide professional development for educators within their LEAs. In focus groups and interviews, liaisons consistently described receiving significant assistance from the AOE State Coordinator for Homeless Education that is reliable, timely, and responsive to resolving individual challenges at the LEA level.

- Most liaisons (55%) stated that they provide professional development about the McKinney-Vento Act to all LEA staff at least annually.
- Most liaisons agreed (65%) that “Staff have been trained and regularly provide trauma-informed responses to chronic absenteeism and truancy.”

In interviews and focus groups, liaisons stated that they especially value training offered by AOE to support onboarding for new liaisons, as well as opportunities to network with and learn from experienced liaisons in other LEAs throughout the year.

Many LEAs access one-on-one technical assistance from the State Coordinator for Homeless Education when they encounter challenging situations or unique cases where greater coordination (including across AOE divisions) is needed. Liaisons are interested in having more short, user-friendly web-based resources such as FAQs and topic guides to provide clarification on common issues.

Comments about LEAs' AOE support needs

“There needs to be a mechanism and procedure (i.e. requiring a bid meeting in the case of a dispute) for the AOE to provide not only guide but facilitate dispute resolution between districts. In some cases, the AOE needs to make the decision when two districts cannot agree because there is NO provision for the disagreement between districts. Some districts are wonderful with whom to collaborate and others are not. By the AOE failing to resolve disputes between districts, they are pitting districts against each other. Katy Preston has been a great resource for our district but could even more valuable if she could make decisions based on a bid meeting.”

“More information doesn't always feel better or more helpful-- in learning so many things in so many different areas, I'm often looking for efficiency. Often AOE's response is to provide more information-- but rarely do I need a 200-page guide. What I really like are checklists or bulleted lists with hyperlinks so if I need to dig into one part of process I know where to look.”

Meeting Educational Needs of Homeless Children and Families

Assessment participants described broad efforts to address the needs of students and families creatively and comprehensively within the constraints of the resources available within schools. About one-third of LEAs (37.5%) have a staff person who provides some outreach and services in the places where students live (including outreach at motels, shelters, and other community settings), and nearly two-thirds (62.5%) never provide services outside of schools.

Comments about Identifying and Tracking Students

“We have kids who disappear. Sometimes for young kids, their families leave, we have no ability to track them. They are our most at-risk families—I don’t want to take them off of our database— it is unsettling. I made a referral to DCF because we had to disenroll by law, but what could/ should we be doing to identify these students? My guess is they are often not enrolling in other schools.”

“One data metric that's been interesting is chronic absenteeism-- When we isolate students experiencing homelessness. . . 75% of those students were chronically absent. This is one of those pieces of data that questions how we dial in on how to get kids to go to school.”

“In this county it is hard to see truancy challenges because of family mobility. . . there is a huge risk of truancy for young children who are homeless. They are new school every year, it may take a long time to identify a homeless family– tracking is hard.”

“There is so much shame around homelessness parents aren’t coming out-- we worked hard to change that here. . . families from other districts say ‘they never told me,’ or I didn't know’.”

Assessment participants described a wide range of outreach and identification processes to identify students who may be eligible for services under the McKinney-Vento Act, such as disseminating information at the start of each school year, screening incoming students at the start of school, sharing information with local community partners, providing self-referral forms via LEA websites, training school registrars to identify students who may be homeless, reaching out to all families who received McKinney-Vento support in the prior school year to check in on their needs, and numerous other approaches.

Once identified, liaisons, other school staff, community-based organizations that provide referrals all serve to provide connections and support. Support services range from addressing transportation needs and connecting homeless students to free or low-cost afterschool programs, to conducting home visits to provide outreach and family support.

Comments About Serving Homeless Students and Families

“I think people would be surprised that school system is doing this job– we have crock pots stored to give to youth staying in hotels– we are running in to storage issues– cooking meals, collecting food.”

“Our location, poverty level, the types of housing in our district-- all create a lot of transitional family situations– We are as urban as Vermont gets, we have all the challenges that go with that. Our burden is different from other parts of Vermont-- this is the state’s problem and needs statewide support.”

“Educators are not social service providers– it is difficult to think about these services because we work in education. These systems are not replicated elsewhere in the state– we need ‘systemic knitting up the line’ -- if community social services were working well, we would not be needed.”

“Schools have to serve kids – they show up every day. We can’t keep a waitlist – state agencies need to recognize that and fund the work.”

Transportation Needs

Managing transportation needs for homeless students was one of the most commonly discussed topics by stakeholders in interviews, focus groups, and surveys. In many districts, rural barriers, lack of public transit options, limited school bus driver availability and other issues make it especially difficult when students must be transported to another district that may be an hour or more away. Individuals at all parts of the current system understand LEAs’ obligations for facilitating transportation for students.

In response to “How do you/your child usually get to school?” most parent/caregiver respondents reported that a family member drives and does not receive reimbursement (45%). Transportation via taxi was the next most common response (22%). However, nearly all districts/supervisory unions (98%) indicated that they reimburse family members who drive students to school. Most also indicated contracting with a taxi company (63%) and/or providing a district-owned bus that transports students. Only 15% of respondents indicated that their district/supervisory union provides gas cards to homeless families to support school transportation.

Figure 2: How do you/your child usually get to school?

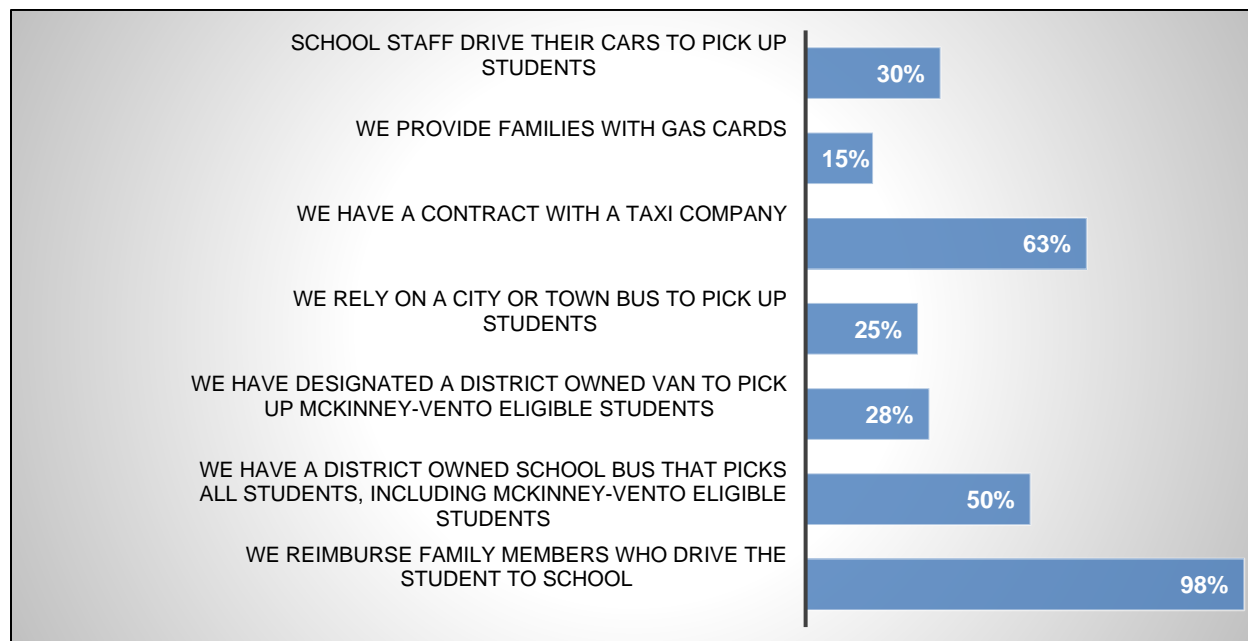


Figure 2 Data Table: How do you/your child usually get to school?

Transportation Strategy	Percent Using
School staff drive their cars to pick up students	30%
We provide families with gas cards	15%
We have a contract with a taxi company	63%
We rely on a city or town bus to pick up students	25%
We have designated a district owned van to pick up McKinney Vento eligible students	28%
We have a district owned school bus that picks all students, including McKinney Vento eligible students	50%
We reimburse family members who drive the student to school	98%

Assessment participants voiced concerns and questions about the difficulty of managing logistics to transport homeless students, costs associated with providing transportation, and challenges for schools when there are few viable options in some communities.

Comments about Transportation

“We aren't tapping into transportation budget as much as we could because we can't find the rides.”

“There isn't a lot of understanding from AOE about what is happening in the field—in rural districts the transportation issue in our supervisory union has ZERO solutions. We have literally hired a limo.”

“We do everything we can think of-- staff drive, we reimburse family members or kids themselves, provide gas cards. I've met them at the pumps, hired taxi service, and asked buses to create a special stop close to the edge of town if someone can get them close.”

“The scope of McKinney-Vento is too narrow—we need to interpret ‘barrier’ as broadly as possible. Many things prevent kids from being available for learning. There is no enforcement for the McKinney-Vento law, so there are vastly different resources and programs—it is not only about transportation or finding clean clothes to wear to school.”

What Services or Resources have Families/Youth Used in the Last 12 Months?

Motel stays were the most commonly used resource by respondents to the parent/caregiver survey (67%), followed by “school provided supplies” and “help accessing benefits.”

Figure 3: Services/Resources Used in the Last 12 Months

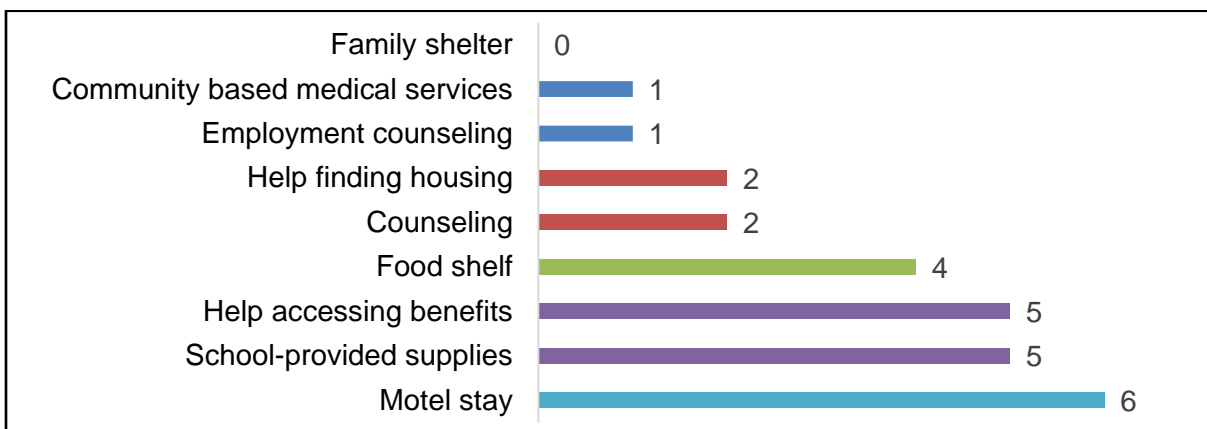


Figure 3 Data Table: Services/Resources Used in the Last 12 Months

Service/Resource	Number Used
Family shelter	0

Service/Resource	Number Used
Community based medical services	1
Employment counseling	1
Help finding housing	2
Counseling	2
Food shelf	4
Help accessing benefits	5
School-provided supplies	5
Motel stay	6

Where do Families/Youth Go to Receive Help?

Parents/caregivers most commonly reported receiving help from state agencies, such as the DCF Economic Services Division, and friends/family members. No parents/caregivers reported accessing help from a place of worship, and only one individual identified a Parent Child Center as a place they sought assistance.

Liaisons reported on the services LEAs provide. All liaison respondents (100%) reported providing transportation, and 95% reported providing support for basic needs such as clothing and hygiene items. Some educators and community-based organizations shared details about on-site spaces within schools where students and/or families could access laundry and receive clothing and other necessities. Nearly all liaisons also provide connections to afterschool program enrollment (88%); counseling, case management, and other mental health services (80%); and support for academic coaching, mentoring, or tutoring (70%). Liaisons were the least likely to provide education about financial literacy (35%) or nutrition education (38%).

Collaboration with Social Service Providers, State Agencies, and Community-based Organizations

At the local level, LEAs described a wide range of collaboration with social services, community-based organizations, and state agencies to serve homeless students and families. Most LEAs consistently work with local housing agencies, food shelves, and family resource programs to help students address non-academic basic needs. Many liaisons expressed that they have limited time available to cultivate new relationships outside of their schools, but that when relationships are in place, they are highly valued and working well.

There is limited collaboration between LEAs except when they must coordinate transportation services for a student. Opportunities for peer-to-peer learning across LEAs (such as the State Coordinator for Homeless Education’s virtual Office Hours) were frequently identified by liaisons as a valuable component of their professional development.

Within AOE divisions there is a high level of collaboration among student and family support programs. However, interviews with other agencies within AHS suggested that collaboration and coordination outside of AOE to serve homeless students and families is limited. Opportunities for intra-agency and interagency coordination include establishing shared definitions of homelessness; identifying policies and practices that may impede or facilitate access to support for homeless families; examining data collection, sharing, and availability; and mapping how state resources are distributed through various programs to better understand how LEAs can receive consistent, well-coordinated support to help homeless students.

Comments About School/Community Collaboration

“[External organizations] want to involve schools - schools just don't have the capacity to engage in these conversations, so naturally there is a divide and schools are not always aware of what services are out there.”

“We have some local food banks and good connections in our schools, and also created our own task force/Care Team with a medical social worker from the medical center in our district, our counselors, and others”

“As liaison, I often connect with elementary special educators, social workers, etc—they often know better what families need. . . often families need case worker or more support than is available-- especially with flooding-- it is hard asking families what they need when we know the resources aren't there. We don't have the resources in the community to meaningfully help them rather than adding something to their place. I tend to focus on transportation and money for supplies or clothes and connect with counselors to help them best they can, but sometimes it feels really contrived.”

“We see a lot of homelessness connected to opioid epidemic, not necessarily directly but indirectly. . . those kids need a lot more resources than just a house. With my magic wand, there would be a local task force with people coming together at same table saying ‘here’s this family, how can we all have a piece of supporting them?’”

Assessment Gaps and Limitations

As discussed in the methodology, challenges in data collection resulted in limited information on some topics. In addition, some topics may have been outside of the scope of the inquiry. As in any assessment of similar scope, themes and topics are those that were the most frequently raised by the most stakeholders, across a variety of stakeholder groups and contexts. As a result, Noonmark identified several topics that were noticeably absent from the data. Most notably, few homeless families and unaccompanied youth participated in the assessment directly, despite a variety of attempts to reach out to individuals and organizations to conduct focus groups or interviews, as well as to disseminate surveys.

Among stakeholder groups who participated in the assessment efforts, there was limited participation by individuals working with or with direct knowledge about preschool populations, and few LEA staff focused on preschool populations in their comments. Likewise, only the AOE staff member who works with migrant populations discussed the unique needs of immigrant, refugee, and migrant students and families, as well as students who are English Language Learners, who experience homelessness. One social service agency representative in northwest Vermont referenced serving a large number of refugees, but no other assessment participants spoke to needs among this population. Similarly, two or three individuals from LEAs and state agencies spoke about the nexus of services for homeless students and services for students with disabilities, but discussion about their unique needs within the context of McKinney-Vento services was limited.

Focus groups with liaisons and other stakeholders included the question *“In your community, are there are specific populations that are more affected by homelessness or are not attending school?”* Responses to this question tended to focus on the reasons a family lost housing or became homeless, such as having experienced domestic violence or flooding, more so than on the circumstances of specific identity-based subpopulations of homeless students.

Lastly, it was beyond the scope of this assessment to gather data directly from children who have accessed McKinney-Vento services.