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Homeless Students and the COVID-19 Pandemic

The integral role that schools play in the lives of students experiencing homelessness and the many challenges they face have never been clearer as the threat of coronavirus continues to grow and schools across the country close. Below are eight things to keep in mind about homeless students during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Students experiencing homelessness often:

1. **Rely on schools as a vital source of food.** Students experiencing homelessness are five times more likely to go hungry than their housed peers. That makes the meals that they receive from the schools even more important.
during this time when more parents are losing their jobs and income. Food pantries struggle to keep up with the higher demand. If a school district can no longer supply hot meals, offer grab-and-go meals to fill this void.

2. **Struggle academically.** Children and youth experiencing homelessness face many challenges that can hinder their academic achievement. Their academic performance tends to decline faster than that of their housed classmates. Any disruption in learning may continue to widen the achievement gap and keep them from graduating on time.

3. **Face many challenges in attending class consistently and remaining engaged in school.** Students experiencing homelessness are already 1.5 times more likely to be chronically absent from school, setting students back academically. They are also at an increased risk of dropping out of high school. Lengthy school closures may result in further disengagement from school. It is important for teachers and homeless liaisons to maintain close ties with students to keep them consistently engaged when participating in distance learning.

4. **Do not have access to the internet and a personal computer.** The shift to remote learning requires that students have access to these resources or risk falling even further behind. Use CARES Act funds, Title I, Part A funds, McKinney-Vento funds, or donations from community partners to provide devices and internet access to these students.

5. **Have special education needs.** Meeting the special education needs of homeless students is important to their academic success. Remote learning can be challenging for these students, as it lacks the structure and individual attention necessary for students with special education needs.

6. **Face many challenges to their mental health and well-being.** Students experiencing homelessness report feeling depressed at higher rates than their housed peers. They also report attempting suicide at four times the rate of their housed peers. As students are forced to stay indoors in often unstable and crowded living arrangements, they are at risk of facing additional stress and isolation, which can be a trigger for suicidal thoughts. Enlist school counselors and social workers to reach out to these students.

7. **Rely on school as a source of stability in an otherwise unstable life.** School closures can be challenging for students experiencing homelessness, as schools provide predictable routines, connection with peers, and relationships with trusted adults. The sense of community that these connections provide for homeless students is vital. Establishing new routines, consistent expectations, and regular check-ins is key to providing needed stability for homeless students.

8. **Have trouble maintaining connections.** Given the challenges of mobility, poverty, and trauma, keeping in touch with students and families experiencing homelessness can be a challenge in normal times. With school buildings closed, and students and families moving more frequently due to COVID-19, maintaining connections is even more difficult. However, keeping in touch with these students is more important than ever. Below are some strategies that homeless liaisons and teachers can use to keep in touch with homeless students and families.

- Increase the LEA’s district homeless liaison capacity to do outreach and homeless-related activities. Use the CARES Act funds or increase the Title I, Part A homeless set-aside.
• Enlist other school staff, such as counselors, paraprofessionals, social workers, and teachers, to reach out to students experiencing homelessness.

• Use all available means of communication to reach families and students, including email, phone calls, texting, regular mail, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, GroupMe, “curbside” home visits, etc.

• Don’t give up when students and families don’t respond. Reach out to emergency contacts and other students to ask if they have updated contact information. Or, ask if they can find the students on social media and urge them to contact the school.

• Reach out to unaccompanied youth directly. Even if a parent’s contact information is in the school data system, remember that most unaccompanied youth have no contact with parents or guardians.

• Once you connect with a parent or youth, stay in touch on a regular basis. Begin by telling students they are missed, and then inquire about supports they might need to stay safe, healthy, and engaged in school.

• Post flyers, brochures, and posters in the community where students and parents might see them, even if those locations are different due to COVID-19. For example, grocery stores and pharmacies might be more essential locations at this time.

• Visit local motels and campgrounds where families experiencing homelessness sometimes stay, placing flyers on vehicle windows or under doors. Maintain appropriate social distancing and other safety precautions.

• Create user-friendly websites and Facebook pages with clear information about community resources, food distribution, and distance learning, including how to obtain devices and internet connectivity.

• When delivering food or learning packets, ask about other needs and encourage families and students to keep in touch. Let them know they are missed, and that schools are ready and able to help them.

• Ask local radio and TY stations to encourage parents and students to connect with schools, emphasizing the support available and talking about McKinney-Vento services.

• Remember, for children and youth experiencing homeless, school is often the safest and most stable part of their lives.

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Office of Federal Programs Contact Information

• Office of Federal Programs: (405) 521-2846
• Gloria Bayouth, Ed.D, Executive Director, gloria.bayouth@sde.ok.gov
• Nancy Hughes, Director of Finance, nancy.hughes@sde.ok.gov
• Corina Ene, Director of Policy and Research, corina.ene@sde.ok.gov
• **Thomas Kirk**, Program Manager, thomas.kirk@sde.ok.gov

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