

COMMENTARY

Educational Experiences of Homeless Youth in Los Angeles

AUTHORS

[Ronald E. Hallett](#) | University of Southern California

[William G. Tierney](#) | University of Southern California

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In 2007 we began researching the educational experiences of homeless youth in Los Angeles. Practitioners, policymakers and researchers had known for decades that homeless youth achieve at low levels and drop out of school at high rates, but minimal research existed at the time concerning how these students understood and engaged with the educational process. Our study gave youth the opportunity to share their experiences and identify educational barriers.

Findings draw from interviews with 120 homeless youth and 45 policymakers, school counselors, and after-school program coordinators. We found that homeless youth are not a homogenous group and educational supports need to be designed recognizing their diverse needs. In particular, “how” a youth experienced being homeless framed their interactions with school and community agencies. Based upon our research, we offer four recommendations:

ENFORCE FEDERAL LAW

The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act created federal protections for homeless youth that increase access to K-12 education, including remaining enrolled at a site if the student moves out of the school boundaries, coordinating transportation to school, allowing students to enroll even when required paperwork is unavailable, providing required uniforms and supplies, and reviewing all state, district and site policies that may limit educational access for homeless youth. We are concerned with student success, but acknowledge that issues of access remain. For example, over half of school districts nationwide report that transportation barriers exist for homeless youth. Many school sites still require proof of residency and immunization records before registering a student. Clearly enforcement of the federal law is necessary.

DEVELOP EDUCATIONAL ALTERNATIVES THAT CATER TO THE NEEDS OF DISCONNECTED HOMELESS YOUTH

Current federal, state, and local policies avoid isolating homeless youth. Indeed, removing students from the mainstream is inappropriate in most cases. At the same time, assuming mainstreaming best serves all homeless students is shortsighted. Specifically, two types of alternative school designs are worth considering: (1) temporary transitional schools for homeless youth disconnected from educational institutions; and, (2) self-contained schools for youth who have multiple risk factors that have led to dropping out. Alternative school designs give students disengaged from the educational process avenues to continue their education.

ASSIGN HOMELESS YOUTH A LONG-TERM MENTOR

Homeless youth tend to be highly transient. McKinney-Vento tried to create a stable educational environment, but that goal in Los Angeles has been in large part unsuccessful. Mentors who follow students have the potential to overcome many of the challenges we outline in the study. The mentor could be proactive with a school system to ensure the student receives resources needed to succeed. Schools and districts should work with local organizations, businesses, and universities to develop mentoring programs.

DEVELOP SUSTAINED RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN SHELTERS AND EDUCATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS

Schools remain critically important to the long-term stability of homeless youth. Rather than a disjuncture between the shelter and school, we are suggesting a closer relationship needs to be built and maintained. Assigning a specific person at the school site to coordinate these efforts with the district liaisons and community organizations would assist in maintaining relationships that could positively influence the educational outcomes of homeless youth attending these schools.

The [full study](#) is in William G. Tierney, Ronald E. Hallett (2012), "Homeless Youth and Educational Policy: A Case Study of Urban Youth in a Metropolitan Area," in Carol Camp Yeakey (ed.) Living on the Boundaries: Urban Marginality in National and International Contexts (Advances in Education in Diverse Communities: Research, Policy and Praxis, Volume 8), Emerald Group Publishing Limited, pp.49-78

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Stanford Graduate School of Education
520 Galvez Mall, Suite 444
Stanford, CA 94305
Phone: 650.576.8484

edpolicyinca.org

