Changing Requirements to Meet the Needs of

Unaccompanied Homeless Youth

Lisa Moore

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Eastern Kentucky University

Abstract

This paper is going to look at credit accrual and recovery for unaccompanied homeless youth who are defined specifically in the literature as someone without the care of a parent or legal guardian who is dealing with homelessness. This is just one of the barriers to education that homeless youth must deal with. The McKinney Act, and later McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, has been paramount in working with these youth and schools to help close the gaps and fix the barriers so that they can obtain the same education as their housed peers. The National Center for Homeless Education is a particular storehouse of successful methods when working with unaccompanied homeless youth and those specific strategies alone could fill a book but I will only be addressing the one specific barrier because of research paper length requirements for this assignment.

Changing Requirements to Meet the Needs of Unaccompanied Homeless Youth

Unaccompanied homeless youth are "young people [who] confront the dangers and challenges of homelessness without the care of a parent or legal guardian" (NAEHCY, 2010). There are many reasons why youth are without their parent or legal guardian and the top two include running away from home or being forced out of their homes by the parent or guardian. Many run away or are forced out because of abuse or neglect or because of disagreements regarding such issues as the youth's sexual orientation or an unwanted pregnancy (NAEHCY, 2010). And they live in a variety of temporary living situations (e.g., cars, campgrounds, parks, abandoned buildings) so they often experience violence and victimization, as well.

The number of unaccompanied homeless youth is on the increase. "Between 1.6 and 2.8 million youth run away from their homes each year" (NAEHCY, 2008). An "analysis of recently released federal data shows that the number of homeless children and youth identified in public schools has increased for the second year in a row, and by 41% over the past two school years" (NAEHCY, 2010). The recent economic downturn is a major reason for these changes and what makes this an increasingly important topic for schools, policy makers, and communities to understand and address in their services.

Unaccompanied homeless youth have a lot of unmet needs from having their basic needs met (e.g., food, housing) to pairing them up with services they need (e.g., helping them cope with stress of homelessness), meeting educational requirements and bridging their lives as adolescents into productive adulthood. It is also important to address stability since it "is important for the healthy physical and emotional development of children [and] a move disrupts one's daily routines and requires substantial adjustments" (Rafferty, Shinn, & Weitzman, 2004). Homeless youth have very little stability.

Unaccompanied homeless youth have higher rates of emotional distress, depression and suicide than their housed peers. They also have greater health issues (e.g., STDs, rates of pregnancy) and substance abuse cases (Thompson et al., 2010).

There are many reasons to help unaccompanied homeless youth and the greatest is the economic benefits that arise from our help. If we don't assist them in ending their homelessness we will be assisting them financially (e.g., incarceration, medical care) the rest of their lives in one way or another (New Avenues For Youth, 2011).

Barriers to Education

Schools alone cannot meet all the needs of unaccompanied homeless youth alone but they are a great place to start where students can find security and safety while giving the students the skills they need to be successful and escape poverty and not become homeless adults (Murphy & Tobin, 2011).

Unaccompanied homeless youth have poor academic performance, are "four times as likely to drop out," are suspended more, have more delinquent behaviors, and spend less time studying than their housed peers (Thompson et al., 2010). "And because children who are homeless are often transient, educational needs are not identified in a timely fashion" (Polakow, 2007).

It is very important that adults in these students' lives from teachers to principals be accepting and sensitive to perceptions perpetrated by the media, Congressional welfare rhetoric, and the public at large. As educators and other helping professionals, our attitudes do make a difference in the lives of the students we work with and it is necessary to develop forms of "gentle teaching" that address unaccompanied homeless youth (Polakow, 2007). This teaching includes educating our peers about the homeless issues so everyone is aware and can work together to help them.

Other barriers to education include the lack of a parent or guardian, lack of school records and other paperwork, lack of stable housing, high mobility, emotional crisis/mental health issues, employment, lack of transportation, lack of basic school supplies, poor health, and credit accrual and attendance policies.

McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act of 2001—Title X, Part C of the No Child Left Behind Act

"The Stewart B. McKinney Homeless Assistance Act [was] the first comprehensive legislation to aid the homeless and was passed in 1987 [and has evolved] into what is known today as the McKinney-Vento Act" (Murphy & Tobin, 2011). It has points in the law to acknowledge the problems of homeless children and youth (defined as those without a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence), create a framework for their well-being, and use educators as tools in the battle to end homelessness. Its core is that "homeless minors have equal access to the same free and appropriate public education as their non-homeless peers" (Murphy & Tobin, 2011). It attempts to do this by removing barriers and creating coalitions.

First there needs to be staff member at the state and local levels to help with implementation, establish "clear, statewide procedures for enrolling unaccompanied youth and determining educational decision-making for them" and "adopt flexible policies and programs to accommodate the demands of homelessness and independence" (NAEHCY, 2008).   Part of these policies and programs must "accommodate the demands of homelessness and independence…where they can be more engaged and successful…in safe and supportive school environments" (NAEHCY, 2008).

McKinney-Vento also sees that each school system has a liaison or coordinator who is responsible for the "well-being of homeless children and adolescents" (Murphy & Tobin, 2011).   They do this through the creation and reworking of policies and procedures to serve homeless adolescents and families by attempting to provide for their specialized needs (e.g., service unites, academic

departments), ensuring identification and linking the homeless student and their families to school and community services (Murphy & Tobin, 2011).

Another important part of McKinney-Vento is how it supports students so that they can attend school, even if they don't meet documentation requirements. It allows them to continue with their education while these issues are resolved. "Enrollment is defined as attending classes and participating fully in school activities" (National Center for Homeless Education, 2010). Schools and school districts must also "revise seat-time and credit policies" to assist homeless students with credit accrual and recovery (National Center for Homeless Education, 2010). And even though these attendance and credit gaps don't always prevent enrollment they often "impede the ability of school personnel to place children in appropriate programs as time lapses lead to service lapses" (Murphy & Tobin, 2011) which leads to dropouts.

<div align="center">Credit Accrual and Recovery</div>

"Unaccompanied youth often struggle to earn credits in a traditional high school system" (NAEHCY, 2008). These youth struggle with balancing their educational needs with holding down a job and just basic survival skills such as meeting basic needs. They also struggle many times with a lack of sleep and physical needs not being met so this also affects their attendance in school and how well they perform when in the classroom. Just like you would never ask an employee to work without getting paid, you shouldn't ask students to attend school without getting credit (National Center for Homeless Education, 2010). States must adopt policies that allow for partial credits and credit recovery to help students graduate since this is vital for them to go on to higher education and financial and life independence.

One strategy that can be used is working "to keep students in their school of origin so they can avoid the challenges of school mobility" (National Center for Homeless Education, 2010). Under

McKinney-Vento school districts must work to help students stay in their school of origin, even when they move outside the district.   This includes helping them with transportation to the school, when necessary. Transportation is very vital in getting homeless youth to school but this also poses another barrier to their education. There are options that schools can employ to assist with this such as re-routing buses, being sure that homeless shelters and other housing options are on the bus routes or giving public transportation passes, for example. Some school districts are actually working with local community agencies to find appropriate housing for youth within their school of origin district (National Center for Homeless Education, 2010). But of course, even if housing is close to a school, if the neighborhood is "rough" many youth might fall prey to violence and victimization.

A second strategy that can be used is to "provide support to enable students to attend school consistently and progress academically" (National Center for Homeless Education, 2010). Some of the strategies that can be used here include educating school staff about homeless so they are better equipped to work with these youth, creating lesson plans and co-curricular groups that meet their specific needs (by asking the students what these are), and providing for basic needs and academic support (e.g., quiet study spaces, after hour access to the school, use of school showers) (National Center for Homeless Education, 2010).

A third strategy is to "award students' partial credit for work completed." Since these youth often have poor attendance, it's important to give credit when they can show up for school so they can "progress academically." It is also imperative to track their attendance and homework and use test scores to give partial credit. This tracking can be more current with the use of such tools as the web-based database called PowerSchool (National Center for Homeless Education, 2010).

A fourth strategy is to "complement regular classes with independent study programs, including learning labs, online learning, and computerized modules" (National Center for Homeless Education,

2010). When youth are experiencing a lot of stress their school work is going to suffer but during times

of less stress they will be able to accomplish more academically. If schools can give students

"nontraditional" learning programs along with a certified teacher and other required school personnel,

they can help their learning during these academically productive times move along faster. McKinney-

Vento assists with access to technology and transportation to assist with these programs. It is also a

good idea for schools to waive fees for these students too (National Center for Homeless Education,

2010).

A fifth strategy is to "ensure that students experiencing homelessness can enroll in appropriate

innovative and/or alternative programs" (National Center for Homeless Education, 2010). Some of these

programs include Middle College High Schools, GEAR UP, Upward Bound, Running Start, the Perkins Act

programs, dropout prevention and recovery and work experience programs. These programs allow

students to gain nontraditional credits such as on-the-job experience and training, earning high school

and college credit at the same time, and using cohorts and mentoring (National Center for Homeless

Education, 2010).

According to the National Center for Homeless Education there are four school district strategies

that can boost credit accrual and recovery options (National Center for Homeless Education, 2010):

1. "Providing training and information to teachers and curriculum coordinators about

    homeless students' needs and seek their support and partnership in facilitating credit

    accrual;

2. Review and revise policies that act as a barrier to youth attaining credits;

3. Explore the credit recovery resources and strategies available in your district and

    community and address barriers to homeless students' access to these programs; and

4. Talk to youth about their interests and needs and seek their help in developing credit accrual and recovery strategies" (National Center for Homeless Education, 2010).

Conclusion

Although there are a lot of educational barriers that affect unaccompanied homeless youth the credit accrual and recovery barrier is vital in fighting the dropout of these students. Fighting dropout is the one way we are going to be sure that these students become effective adults who are not caught up in the cycles of poverty, homelessness, violence and victimization.

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