



International Network for School Social Work

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How can you do homework when you don't have a home?

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School children are living in shelters, campgrounds, on the streets, in cars, in abandoned buildings or with relatives. They may fall asleep in class, miss a lot of school, never have their homework done and eat their only meal in school. School is sometimes the haven where they are fed, clothed, counseled, loved and kept clean through the joint efforts of their teachers, school social workers and other school staff.

Throughout the US about 1.3 million school-aged children were homeless during the 2012-2013 school year. Despite this shocking statistic, there is a national plan, initiated by the Homeless Emergency Assistance and Rapid Transition to Housing (HEARTH) Act of 2009, to end family homelessness by 2020.

The McKinney Vento Homeless Assistance Act

Homeless students may have difficulty getting to school due to inadequate transportation, lack of sleep and the accumulated stresses in the family. Fortunately, there are laws in place to protect these students to ensure they receive an equivalent education to housed students. The McKinney Vento Homeless Assistance Act of 1987 assured that homeless students receive certain protections. For example, students may enroll in school without records and they can attend their school of origin if it is in their best interest. Local Education Agencies are required to verify that the family is homeless and that transportation will be provided so that the student can return to their school of origin. The purpose is to maintain educational stability, even if their housing is unstable. Homeless students also qualify for free lunches.

For purposes of McKinney Vento eligibility, students are considered homeless if they are living in a shelter, doubled up with others, or living in some place not meant for human habitation such as cars, parks or abandoned buildings. Youth who are not living with a guardian or parent are also eligible. Overall, homelessness is a huge problem in the United States.

School social workers are often the first school staff to find out that a family is homeless. If a student reports that they slept in a car, or if a parent approaches the school for help, the school social workers must respond with resources and options for the family. Having a list of housing, shelters, food pantries, clothing closets, social services etc. is helpful in providing the family with options. Our school social workers can help support the students while they are in school. School is often the safe and stable place for homeless children where school social workers and other staff make sure the child has enough to eat, has warm clothes, school supplies and hygiene products.

The school social worker may also talk to the teachers in how to identify students who may be homeless. They can provide a confidential resource to parents and teachers if there are additional concerns.

School social workers are advocates for our students and families experiencing homelessness. Using first-hand accounts of children's experiences of being homeless, school social workers are a great resource to policy-makers on many issues, ranging from appropriate response to poor attendance to the need for providing for personal hygiene in schools.

How it works in St. Paul Public Schools in Minnesota

The McKinney Vento Act, with the protections it provides students, is a strong law that assists students in maintaining school stability. It is important to recognize the work of school social workers in this process and to value the relationships that children and their families develop with strong ties to their classmates and teachers.

As a school social worker, I am the District Homeless Liaison for St. Paul Public Schools, an urban district in Minnesota. We have about 37,000 students and identify about 2000 students as experiencing homelessness every year. My position involves working with the whole district and using our school-based school social workers as contacts for homeless students in each school. Many times, those school social workers are the first to identify a family as homeless. They refer the family to our program for resources and for transportation back to the student's school of origin.

Of the 2000 homeless students in our school district, about 90% are students of color (primarily African American, American Indian, Asian American or Hispanic) compared to the entire district with about 78% students of color. So, students of color experiencing homelessness are overrepresented.

Our program also works with students that are in foster care, living in out-of-home placement. We provide similar supports and resources to these students and their foster families.

There are about 130 school social workers in the St. Paul School District, most working in Special Education services providing social and emotional support to students, although there are some school social workers who are funded by general funds and who work with the entire school. As school social workers, we provide resources to families and positive interventions to help teachers with their students. School social workers study the situation of the whole child in his or her environment and implement interventions and supports through that lens.

Recently, we had a situation where the family of a boy in 4th Grade lost their home. The family had to move about 20 minutes away to double up with a relative. The student, who required special education, had attended the same school since kindergarten and had made a number of gains throughout the years. The parent came to school and indicated that the student was going to have to miss school or attend a new school because they were moving out of district. The school social worker and the homeless education program advocated to set up transportation so that the student could continue at his original school, where he had developed strong relationships with his peers and staff. The school district provided transportation for about 2 months before the family was able to secure housing again. School social workers stayed in touch with the family during this time and, with their help, the family was able to secure affordable housing back in their original neighborhood.



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