

Building a Grad Nation:

Progress and Challenge
in Raising High School
Graduation Rates



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A Report By:
Civic Enterprises

Everyone Graduates Center at the School
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Note: The following pages are an excerpt from the 2018 report. For the full Building a Grad Nation report, visit: www.americaspromise.org



The American Graduate initiative, which was made possible by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB), is public media’s long-term commitment to improving youth outcomes through education and career readiness. Public media is uniquely positioned to serve as content creators, trusted communicators, conveners, and community connectors. Since 2011, national producers and local stations have engaged

with more than 1,700 partners, including the GradNation campaign, to create public understanding of the challenges students, especially those in high poverty communities, face on the path to a high school diploma. Together, we have identified pathways to student success. However, achieving a high school diploma is just the first step toward a future of gainful employment and career opportunity. This year, public media launched “American Graduate: Getting to Work” to help young people stay on a positive path, as lifelong learners, developing the skills required to succeed in a changing job market impacted by technology. Through American Graduate content and engagement, public media is inspiring millions of caring citizens to become “champions” on behalf of our country’s young people, mentoring them from the classroom to full participants in our civil society.

EDUCATION LEADS HOME

In the school year 2015-16, there were 1.3 million homeless students identified in our nation’s public schools. This is more than double the number of homeless students in 2006-07. As high as these numbers seem, they are almost certainly undercounts given how difficult it can be to identify homeless students.

Under the McKinney-Vento Act, students are defined as homeless if they lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence. In the majority of cases, young people experience homelessness with their families. They may be living in shelters, motels, out of cars, or doubled up with other families without a stable place to call home. It also includes youth who are homeless on their own without a parent or guardian.

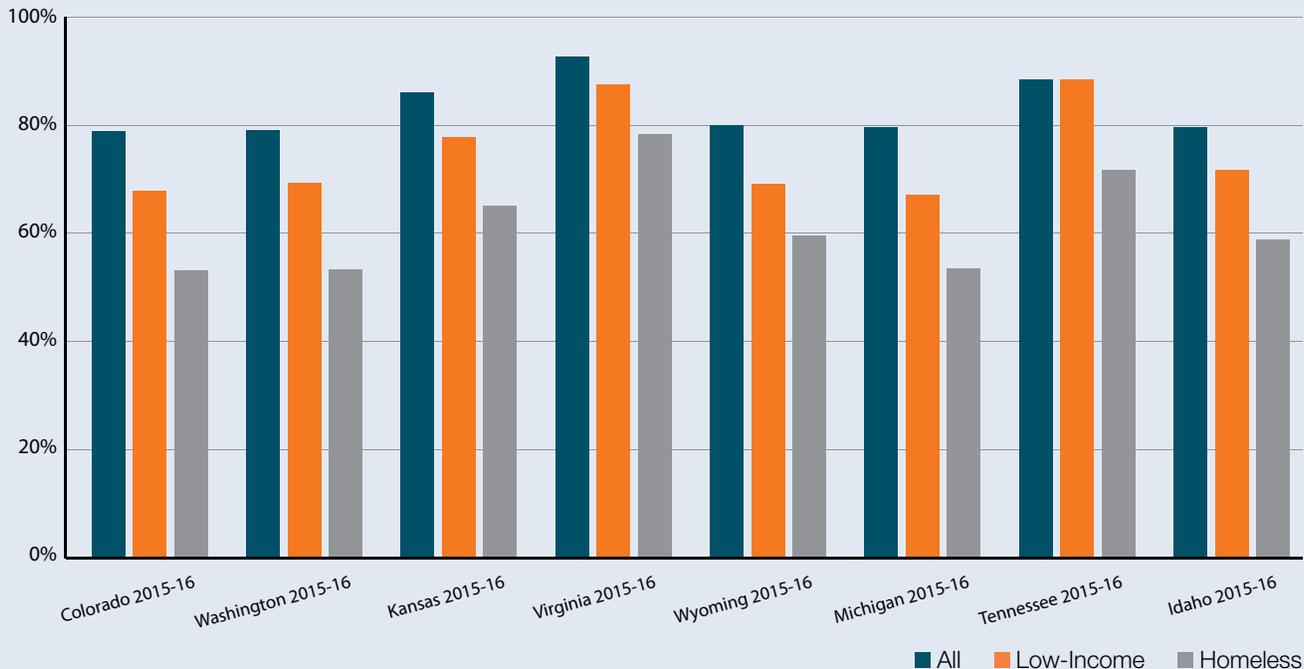
Homelessness has many negative impacts on students including poor attendance, course failure, discipline problems, and falling behind their peers in their studies, and research has shown that those negative impacts are long-lasting, remaining even after a student has been stably housed.

Failure to graduate from high school also means these young people will be less likely to access well-paying jobs that will allow them to be stable adults. Achieving that first step of a high school diploma is critical to preventing these young people from living in poverty in the future, and struggling with homelessness as adults. In fact, recent research showed that youth without a high school diploma or GED were 346 percent more likely to be homeless than their peers who had completed their high school education.⁸

Given all of these risks, it is essential that schools be able to quickly identify students experiencing homelessness, and connect them to the right supports that will help them not only regain stable housing, but to stay in school and on track towards graduation during this difficult time.

8 Chapin Hall. “Missed Opportunities: Youth Homelessness in America.” Retrieved from <http://voicesofyouthcount.org/brief/national-estimates-of-youth-homelessness/>

High School Graduation Rate by Poverty and Housing Status, 2015-16



Under the new ESSA regulations, as of the 2017-18 school year, all states will be required to disaggregate and report high school graduation rates for homeless students. As of now, graduation data is available only from the five states that were previously publically reporting on their own – CO, KS, VA, WA, and WY. In all five, rates for homeless students lag well behind graduation rates for all students, even other low-income students.

Across all five states, graduation rates for homeless students have risen slightly in the last several years. It is encouraging to see progress as states focus on this important demographic of students.

But beyond tracking data, we will need the support of a wide range of stakeholders and data-driven tactics and strategies if we are to help more homeless students succeed in achieving their education.

To this end, Civic Enterprises, in partnership with Schoolhouse Connection, ICPH, and America's Promise Alliance, has launched **Education Leads Home**, a national campaign that will bring together a diverse set of stakeholders to rally around homeless children and youth and help them overcome the barriers to their educational success that homelessness sets in their path.

Education Leads Home has set three concrete goals.

1. Young children experiencing homelessness will participate in quality early childhood programs at the same rate as their housed peers by 2026;
2. a 90 percent high school graduation rate among homeless students by 2030; and
3. a 60 percent postsecondary attainment rate by 2034.

To achieve these goals, the campaign will work to:

- Raise awareness in schools and communities about the presence and needs of homeless students
- Improve identification of children and youth experiencing homelessness in our schools
- Implement existing federal policy with fidelity in schools and districts across the country
- Build a strong network of supports around schools and students to connect them to social/emotional supports, as well as tangible supports like housing
- Find and share best practices and efforts across the nation that are working to help homeless students succeed

Policy Recommendations to Support Homeless Students

The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act is the blueprint for helping homeless students attain their high school diploma. The Every Student Succeeds Act's (ESSA) amendments to the McKinney-Vento Act went into effect in October 2016, but implementation remains a work in progress. To fully realize the new legislative requirements, states should:

1) Support LEAs to Ensure Homeless Liaison Capacity

ESSA added to the requirement that every Local Education Agency (LEA) designate a McKinney-Vento liaison by specifying that the liaison must be “able to carry out the duties described” in the law. Guidance from the U.S. Department of Education interprets this language to mean LEAs “should allocate sufficient time for... liaisons to do their jobs effectively and should support them in fulfilling their duties as outlined in the law and in making timely decisions.” The ten duties of the liaisons range from identifying homeless students to providing referrals to disseminating public notice of educational rights. State educational agencies (SEAs) are required to provide professional development and technical assistance to liaisons and to monitor LEA compliance with the McKinney-Vento Act.

States can support school districts to ensure adequate liaison capacity by:

- Helping LEAs to conduct their own needs assessments of the ability of the liaison to carry out his or her responsibilities, and identifying supports that may be needed from other LEA personnel to help the liaison carry out these responsibilities;
- Providing virtual or in-person networking opportunities for liaisons in the state to learn from each other and borrow best practices from other school districts; and
- Including questions about the ability of the liaison to carry out his or her duties in LEA monitoring instruments

2) Ensure Adequate Title I Set-Asides for Homeless Students

Title I Part A of ESSA is the largest federal preK-12 education program, funded at over \$15 billion and reaching the majority of school districts in the United States. Under ESSA, all LEAs that receive Title I Part A funds must reserve funds to support homeless students. The amount of Title I funds reserved for homeless children and youth must be based on the total allocation received by the LEA, and set aside prior to any allowable expenditure of transfers by the LEA.

States can support school districts by:

- Helping LEAs to conduct their own needs assessments to determine an appropriate set-aside amount;
- Providing specific examples of ways in which other LEAs in the state are using Title I funds to assist homeless students; and
- Including a specific line item for the homeless student set-aside funds in the LEA consolidated plan for Title I.

3) Remove Barriers to Credit Accrual and Graduation

Students experiencing homelessness—and the school mobility that often follows—frequently face challenges in accruing credits due to district variations in class offerings, methods of calculating credits, and graduation requirements. Such barriers to credit accrual can greatly impact a student's ability to graduate with his or her cohort, advance toward higher education, and achieve financial stability and independence.

ESSA requires that SEAs and LEAs implement procedures to identify and remove barriers that prevent homeless students from receiving appropriate credit for full or partial coursework completed at a prior school. States should review, and possibly revise, state policies on credit accrual to ensure that such barriers are removed. State plans should also clearly describe how youth experiencing homelessness will receive assistance from school counselors to prepare and improve their readiness for college.

Several states have successfully passed legislation that complements these federal requirements for supporting high school students experiencing homelessness. For example:

- In California, when partial credit is awarded in a particular course, the student shall be enrolled in the same or equivalent course, if applicable, to complete the entire course. (Ca. Educ. Code §§51225.1 and 51225.2)
- In New Mexico, a student who changes schools at least once during a single school year as a result of homelessness is entitled to priority placement in classes that meet state graduation requirements, and timely placement in electives comparable to those in which the student was enrolled at the previous school(s). (HB 301 (2017))
- In Oregon, a school district or charter school must waive graduation requirements that exceed state requirements for students who experienced homelessness at any time from grade 9 to 12. (Or. Rev. Stat. §329.451)

SPOKANE PUBLIC SCHOOLS' TAKE HEART: MOVING THE GOAL POST PAST GRADUATION

Improving high school graduation rates for students experiencing homelessness is itself a challenge, but Spokane Public Schools (SPS) is moving the goal post even further to help students.

The second largest district in Washington State, SPS comprises 54 schools and over 31,000 students—1,109 of whom identify as experiencing homelessness. Recently, school administrators made a forward-thinking change to their belief system and district culture with the “T-2-4” program: aiming beyond the high school diploma to help ensure their students are ready, that they get in, and then make it through their choice of higher education (whether it is a technical, two-year, or four-year college). This means that every adult in the system is committed to the successful completion of some form of higher education for every child—and that includes homeless children and youth.

SPS's Homeless Education and Resource Team (HEART) has contributed to an overall upward trend in on-time graduation rates for students experiencing homelessness since 2013. An intra-district data management system, School Data Tools, allows district staff access to real-time information to support the needs of every student. School Data Tools tracks assessment scores, course completion rates, absenteeism rates, graduation rates, discipline counts and trends, and school improvement plan progress. In the spirit of the T-2-4 program, it also tracks FAFSA completion rates.

In 2014, HEART leveraged its extensive data tracking to develop and assign a new position. The Homeless Community Specialist role, created to provide highly engaged support for students experiencing homelessness and their families, initially worked with two high schools identified by the district's quarterly point-in-time report as having the greatest number of unaccompanied homeless youth with the highest risk of dropping out and the lowest graduation rate. HEART augmented this specialized role with the Check & Connect mentoring program, the only dropout prevention program reviewed by the United States Department of Education's **What**

Works Clearinghouse found to have strong evidence of positive effects on staying in school. Highly relationship-driven, Check & Connect provided HEART with guidance on effective strategies, a means to document their work, and a conduit to communicate with administrators, teachers, and other district staff.

The 2016 passage of the Washington Homeless Student Stability and Opportunity Gap Act amended state laws related to improving educational outcomes for homeless students through increased identification services, in-school supports, and housing stability. Subsequent grants from the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction enabled SPS's HEART to hire a second Homeless Community Specialist and provide intensive support services to two additional high-needs high schools.

HEART staff recognize the value of proactive advocacy, too. They regularly attend Student Support Team meetings and Community Truancy Board meetings to help identify and problem-solve challenges outside of school, such as family stress, trauma, housing instability, and food insecurity. While these students and families may not necessarily be experiencing homelessness, HEART's community connections provide support that aims to prevent future homelessness and promote graduation.

Adhering to the T-2-4 philosophy means that, for every student, high school graduation is just the beginning. SPS is well aware that the jobs of the future will require learning after high school. HEART's Community Specialists spend each day working with students to set goals, identifying incremental steps toward those goals, putting in the work and commitment needed to obtain each goal, and celebrating goal achievement. Preparing students to look towards the future with big, attainable aspirations is what HEART is all about.