
Getting to Graduation

Tools for Using Data
to Support Student
Success

National Center for Homeless
Education

THE UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA AT GREENSBORO

National Center for Homeless Education

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With funding from the U.S. Department of Education, the National Center for Homeless Education (NCHE) at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro provides critical information to those who seek to remove educational barriers and improve educational opportunities and outcomes for children and youth experiencing homelessness.

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Foreword

The Education for Homeless Children and Youth (EHCY) program, authorized by the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, has entered a phase of accelerated and comprehensive performance management. The availability of enrollment and performance data from local educational agencies (LEAs) and individual schools has acted as a catalyst for this new phase. The significant increase in homeless students, with nearly twice as many students identified by school districts during the 2013-14 school year as in the 2006-07 school year, also necessitates a renewed emphasis on the evaluation of programs that support these students.

Expectations for performance management have been evolving over the 27-plus years since the creation of the EHCY program. In addition to the ever increasing number of children and youth experiencing homelessness, federal laws and the priorities of various political administrations influenced the program's growth. The Government Performance and Results Act (GPRA), first enacted in 1994, requires federal agencies and grant programs to establish and report on progress toward annual targets for long-term goals that demonstrate improvement over baseline performance measures. Additionally, the enactment of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) in 2001 amended the Elementary and Secondary Education Act and heightened the accountability of educational agencies for the academic achievement of all economically disadvantaged students, including homeless students.

By the mid-2000's the U.S. Department of Education (ED) selected program measures aligned with NCLB's goal for 100 percent student participation in state assessments for English language arts and mathematics, with a target of proficiency for all students in grades three through eight by 2014. Starting with the 2004-05 school year, all states submitted data in the Consolidated State Performance Report (CSPR) to measure the progress of programs in meeting the academic goals resulting from NCLB. When the annual CSPR began collecting information on homeless students in school year 2005-06, it largely focused on students served by LEAs with subgrants. The requirements to provide auditable and verifiable counts of homeless students enrolled in LEAs by grade and nighttime residence signified a shift away from less accurate estimates used in the past. Making the results of the first CSPR public in 2006 ushered in a new era of data reporting and performance management.

Our capacity to analyze state and LEA data longitudinally developed rapidly as technology adapted to the increased emphasis on program improvement in public policy. To facilitate the collection and use of program indicator data, including homeless education information needed for the CSPR, ED launched the *EDFacts* initiative in 2005 to gather data from schools, LEAs, and SEAs. Fully implemented by the 2008-09 school year in

accordance with U.S. Department of Education regulations, data stored within *EDFacts* populate the CSPR tables and provide essential information for the public online through [ED Data Express](#). At the same time, states developed longitudinal data warehouses that allowed unprecedented cross-referencing of program outcomes for students in multiple state and federal education programs.

Over the past five years, the focus on outcomes for homeless students shifted further away from a narrow focus on students served by LEAs that receive funds under the McKinney-Vento Act to a more comprehensive focus on the academic success of all homeless students enrolled in public schools. Consequently, *EDFacts* and the CSPR now include information on the academic achievement and demographic subgroups of all homeless students enrolled in school. As a result of requirements for other federal education programs, *EDFacts* also includes data on homeless students, such as dropout and graduate data, in addition to data collected specifically for the EHCY program.

Given the astounding growth in our capacity to collect, store, and make public information on academic outcomes, perhaps it is no surprise that the need for professional development on program management and evaluation also grew. A national study of the EHCY program commissioned by ED in 2010¹ indicated the desire of State Coordinators for more technical assistance related to data reporting and analysis. Based on this finding, the EHCY program was selected in 2012 to participate in ED's data quality improvement efforts. This initiative examined common indicators of data quality, such as completeness, internal consistency, patterns, and outliers. Under-identification of homeless students emerged as a bigger risk for the program than misuse of funds or even underperformance on outcome measures, such as the proficiency of homeless students in reading and mathematics. In light of this risk assessment, pilot analyses of LEA data, including at patterns for individual and clusters of LEAs, were conducted to evaluate the effectiveness of efforts to identify homeless students based on Free and Reduced Price Lunch counts, with the goal of determining which LEAs had the highest need for further technical assistance.

Encouraged by the new data analytic capabilities experienced by the program, the EHCY program office participated in the development of a logic model and leading indicators process through the Office of Elementary and Secondary Education in 2014. In order to improve early interventions and support for students, this process resulted in proposals for new *EDFacts* data elements on chronic absenteeism and a four-year cohort graduation rate for students experiencing homelessness during their high school educations². Related to the new data elements, the EHCY program office is considering a new GPRA measure on secondary education, with the goal of improving homeless

¹ The final report of this study is available at <http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/oeped/ppss/reports.html#homeless>

² It is anticipated that these new data elements will be implemented starting with school year 2016-17.

student graduation rates across the nation by 2020. Other leading indicators implemented in fiscal year 2015 focus on the use of LEA and SEA data by states to shape their technical assistance, monitoring, and annual work plans for state activities.

An interesting convergence of ED's performance management efforts with the Uniform Guidance issued by the Office of Management and Budget took effect on July 1, 2015, resulting in a consolidation of their cost circulars with many of ED's regulations governing the management of its grant programs. SEAs are now required to conduct a risk assessment of subgrantees that includes an analysis of performance risk. The changes are consistent with risk assessments the EHCY program office began conducting in 2011 to inform program monitoring; recent risk assessments completed by the EHCY program office also included LEA level performance as a selection criteria when choosing LEAs to interview during state monitoring. The need for more detailed risk assessments for state monitoring grew after the EHCY program began monitoring states independently from other programs and conducting more remote reviews. Performance management will likely become a separate monitoring element to ensure that states also implement risk assessment and other data activities starting in fiscal year 2017. It is anticipated that corrective actions will be required for states with poor data quality and recommendations will be given to strengthen more use of data for improving program performance.

As we continue moving forward with more assertive program management, and in keeping with past requests for technical assistance related to data and evaluation activities, this guide is part of a series of technical assistance products that will help State Coordinators analyze and use data for the purpose of developing annual work plans, conducting risk assessments, and shaping technical assistance. We look forward to partnering with you to strengthen the work that has already begun in your state. As our program grows stronger, so do our students, leading to our ultimate goal of getting them to graduation.

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Introduction

The purpose of the McKinney-Vento Act is to ensure students experiencing homelessness have access to the education and other services they need in order to meet state academic achievement standards, and ultimately, to graduate prepared for college and career. Most homeless educators work one-on-one with homeless children, youth, their parents and guardians. Undoubtedly, their care in supporting students to enroll, attend and succeed in school is critical to the success of homeless students and the EHCY program. However, most state and local educational agencies lack the capacity required to provide intensive case management to all homeless students. The demands and stresses of serving homeless students often put stakeholders in the position of constantly reacting to overwhelming, immediate needs. To turn the tide of overwhelming student needs and program responsibilities to a more proactive course of action, State Coordinators and their partners need to determine where LEAs and homeless education programs underperform, under identify, or under serve children and youth experiencing homelessness.

In order to help states identify areas for improvement, the U.S. Department of Education (ED) has commissioned a set of local educational agency (LEA) workbooks and this manual to support the use of data by State Coordinators and other key stakeholders in the education of homeless students. Primarily, this manual will assist states in creating or adjusting measurable goals and related targets, as well as evaluating the overall effectiveness of activities conducted on the part of both school districts and the state homeless education program. These goals and measures can then be used to inform the development of state plans and annual work plans for state activities.

Before Digging Into the Data

Before digging into program data and charting a new course for program evaluation, reviewing information on the current priorities set by ED and federal law will help State Coordinators create solid annual work plans and needs assessments. In addition to monitoring activities already a part of McKinney-Vento program implementation, recent changes to the Uniform Guidance outlined in federal regulations impact the type of program evaluations states must now conduct. While many states have used a risk assessment to evaluate subgrantee and non-subgrantee performance for some time, the

updated Uniform Guidance now requires states to assess the risk of subgrantees when awarding funds.

ED further reinforced the need for states and school districts to evaluate the effectiveness of strategies used in the education of homeless students by including measures of data-informed practice in its leading indicators for program quality. The leading indicators, along with other required data collections, will be used to inform ED about progress made by states and LEAs in implementing the McKinney-Vento Act. They will also assist with the identification of states most in need of monitoring or technical assistance.

For more on the Uniform Guidance, [click here](#).

The resources on risk & subgrant management may be especially helpful; they are available [here](#).

More information on the priority goals and leading indicators set by ED for the Education for Homeless Children and Youth (EHCY) program are provided in Appendix A.

Local Educational Agency (LEA) Workbooks

An Excel workbook has been developed for each state, reflecting the data submitted by the state's LEAs on topics related to the education of homeless children and youth. The workbooks are comprised of data points from *EDFacts* and the Consolidated State Performance Report (CSPR). State Coordinators can use these to complete needs assessments, target monitoring to LEAs identified as most at-risk, evaluate program outcomes, and foster collaboration with other programs.

A preliminary set of LEA workbooks were produced in 2014. Over the course of the next four years, the LEA workbooks will be updated annually to include recent data, as well as other upgrades based on requests from State Coordinators, current trends in program development, and new program requirements. While the workbooks include basic information about homeless students to help with planning activities, they are meant to be working documents that State Coordinators use by either manipulating data to address specific concerns or by incorporating additional data to reflect the unique program goals of the state. For example, discipline data and information about the reasons students have individualized educational plans are not submitted to ED for homeless students, and are therefore not included in the workbooks, but could have correlations to the dropout, graduation, and academic performance data in the workbooks.

In 2014, the LEA workbooks included:

- information indicating which LEAs received a McKinney-Vento subgrant;
- the number of homeless students enrolled in each grade;
- the number of enrolled, homeless students by type of primary nighttime residence;

- the number of enrolled, homeless students by type of subgroup;
- the number of students served by McKinney-Vento subgrants in each grade;
- the number of students served by McKinney-Vento subgrants by type of subgroup;
- academic participation and performance data for English Language Arts and mathematics;
- data on the participation of students in Title I programs; and
- the number of homeless students who dropped out of school.

In 2015, science assessment data and additional information about student subgroups was added.

In addition to containing raw data for each LEA that can be used by State Coordinators to analyze various aspects of their homeless education programs, the workbooks also contain brief highlights of the state’s data overall.

Accessing the LEA Workbooks and a Note on Confidentiality

Due to the data contained in the LEA workbooks, a username and password are required to access them. State Coordinators will be given credentials to access the workbook for their state. If a state would like additional education for homeless children and youth personnel to have direct access to the workbooks, they must submit a request for additional credentials to the National Center for Homeless Education (NCHE). This request must be made in writing by the State Coordinator and include the name, title, and contact information of the person for whom access is being requested. It is also incumbent on the Office of the State Coordinator for Homeless Education to inform NCHE of any personnel changes that require the removal of access rights.

As student data, all information contained in the LEA workbooks is protected under federal law. In addition to protecting information about students that directly identifies them, federal privacy laws also consider information to be considered personally identifiable, and therefore protected, if the identity of a student could be reasonably inferred by either direct or indirect means. As a result, even aggregated data for an LEA may be considered protected information due to the small population of students reported by some LEAs.

Federal laws that govern data and confidentiality:

- [The Privacy Act](#)
- [The E-Government Act](#)
- [The Education Sciences Reform Act](#)
- [The U.S. Patriot Act](#)
- [The Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act](#)

While none of the information contained in the workbooks includes information that directly identifies students, many cells in the workbook do fall below the threshold for public release, and are therefore considered confidential information. Each state is required to develop policies for securely handling student data. Prior to releasing any data contained in the LEA workbooks, State Coordinators and authorized personnel must confirm the information release is allowed under the mandated state policies. It is the responsibility of State Coordinators and authorized personnel to safeguard the security of the LEA workbooks and their contents.

Data Sources

“It is a capital mistake to theorize before one has data.” Sherlock Holmes

Information contained in the local educational agency (LEA) workbooks primarily comes from data collected for the *EDFacts* Initiative and the Consolidated State Performance Report (CSPR). It is important to understand what each of these data sources contain, their characteristics, and the potential uses for the information they contain in order to effectively change raw data into insights about educational practice.

***EDFacts* Information**

EDFacts facilitates the use of data to inform policy, management, and budget decisions for public education programs. In addition to storing data on academic performance, *EDFacts* includes information about funding, data related to civil rights issues, and school, staff, and student demographic information.

EDFacts file specifications govern the submission of data submitted to the U.S. Department of Education (ED) and outline the format and type of data to be reported. The data is provided primarily through the EDEN Submission System (ESS), but may also be submitted through an online survey of civil rights information, or the *EDFacts* Metadata and Process System (EMAPS). Information about the *EDFacts* Initiative, the files specifications, and who must submit data can be accessed [online](#).

Homeless education data included in *EDFacts* includes two data sets: a duplicated data set from LEAs and an unduplicated data set from the state educational agency (SEA). Once submitted, the data prepopulates the CSPR for each state.

EDFacts stores data collected at the school building, LEA, and state educational agency (SEA) level. Reporting requirements vary for each level based on the type of data being submitted. For more information about the data required from each agency, check out the file specifications.

CSPR Information

The CSPR serves as the annual data collection tool required by Section 9303 of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act to monitor the performance of federal education programs. In addition to reporting information on the education for homeless children and youth program, the CSPR includes information on Title I, teacher quality, English language acquisition, grant programs for statewide assessments, and rural education. CSPR data are also displayed on the [ED Data Express website](#).

The National Center for Homeless Education (NCHE) provides an annual [Federal Data Collection Guide](#) to help State Coordinators understand and navigate the collection and submission of high quality data.

Differences Between ED Facts and the CSPR

While all CSPR data are ED Facts data, not all ED Facts data are CSPR data. This is one of several important differences to understand when choosing which data and source to use. The goals of your technical assistance, monitoring, or policy project may dictate which data source is most appropriate to measure its impact.

ED Facts	CSPR
Prepopulates reports, such as the CSPR; used for other reports, such as the Federal Data Summary	Is a compilation of ED Facts data that is used to measure program performance
Includes data that can be disaggregated at the school, LEA, or SEA level	Includes only LEA level data that may not be disaggregated
Requires data submitted at the SEA level to be unduplicated, such that a homeless student is counted only once, regardless of the number of schools or LEAs the student attends within the state; results in unique student counts for the SEA and LEA levels	Requires data submitted at the LEA level to be unduplicated at that level, resulting in counts that may include students multiple times if the student attended more than one LEA within the state; does not include SEA level data
Does not allow unduplicated data to be broken down to reflect McKinney-Vento grant status	Contains duplicated data to be broken down to reflect McKinney-Vento grant status
May be corrected at any point within three years after the original submission of data files	May only be corrected during the collection and correction windows established annually by the U.S. Department of Education
Does not allow for the submission of comments to describe data	Requires the submission of comments to describe data that do not conform to established standards, as well as corrective actions the state is taking to align practices to established standards

Affecting Change

"It is not necessary to change. Survival is not mandatory." W. Edwards Deming

One of the biggest complaints school and state agency personnel have about data is that it seems like we collect a great deal of information, but are often unclear as to if and how it is put to use. Given the number of things State Coordinators are tasked with completing each day, it is no surprise that many struggle to complete a needs assessment for their programs. In turn, that creates challenges with developing an annual work plan that includes goals that relate to the requirements in the law and outcome measures that reflect the effectiveness of work plan activities.

Which Do You Think About?



Using data to build programs that create change for students does not have to be overwhelming or convoluted. By breaking things down into smaller steps, you can begin to incorporate data into your daily work.

1. Ask yourself what you want to know. Are you curious about the number of children that districts fail to identify during the school year? Or maybe your interest is more focused on how a homeless student's special education status impacts their education. Brainstorm a list of things and consider recruiting someone else to help you bounce ideas around. Also, try keeping a running list of ideas that you can come back to for those random times when an idea strikes, but you are otherwise occupied with a task or meeting.
2. Look at what you already know about students. This information can come from your *EDFacts* data, the data in your LEA workbook, unduplicated data for your state, the state's academic report card, or information from other programs like the Head Start needs assessment for your state. It can also come from records on requests from your schools or parent reports. If you do not have adequate information to inform your questions and concerns, identify sources that you can tap into to fill in the gaps.
3. Identify where you would like to see your students and program excel. Imagine you are in a meeting with other agency staff or State Coordinators. When talking about how the students are doing, what do you want to own the bragging rights on? Do you want your students to have the highest graduation rate? Do you want your students to have the lowest numbers of expulsions? What are the other areas in particular in which you would like to see your students excel?
4. Compare the list of things you're curious about, the information you already know, and the list of things you want your students to excel at in particular. The places they overlap with each other and with program or agency requirements are your priority areas for program development.



Of course, wanting something does not make it possible. If you want all your homeless students to pass the English Language Arts exam in two years, but currently only 20 percent of them are passing the test, you will need to adjust your goals. Look at the list you put together as a result of item four above. Which of the things on your priority wishlist are

- specific,
- measurable,
- attainable,
- reasonable, and
- timely?

Once you cross the items off your list that do not meet the description of specific, measurable, attainable, reasonable, and timely, you have identified the program goals that mean the most to you and are most likely to be achieved.

If, after implementing activities to support your goals, you notice that the program is not affecting change to the extent you expected, try not to become discouraged. As the saying goes, the one constant is change. It could be that the activities are not as effective as you first thought, the students and schools have evolved in some way that has reduced their effectiveness, or that new trends and practices have emerged that would serve your program and students better. In that case, just repeat this process to make the adjustments you need to continue to see growth.

Limitations and Use

“Torture the data, and it will confess to anything.” Ronald Coase

Data can answer many questions, but there are limits to what it can tell us. For example, high expulsion rates among homeless students could mean the student had problems getting to school and were expelled for poor attendance, that the expulsion hearing officer was not aware that the McKinney-Vento Act requires schools to help homeless students get to school, or that the students displayed poor behavior unrelated to their homelessness. As a result, it is important to evaluate your assumptions and the reasons you chose activities based on the data. Bias is unavoidable, but it can be limited.

The following guidelines can help you analyze your data and program accurately.

- Correlations represent relationships and connections between variables. They can be observed, but the fact that a relationship exists between the variables does not prove that one caused the other. For example, when your school districts provide school supplies to students, you may notice an increase in their National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) scores. It would be easy to conclude that providing school supplies increases the academic outcomes of students. However, the real cause for the increase in NAEP scores may be that the schools also instituted a new curriculum. Be careful to avoid assigning causation before you can prove something to be true.
- Running a calculation on data or manipulating it in some way will not necessarily tell you what you want to know. If you want to know the percentage of students who passed the reading assessment at the end of third grade, but you only have data on the number of students who were enrolled on the day of the assessment and the number of students who were promoted to the next grade, no amount of statistical analysis will result in the number of students who passed the assessment. In this instance, you simply need more information, not advanced statistics.
- Group size matters. For example, you may notice that a local educational agency (LEA) increased the number of students it identified by 75 this school year. If last year the same district identified one student as homeless, that would represent a 100 percent increase in the number of identified students. On the other hand, if

last year the LEA identified 1,000 students as homeless, that would only represent a 7.5 percent increase.

- Not all change is significant. What may initially appear to be a very large change may actually be more easily explained by chance or be a smaller change than it first appears. Depending on the data, the change being measured, and any growth models implemented by your state or districts, statistics can help you discern between changes that only present as noteworthy vs. changes that actually are noteworthy.
- Looking at multiple data sources can help you avoid bias. For example, in comparison to the number of homeless students passing statewide assessments reported by other states, your students may be doing exceptionally well on measures of mathematics and language arts skills. On the other hand, in comparison to other students within your own state, the same homeless students may be far behind their peers in skill attainment measured by the assessments.
- Question anomalies in the data. They may indicate that something is going very well or very poorly, but they may also indicate that the data is corrupted and better collection practices need to be implemented.
- Similarly, it is important to establish checks and balances in collecting data and reviewing it. For example, you may want to question districts that show a 10 percent or more change from the number of students reported as homeless the year before. Procedures such as the use of assurances about the collection methods and accuracy of the data can also help to avoid errors in data quality. It is extremely unlikely that the liaison for your LEAs is the person actually submitting data to your state agency. As a result, procedural safeguards can help to ensure that the data steward for the district submits accurate data received from the liaison instead of automatically filling in a zero under the category for homeless students.

Using the LEA Data Workbooks

“If the statistics are boring, you’ve got the wrong numbers.” Edward Tufte

As noted earlier, the local educational agency (LEA) workbooks contain data submitted to ED*Facts* by school districts in your state. The workbooks include raw data and a tab that contains aggregated data for your state as a whole. This data is duplicated due to the inability of LEAs to determine which of their students also attended other districts in the state, and therefore will not match some of the other public reports on homeless students in your state.

Each workbook includes the following:

- Blue tabs designed to help you navigate the workbook, including the user guide and the codebook, which describes the labels and variables included in the workbook.
- A green tab for summary data, which presents descriptive aggregates of the LEA data for a statewide picture.
- A red tab that includes all of the raw data submitted by each LEA in the state and matched data from the Common Core of Data.
- Yellow tabs that include the raw data grouped by topic areas, such as enrollment, assessment, or student subgroups.

In keeping with the idea that the McKinney-Vento Act requires collaboration on the part of State Coordinators and liaisons with other programs and services, the data included in the workbooks is not limited to data on homeless students collected in Section 1.9 of the Consolidated State Performance Report (CSPR). Other important data, such as homeless students served by Title I and the numbers of students who dropped out of school are also included.

It is the hope and expectation that these workbooks will be useful for State Coordinators as they plan their activities for the year. While the summary data is available to give you a quick temperature of the state overall, the raw data allows you to run your own analyses. You know your state and program better than anyone else, so you may want to use additional rankings or comparisons to inform which LEAs you choose for monitoring, technical assistance, or grant funding based on need and strength of programming. LEAs with a subgrant are also marked in the workbooks to allow for easy sorting by funding status.

Due to the fact that the workbooks are provided in Excel format, no additional statistical analytics software is required. By

using simple functions incorporated into the Excel software, you can easily calculate percent change or average enrollment, sort LEAs by demographics like number of students enrolled, or create charts and graphs. You can also easily add additional data, such as funding information, into the spreadsheets to enhance your analysis or use the calculations in the spreadsheets to create publications or awareness documents in word processing or presentation software.

To help get you started, two tools are included for you with this manual. The first, Appendix B, is an awareness document that you can use to combat common myths about homeless students. Text about common myths and reasons why they are false is already provided; placeholders are also included for you to add data from your own state to create a document personalized to your program. The second tool, Appendix C, is an Excel spreadsheet that is pre-set to allow you to compare the number of homeless students identified by your LEAs, the number of homeless students served by Title I, and the funding allotments for your program and Title I set-asides assigned to each LEA.

Q: *Are education service centers, state operated agencies, and supervisory unions considered LEAs?*

A: *YES! The definition of an LEA includes these agencies and more, as they are administrative units that operate schools or contract for educational services. For more information about the definition of an LEA, see the glossary included in the [Federal Data Collection Guide](#) and consult the [file specifications](#) to determine which LEAs must be included in the data collection for your state.*

If you are unfamiliar with working with excel, many tutorials are available online at no cost. Microsoft offers a number of tutorial videos on various topics through their [Office Support website](#).
