



Supporting College Completion for Students Experiencing Homelessness

Best Practices in Homeless Education Brief Series

This National Center for Homeless Education brief

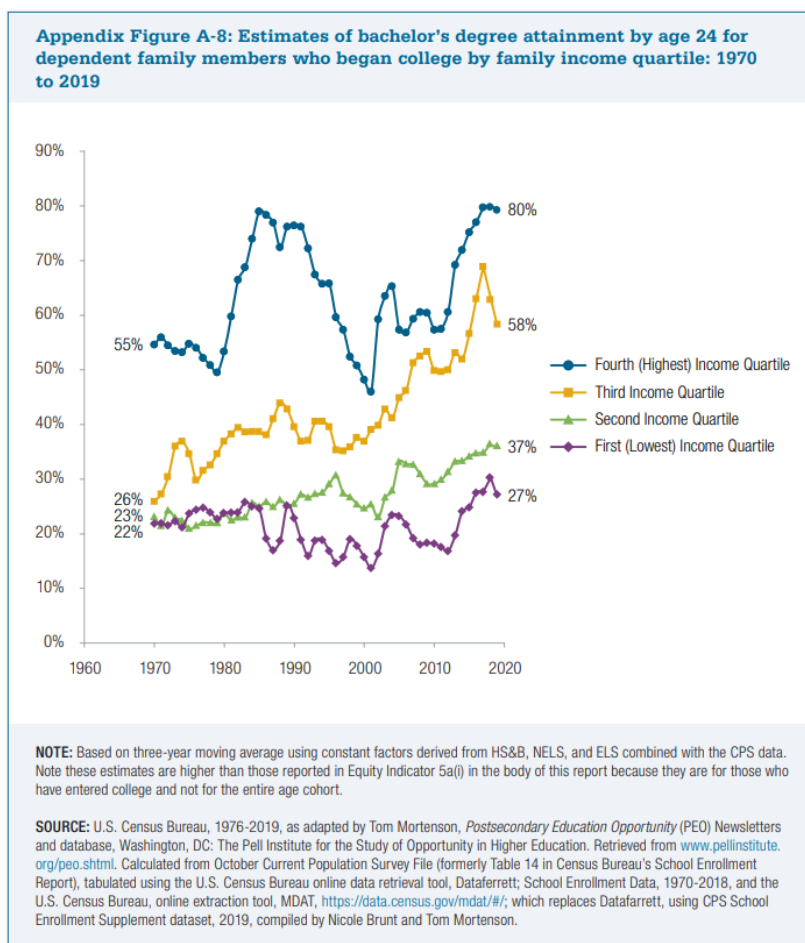
- provides information for State Coordinators, local liaisons, school counselors, and school social workers on supporting students experiencing homelessness transitioning from secondary to postsecondary education;
- spotlights promising practices for supporting college completion for students experiencing homelessness; and
- offers partnership strategies for supporting students experiencing homelessness with college completion.

Introduction

Youth and young adults experiencing homelessness face many challenges while pursuing postsecondary credentials. In 2020, the #RealCollege Survey conducted by The Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice found that 48% of the 195,000 respondents reported experiencing housing insecurity,¹ and 14% of respondents reported experiencing homelessness (Hope for College, 2021). Low education attainment is occurring in higher education institutions across the country, with more than a quarter of first-year college students not returning for their second year in community college. In 2019, the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center identified 36 million former students who had some postsecondary experience but did not earn a credential (Causey et al., 2022). Despite this information, research has shown that educational attainment is associated with increased earning potential; the term known as the “education premium” finds that the more education an individual gains, the rate of unemployment goes down, and the likelihood of employability rises (Chassman et al., 2020). Students experiencing housing insecurity and homelessness benefit from additional support during the transition to college and while pursuing a postsecondary credential. This publication highlights some of the barriers students experiencing homelessness may be navigating while attending college, provides recommendations for how educators can partner to support students transitioning from secondary education to postsecondary education, and spotlights two institutions of higher education that have implemented programs to support college completion.

¹Housing insecurity includes challenges such as trouble paying rent, frequent moves, spending a high percentage of income on housing, and overcrowded housing. For more information on housing insecurity visit: <https://health.gov/healthypeople/priority-areas/social-determinants-health/literature-summaries/housing-instability>.

Since the College Cost Reduction and Access Act ([CCRAA], 20 U.S.C. § 1001 et. seq.) was signed into law in September of 2007, the issue of college access for youth experiencing homelessness has garnered increased attention. Among other provisions, the CCRAA confers independent student status on unaccompanied homeless youth. This status allows these youths' federal financial aid packages to be calculated based on their own income and assets (not those of their parent(s) or guardian(s)). It also eliminates the need for the signature of a parent or guardian on the youths' Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). This CCRAA provision has helped to ensure that unaccompanied homeless youth (UHY) have



access to the financial support necessary to pay for college. In 2020, the FAFSA Simplification Act was passed as part of the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2021, which overhauls the federal student aid program starting in the 2024-25 award year.² Under the FAFSA Simplification Act, applicants under the age of 24 will be asked a single question on the FAFSA³ to determine if they are a UHY.⁴ The applicant will need to provide documentation that supports their homeless determination. The FAFSA Simplification Act requires that these determinations be made as quickly as possible and expands who can verify the applicant's status as a UHY.⁵ The determination as a UHY carries into subsequent financial aid award years. The updates to the verification of dependency status for UHY under the FAFSA Simplification Act remove barriers to accessing postsecondary education opportunities.⁶

²<https://studentaid.gov/help-center/answers/article/fafsa-simplification-act>.

³<https://studentaid.gov/sites/default/files/dependency-status.pdf>.

⁴To be considered an unaccompanied homeless youth on the FAFSA form, an individual must be a youth who is unaccompanied and homeless or is unaccompanied, self-supporting and at risk of becoming homeless. See the Dear Colleague Letter on Unaccompanied Homeless Youth Determinations: <https://fsapartners.ed.gov/knowledge-center/library/dear-colleague-letters/2023-04-14/unaccompanied-homeless-youth-determinations-update>.

⁵<https://schoolhouseconnection.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/The-FAFSA-Simplification-Act-Summary.pdf>.

⁶Visit NCHES [Increasing Access to Higher Education for Unaccompanied Homeless Youth: Information for Colleges and Universities](#) for an overview of unaccompanied homeless youth and a summary of federal legislation that support unaccompanied youth with accessing college.

Entering college and securing financial aid, however, are only the first steps along the path to degree completion. While college entry statistics for low-income, first-generation college students⁷ demonstrate a modest narrowing of the gap between students in the top and bottom income quartiles (The Pell Institute, p. 282), bachelor's degree attainment statistics are far less encouraging. In response to the continued gap in degree attainment between low-income and higher-income students, postsecondary institutions around the country are building programs aimed at providing post-matriculation support for students at high risk of dropping out, including students experiencing homelessness.

Barriers to Degree Completion

Homeless youth face several barriers to academic success and degree completion in the postsecondary environment. The experience of homelessness itself can be highly destabilizing, even traumatic, with effects on student's physical, mental, emotional, and academic well-being. The overall context of poverty in which homelessness usually occurs brings with it a steady barrage of stress, including lack of access to adequate nutrition and healthcare or unsafe and often overcrowded living conditions. Further, many college-bound students in homeless situations have not had anyone in their lives to serve as an educational role model, providing valuable support and information along the student's path to college. These students often arrive at college feeling out of place, questioning whether they belong in college or if they have what it takes to be successful. Some students who experienced homelessness during the K-12 years are fortunate enough to secure stable and adequate housing in a college dormitory. However, even then, these students continue to face challenges, including concerns about where they can go when dormitories close over extended school breaks. Other students continue to experience ongoing homelessness as college students, shouldering the burden of financial survival and daily safety while trying to meet academic demands.

Barriers students experiencing homelessness may face while attending college that create risk factors to completion include:

- food and housing insecurity,⁸
- the cost of attending college,⁹
- securing employment that generates a sufficient income while attending college,⁹
- lack of safety nets, including financial support,⁹
- family conflict or past trauma,¹⁰
- isolation and disconnection from peers in classes and on campus,¹⁰ and

⁷At the time of the release of this publication, no national-level data sets on college entry and/or completion for homeless students are available. Because many college-bound youth experiencing homelessness are from low-income families and/or are first generation college attenders, college entry and completion data on these populations may assist in understanding college entry and completion rates for homeless students.

⁸Goldrick-Rab, 2018

⁹Consolidated from NCHE Helpline responses.

¹⁰Hallett & Freas, 2017

- first-generation¹¹ college goers face a variety of challenges that include a lack of academic preparedness and social supports.¹²

These risk factors are associated with “nontraditional students”¹³ and students experiencing homelessness who are at a much higher risk of dropping out of college or taking much longer to graduate as they balance multiple and sometimes seemingly conflicting priorities (Johnson, 2013). The common dynamic among many of these risk factors is the lack of academic, social, and financial support that students must take responsibility for and balance along with the demands of school and conflicting priorities. The more responsibilities a student must balance, the easier it is for the student to lose educational focus and either begin to struggle academically or feel that the load of responsibility is too much to bear. Unfortunately, in these situations, students may set aside their educational goals.

K-12 and Higher Education Collaborations

Local homeless liaisons, school counselors, school social workers, and other student support staff that work with students experiencing homelessness in secondary education are well positioned to support students with selecting a college that fits the needs of the student as part of planning the transition from secondary to postsecondary education. When selecting a college, students experiencing homelessness may need to consider their basic needs, including housing and food, school supplies, and transportation (Havlik, 2017). School social workers and school counselors are often appointed as the building point of contact in one or multiple schools, providing support to the school district's local liaison. The [McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act](#), as amended by the Every Student Succeeds Act, requires the State educational agency (SEA) homeless education plans to describe how school counselors will provide students experiencing homelessness support with college preparation and readiness [42 U.S.C. § 11432(g)(1)(K)].¹⁴ More school districts are hiring school social workers to add capacity to the local liaison. They should be considered as another partner in supporting students experiencing homelessness with college preparation and readiness and accessing postsecondary pathways.¹⁵

¹¹First-generation is defined by neither parent of a student having completed a bachelor's degree or in the case of an individual who resided with and received support from one parent who did not complete a bachelor's degree (U.S. Department of Education, 2011). <https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ope/trio/statute-trio-gu.pdf>.

¹²Havlik et al., 2020

¹³Criteria used to identify nontraditional students includes financial and family status, enrollment patterns, and high school graduation status, see <https://nces.ed.gov/pubs/web/97578e.asp>.

¹⁴For more information on the role of school counselors role in support college preparation and readiness and strategies for partnerships see NCHes brief [School Counselor Supports for College Preparation and Readiness for Students Experiencing Homelessness](#).

¹⁵For more information on the role of school social workers in expanding local liaison capacity and partnership strategies see NCHes brief [Partnering with School Social Workers to Expand Local Homeless Liaison Capacity and Provide Wraparound Services under the American Rescue Plan Homeless Children and Youth Program](#).

Homeless higher education liaisons, a role like the local liaison in school districts, identify students experiencing homelessness and support access to basic needs such as housing, food, and clothing (Haskett et al., 2022). More colleges and universities are implementing the higher education homeless liaison role along with basic needs centers that offer a variety of different supports. In addition, many states have passed legislation that either allows or requires public institutions of higher education to have a homeless higher education liaison.¹⁶ Understanding the role of the homeless higher education liaison and how to contact the individual in that role is valuable to supporting students experiencing homelessness with transitioning to college and providing a warm handoff.¹⁷ If your local postsecondary institution doesn't have a homeless higher education liaison, consider searching for an on-campus basic needs center or collaborating with staff in the financial aid or advising departments.

Higher Education Institutions Taking the Lead

There are no federal statutes requiring higher education institutions to identify students experiencing homelessness and provide support services that remove barriers to attending school. Awareness of housing and other basic needs instability among students in college is growing. As a result, higher education institutions are implementing programs to meet students' basic needs to support college completion. Below are exemplars from two higher education institutions that have developed and implemented supports and programs. The information provided in the exemplars is valuable to staff who may be interested in replicating a similar program in their own institutions of higher education. Additionally, the information provided is valuable for homeless education staff in secondary education to gain an understanding of what supports can exist on higher education campuses.

National Resources

At the national level, organizations are providing resources and communities of practice opportunities to institutions of higher education to assist in supporting students experiencing homelessness in accessing higher education pathways and attending college. SchoolHouse Connection has launched a learning network for homeless higher education liaisons. For more information, visit <https://schoolhouseconnection.org/tips-for-homeless-higher-education-liaisons/>. The National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth (NAEHCY) has developed a toolkit of resources for students, advocates, and educators. To access the toolkit, visit <https://naehcy.org/higher-education/>.

¹⁶To see which states have enacted laws allowing or requiring homeless higher education liaisons, visit: Schoolhouse Connections [Tips for Higher Education Homeless Liaisons](#).

¹⁷A warm handoff is the process of personally connecting a client, patient, or student to a resource or another provider. A warm handoff can be done through a phone call, face-to-face meeting, or other means that go beyond providing a client, patient, or student a resource to pursue on their own. For more information visit <https://www.lawinsider.com/dictionary/warm-handoff>.

Kennesaw State University

Kennesaw State University (KSU) has two campuses located in Kennesaw, Georgia and Marietta, Georgia. The student body population is 45,000 between both campuses. [Campus Awareness, Resource & Empowerment Services \(CARE Services\)](#), a stand-alone department, provides services to students, ensuring access to food, shelter, and safety. This spotlight will provide an overview of the programs CARE Services offers to meet the individual needs of students, describes how CARE Services is funded, and how the staff collaborates with local school districts to support the transition from K-12 to postsecondary as well as partnerships with community-based organizations to provide wraparound supports.



CARE Services is funded through private and foundation donations, investments from community members, and fundraising in collaboration with the KSU Foundation. The university funds the staff positions that support the CARE program and includes two coordinator positions, an office manager, student staff, and the director role. The CARE Services program serves approximately 2,200 students per year, offering emergency assistance, case management, temporary emergency housing, and the resource pantry. Eligibility criteria to utilize the programs CARE Services provides are a low barrier¹⁸, focused on prevention, and open to any enrolled student who needs support.

CARE Services offers comprehensive emergency assistance that includes financial support to access technology for remote learning, classroom support needs, healthcare expenses, childcare expenses, outstanding tuition balances, and bus passes for public transportation. The average award per student is approximately \$1,000 in the form of a scholarship that is made possible through grants, donations, and a partnership with the financial aid office. Additionally, CARE Services provides housing assistance to avoid eviction after receiving a notice. Housing support is one of the most sought-after forms of emergency services offered, with 77% of applicants receiving financial assistance in the 2022-23 award period requesting assistance due to a pending eviction.

Case management for students is weaved into all the support programs CARE Services provides for as long as desired. Case management services also offer access to additional supports that include coaching, advocacy, budgeting, finding employment, and referrals to on and off-campus resources. Students working with a case manager set their own goals based on individual needs while also receiving support with implementation and progress monitoring.

The Kennesaw and Marietta campuses have temporary emergency housing that is part of the on-campus housing. Each campus has two beds, with renewals occurring on a two-week basis while CARE Services

¹⁸Low barrier refers to a program that has limited if any requirements for participants to utilize the services offered, for more information visit <https://www.lawinsider.com/dictionary/low-barrier>.

staff works with the student to find safe and stable housing. Eligibility for emergency housing includes an assessment of access to a safe and stable place to live. If the four beds between the two campuses are full, CARE Services staff place the student in a hotel. Students receiving temporary emergency housing can utilize the resource pantry to get necessities such as bedding, towels, food, and hygiene items.

Both campuses have a resource pantry located in the student center, which is the hub of each campus. The pantry is open during weekday business hours and is accessible to all KSU students. When setting up the resource pantry, CARE Services partnered with Kroger to design the space like a grocery store stocked with goods that include hygiene items, school supplies, shelf-stable food, and household items. When available, the resource pantry also has refrigerated and freezer items. In partnership with a local non-profit, MUST Ministries, a mobile pantry offering perishable food items such as dairy and meat, comes to campus once a month. The resource pantry relies on donations from the community to maintain the stock.

CARE Services also hosts ASCEND, a K-12 transition to higher education and retention program for incoming students who experienced homelessness in high school or had experience with the foster care system. Participants are termed “ASCEND scholars” and are provided many opportunities to build community and develop skills to support the successful completion of their educational goals. Scholars begin their transition with support from peer leaders during Bridge Week, where they engage in academic, social, and professional workshops aimed at preparing them for college. The workshop series continues through the duration of the scholar’s time at KSU. Workshop topics and speakers are curated based on where scholars are at in their program and the identified needs. During bridge week, scholars can also explore the campus, interact with current ASCEND students, learn about scholarships and financial aid, and meet faculty, staff, and members of the community. The Living-Learning Village is on-campus housing available to participants of the ASCEND program. Throughout their time in the program, scholars have access to a team of wraparound supports that includes a counselor who is trained to work with students with trauma and a program coordinator who provides case management, success coaching, and support with goal setting. Scholars also have the option to be paired with a community member to receive mentoring support. Additionally, scholars can participate in cultural enrichment activities and travel abroad opportunities, which are funded through stipend awards, as available. The ASCEND program has been highly successful, with a 100% retention rate of participants in the 2022-23 school year.

Outreach to students and awareness of the supports CARE Services provides is done through many avenues. The CARE Services staff holds tabling events on campus throughout the school year. The CARE Services staff attend meetings with faculty and staff in various departments across campus – including financial aid, advising, and counseling – to share information about CARE Services supports. Additionally, the staff at CARE Services connects with other on-campus support offices, including military and veteran services, counseling, and psychological services. There is also a partnership with on-campus housing and campus police that helps distribute boxes of food and basic hygiene items and a card with information about the support CARE Services provides to students.

The CARE Services staff collaborates with local school districts and statewide government agencies to spread information about the on-campus support programs and opportunities to participate in informational sessions through prospective student days and open office hours to answer questions about attending higher education. In return, a local school district provides driver's education classes to ASCEND scholars. In partnership with the Department of Children and Families, KSU hosts in-person tours of the ASCEND Living-Learning Village for eligible youth interested in learning more about attending college, including residents of group homes around the state of Georgia. The goal of the tours is to give youth a chance to gain perspective on the college experience and get connected to programs of interest at KSU and other institutions of higher education.

Leaders at KSU and CARE Services emphasize the need to maintain partnerships with community-based organizations. While the CARE program provides a breadth of supportive services for students on campus, sometimes referrals need to be made to wraparound support to off-campus partners. To maintain those partnerships and stay current on new community resources, the director attends the local [Continuum of Care](#) meetings, which also provides a great opportunity to spread awareness of the CARE program to increase the accessibility of higher education for youth and young adults.

Edmonds College

Edmonds College is in Lynnwood, Washington, 30 minutes north of Seattle. The student body population is 7,529. Starting in 2018, the college opened the Triton Food Pantry, and in 2022, [Triton Student Resource Hub](#) ("The Hub") moved into a stand-alone



building and began providing enrolled¹⁹ students access to food, clothing, housing, emergency grant assistance, and referrals to community resources. In 2020, Edmonds College was selected to participate in the Supporting Students Experiencing Homelessness²⁰ (SSEH) pilot program funded by the Washington State legislature. The Hub uses several other funding sources in addition to the SSEH grant funds that can be leveraged to fund staff salaries and increase the awards students can receive. To support programming as well as awareness of the on-campus programs, staff at The Hub partner with different departments on campus and community partners to provide wraparound services.

The Hub has three full-time staff members who are funded by a variety of state and local grants, two full-time Resource Navigators, and a full-time 211²¹ Community Resource Advocate. The Hub provides services that have low barriers to access, are open to all students, use a single application with quick

¹⁹Enrolled means a student has applied for and been accepted to the college and is enrolled in at least one class.

²⁰See the Washington State Supporting Students Experiencing Homelessness (SSEH) pilot program report to the state legislature, <https://wsac.wa.gov/sites/default/files/2023-Supporting-Students-Experiencing-Homelessness-Pilot-Project-Report.pdf>.

²¹211 is a referral line for community members operated by specialists that provide callers referrals to agencies and community-based organizations that address a variety of needs. 211 calls are routed to a local or regional calling center. For more information visit <https://www.fcc.gov/consumers/guides/dial-211-essential-community-services>.

approval and funds disbursement, and leverage the food pantry and common physical spaces to address college student homelessness. The Hub emphasizes placing trust in students and aims to mitigate stigma by offering a safe and welcoming space.

The Hub provides emergency services for students that range from \$100 to \$5,000 per academic year to help remove barriers that may hinder a student from continuing to attend college using funds from six different sources, including SSEH grants. Emergency service supports include grocery store gift cards, child-related expenses, public transit passes, utility bill payments, car repairs, gas cards, and funds for eviction prevention. Emergency services also cover one-time payments for medical copays or bills and can also be used to cover the cost of eyeglasses or immediate dental care needs. Edmonds College has a partnership with on-campus housing to provide short-term stays based on the amount of emergency funds available for the student. If there aren't vacancies in on-campus housing, The Hub can also use emergency funds to pay for market-rate housing. For student needs that go beyond the capacity of what The Hub can provide, the 211 Community Resource Advocate offers resource navigation, warm handoffs to community resources, and support with public benefits enrollment.

Once a week, students and employees can access the Edmonds College Food Pantry located in The Hub for food, clothing, and hygiene items at no cost. The food pantry offerings include non-perishable items and other shelf-stable food. More recently, the food pantry acquired a refrigerator and is offering some dairy items. Once a week, the Lynnwood Food Bank Truck comes to the parking lot where The Hub is located, offering items that typically consist of fresh fruit, vegetables, bread, pastries, eggs, and meat. The Hub's food, hygiene, and clothing pantry is funded through community donations and the Associated Students of Edmonds College Campus Green Fund.

Partnerships with community-based organizations, such as the collaboration with the Lynnwood Food Bank Truck, are an important piece to expanding sustainable wraparound supports to students. The Hub has strong partnerships with Volunteers of America, Verdant Health Commission, the Edmonds College Foundation, Snohomish County Department of Social and Human Services, and CARES of Washington.²²

The Hub collaborates with on-campus departments to advertise supports and provide cross-department referrals. To expand awareness of The Hub's services, the staff advertises in the monthly student newsletter, presents to staff and faculty, attends campus staff events, and offers tours of The Hub building. The Hub receives student referrals from faculty, financial aid and advising staff, and the Wellness Center. The Hub staff also works closely with the on-campus workforce case managers to provide childcare for parenting students through the Basic Foods and Employment Training²³ (BFET) program.

²²CARES of Washington is a local organization that comes on campus to help students with interview skills, financial support for buying interview clothing, and support with accessing employment opportunities.

²³The Basic Food and Employment Training (BFET) program offered through the U.S. Department of Agriculture Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) is an employment readiness program for recipients of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) provided by community and technical colleges or community-based organizations. For more information visit, <https://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/employment-and-training-resources-available-states>.

The Hub collects data through an outcomes and satisfaction survey to participants each quarter. Based on participants' feedback, 90% reported staying in school after receiving financial support. In the fall quarter of 2023, 97% of survey respondents who received emergency awards completed the quarter, with 88% reporting they are now food secure and 64% stating they have secure housing. The data and survey outcomes highlight the need for basic needs services, including housing for students, which removes barriers and supports college completion.

Practices for Consideration to Support Students Experiencing Homelessness with College Completion

Collaboration between secondary and postsecondary education is an effective way to support students experiencing homelessness in selecting a college pathway that fits not only their educational and career goals but also meets their basic needs. Since homeless higher education liaisons and basic needs centers on college campuses are gaining momentum across the country, homeless education staff have a connection point to provide a warm handoff to students. Educators in secondary and postsecondary education are also encouraged to:

- Partner with the local youth action board associated with the local Continuum of Care to identify the needs of college students experiencing homelessness and develop strategies for offering support programs;²⁴
- Partner with the higher education institution's student government council to identify student needs, spread awareness of housing instability on campus, and support the development of programs; and
- Collaborate with the local continuum of care to stay abreast of housing resources and other services provided by community-based organizations to support referrals to wraparound services.²⁵

²⁴To see examples of partnership between youth and young adults with lived experience, higher education institutions, and the local Continuum of Care visit [The Youth Success Project](#).

²⁵For partnership strategies between housing providers and homeless education staff visit NCHes [Housing and Education Collaborations to Serve Homeless Children, Youth, and Families](#).

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Local contact information

Please put the contact information here.



For more information on issues related to the education of children and youth experiencing homelessness, contact NCHE at homeless@serve.org.