



Policy Brief

Students in Foster Care or Experiencing Homelessness: An Update

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Students in foster care or who experience homelessness face significant challenges with their educational stability and overall well-being. These students frequently experience unstable living conditions, including residing in shelters, motels, cars, or temporary homes due to economic hardship, or placement in the foster care system. Heightened mobility for these students often leads to frequent school transfers, absenteeism, emotional distress, disrupted learning, and low graduation rates—all of which severely hinder their academic, life, and long-term outcomes.

LESC staff interviewed representatives from 11 school districts, the Public Education Department (PED), and the Children, Youth, and Families Department (CYFD) to better understand the current educational status of New Mexico's students either in foster care or experiencing homelessness. These interviews offered insights into the specific challenges these vulnerable student populations face, as well as the effectiveness of existing supports and resources. By engaging directly with school administrators, educators, and support staff, LESC staff identified common barriers to academic success for these students and explored the level of collaboration between school districts, PED, and CYFD. The interviews also provided an overview of how school districts address the needs of these students, with the goal of informing policy improvements and enhancing student supports. This brief provides key information and data about students who are in foster care or experiencing homelessness, summarizes LESC staff's research about supporting these students, and offers policy recommendations for LESC lawmakers to consider.

The Status of Students in Foster Care

Foster care is a temporary living arrangement designed to provide children with a safe and supportive environment when they are unable to remain with their biological parents or guardians due to concerns about safety or well-being. This system ensures children receive essential services, including secure housing, nutrition, education, healthcare, and emotional support.

Understanding the Foster Care System

The national understanding of a foster child is a minor, typically under the age of 18, who has been temporarily separated from their biological parents or legal guardians and placed in the care of a foster family or designated caregiver due to circumstances such as neglect, abuse, abandonment, parental inability to provide adequate care, or parental incarceration. In New Mexico, however, the definition of a foster child or child in foster care varies across different statutes, reflecting a lack of consistency.

Key Takeaways

- CYFD and PED collaborate to address delays in notifying schools of foster care placements through the restructuring of CYFD, including the formation of an ESSA team. Both agencies maintain up-to-date school contact information (*Page 3*).
- There is currently no dedicated funding specifically for students in foster care, although districts and schools leverage federal funds and SEG allocations (*Page 5*).
- Staff are trained to recognize signs of homelessness, including frequent moves, poor hygiene, hunger, or lack of supplies, with smaller communities relying on informal networks to identify students (*Page 8*).

LESC staff reviewed New Mexico's statutes, including the Children's Code (Chapter 32A NMSA 1978), Public Schools (Chapter 22 NMSA 1978), and the administrative code for social services (NMAC 8), for a consistent definition of foster care and foster child. However, it was revealed Chapter 32A NMSA 1978 does not provide a specific definition for "foster child" or "foster care." However, it contains related terms and definitions such as:

"Placement and care" mean the day-to-day care and protection of the child or eligible adult, including responsibility for placement decisions about the child or eligible adult." See [Section 32A.26.2 NMSA 1978](#).

"Foster care placement" means: (1) an action pursuant to the Abuse and Neglect Act [Chapter 32A, Article 4 NMSA 1978] removing an Indian child from the child's parent, guardian or Indian custodian for temporary placement in a foster home or institution or the home of a guardian where the parent or Indian custodian cannot have the child returned upon demand, but in which parental rights have not been terminated; or (2) the temporary placement of an Indian child in foster care pursuant to a voluntary agreement entered into between a parent, guardian or Indian custodian and the department pursuant to the Voluntary Placement and Family Services Act." See [Section 32A.28.2 NMSA 1978](#).

Additionally, Section 22-13-33 NMSA 1978 is specific to appointing a point of contact person for certain students in which it defines:

"Foster care" means twenty-four-hour substitute care for a student placed away from the student's parents or guardians and for whom the children, youth and families department has placement and care responsibility, including placements in foster family homes, foster homes of relatives, group homes, emergency shelters, treatment foster homes, residential facilities, childcare institutions and preadoptive homes. For the purposes of this section, a student is in foster care regardless of whether the foster care facility is licensed, and payments are made by the state, tribal or local agency for the care of the student, whether adoption subsidy payments are being made prior to the finalization of an adoption or whether there is federal matching of any payments that are made." See [Section 22.13.33 NMSA 1978](#).

However, the administrative code for social services contains a separate definition of foster child or child in foster care which was defined as:

"Foster child" or "child in foster care" as referred to as "child" herein, means a child who is placed in the care and custody of children, youth and families department protective services division either under the legal authorization of the Children's Code or through a voluntary placement agreement signed by the parent or legal guardian, or a child who is placed with a licensed child placement agency under the authority of the Child Placement Agency Licensing Act. If the court orders legal custody to a relative, person, facility, or agency other than the children, youth and families department protective services division, the child is not a child in foster care of protective services division." See 8 [NMAC 8.10.8.7](#), 8 [NMAC 8.26.2.7](#), and 8 [NMAC 8.26.4.7](#).

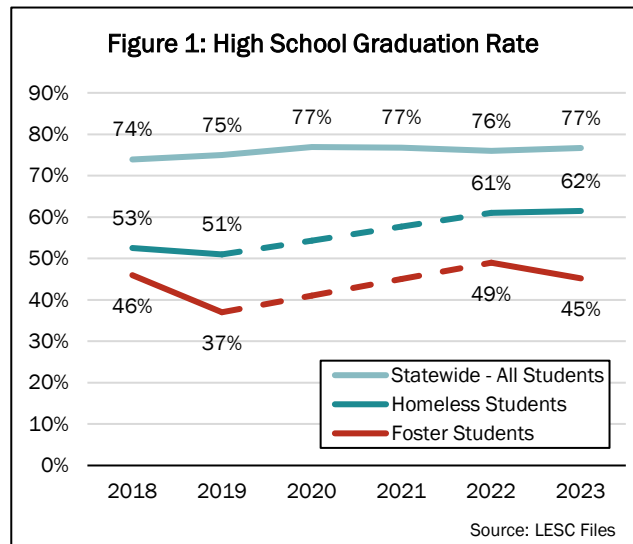
Consistency in definitions is crucial for clear communication and effective policymaking. When different statutes or agencies define terms inconsistently, it can lead to confusion about eligibility for services, hinder coordination among agencies, and create barriers to accessing necessary resources. Clear and uniform definitions ensure that all stakeholders—families, foster care providers, schools, and policymakers—understand the scope of care and services available, leading to more efficient support for foster children.

Demographic Data Across New Mexico

According to a September 2024 [LFC report](#), in FY24, 872 youth entered foster care in New Mexico, 542 exited foster care, and as of July 2024, 2,106 children were under CYFD care. LFC staff noted the number of children in foster care has steadily declined from FY17 to FY23. Children in foster care often face considerable academic challenges compared to their peers who are not in foster care. As shown in **Figure 1: High School Graduation**

Rate, students in foster care are among the lowest of any student group, with only 45.2 percent graduating in FY23, compared to the overall state graduation rate of 76.7 percent, largely due to high mobility and frequent disruptions in education. Frequent relocation to new schools can result in significant learning gaps, making it difficult for students in foster care to meet academic milestones.

Additionally, attendance is a significant concern, with students in foster care exhibiting higher absenteeism rates. PED does not report specific absenteeism rates for students in foster care, but [national research](#) finds children in foster care are twice as likely to be absent. Mental health issues, often stemming from trauma, further exacerbate difficulties with both attendance and academic achievement.



Identifying and Tracking Students in Foster Care

Students in foster care are primarily identified through communication between CYFD and school districts, but this process faces significant challenges. LESC staff found notifying schools of foster care placement is often delayed or, in some instances, never occurs, which can pose a safety risk, such as parents taking students without the school's knowledge.

CYFD has restructured its department to address these issues, including creating an Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) team, embedded in the department's Office of Advocacy. Frontline CYFD staff, such as investigators and permanency workers, intend to ensure schools are aware when a child comes into care or needs to change placements, especially if placement is out of their school district. CYFD's Office of Advocacy now serves as the main point of contact for schools regarding school placement, transportation, and other educational issues for students in foster care. CYFD also aims to improve its process of providing "child notification letters" to schools that contain extensive information about the student and contact information for their CYFD caseworker.

Point of Contact for Certain Students for Districts

Section 22.13.33 NMSA 1978 states each school district and charter school must designate an individual to serve as a point of contact for students in foster care and students involved in the juvenile justice system. The designated point of contact is required to work with CYFD to develop school district or charter school policies. This collaboration focuses on determining the student's best interest in remaining at their school of origin, ensuring transportation to their school of origin if it is deemed beneficial, and managing any disputes that may arise. The point of contact also participates in or convenes Best Interest Determination (BID) meetings with CYFD and ensures that transportation is provided according to district or charter policies in compliance with state regulations.

Additionally, for students in foster care or involved in the juvenile justice system, the point of contact must ensure equal access to extracurricular activities, career and technical education programs, and other special opportunities for which the student qualifies. Point of contacts are responsible for ensuring high school students receive adequate college and career counseling, access to necessary special education services, and appropriate support from school staff. The point of contact also facilitates communication between the school, CYFD, the student, caregivers, and other relevant individuals to guarantee the implementation of these responsibilities. Further, points of contact must provide training and resources to other school staff on the educational challenges and needs of system-involved youth, including trauma-informed practices. Lastly, CYFD is required to notify schools when a student enters foster care or when a foster student enrolls in the school.

Collaboratively, CYFD and PED maintain spreadsheets to keep school contact information up to date as cases are reassigned or workers change.

School registration is another common method used by school districts to identify students in foster care. This method, however, has gaps, as students' circumstances may change after registration. It requires case managers or supervisors to contact schools directly to inform them of a student's foster care status. Ultimately, there is no standardized statewide process for identifying and tracking foster students.

Additionally, many districts lack a uniform system for tracking students. Even if school districts have an indicator in their system to track students in foster care, most schools don't continue to update students' status if foster care placement changes or terminates. This leads to discrepancies in reported numbers, potentially affecting the resources allocated to support these students.

Training Initiatives to Better Serve Foster Care Students

Several school districts mentioned a lack of dedicated training for serving students in foster care and expressed a desire for more training to support students and build relationships between education staff and the foster care system. Some school district foster care liaisons noted school counselors are responsible for many areas, with foster care being one small part of their duties, meaning this resource is not enough to serve these students fully. Some districts rely on mandatory online training through McKinney-Vento for all staff, including cafeteria workers and bus drivers. However, this focuses more broadly on students experiencing homelessness than foster care.

Although PED and school districts shared there have been no past training initiatives on foster care education, PED is planning four mandatory virtual trainings focused on this topic. PED intends to offer its first training in October 2024 once the list of foster care and students involved in the juvenile justice system points of contact in all state and charter schools is updated. PED staff also mentioned they meet with the CYFD ESSA team every other week and will be developing technical assistance and other training initiatives. In collaborating with PED, CYFD is also developing training and guidance for school districts on points of contact and processes around BID meetings for students in foster care. BID meetings are held when a student in foster care's living situation changes and involve various stakeholders to determine if it's in the child's best interest to stay in their current school or transfer.

The new ESSA team at CYFD intends to provide more training for CYFD staff on tracking and addressing the educational needs of students in foster care, such as identifying if a student needs an Individualized Education Program (IEP) or Section 504 plan and connecting students to other disability-related services they may be eligible for. CYFD representatives stated one of the goals is to train CYFD staff on the "why" behind the importance of addressing educational needs and stability for students in foster care, such as the impact placement changes can have on attendance and graduation. While PED and CYFD are working to improve services and coordination, challenges remain, particularly related to funding and consistent training for supporting students in foster care.

The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act

Enacted in 1987 and updated in 2015 under ESSA, the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act ensures public school districts and charters identify, enroll, and support the academic success of children and youth experiencing homelessness. The act mandates immediate school enrollment without typical documentation, provides transportation to maintain school stability, and addresses educational barriers caused by homelessness, including access to preschool education.

To ensure compliance with the act, PED partners with McKinney-Vento.org for training on homeless education laws. School personnel, including homeless liaisons, must register on the McKinney-Vento.org website to access training, which covers legal obligations and best practices for identifying and supporting homeless students. This training ensures that schools are prepared to meet the needs of homeless students and comply with federal regulations, helping students achieve educational stability and success.

Intentional Services and Support for Foster Care Students

Educational stability is a priority for students in foster care, with efforts to keep them in their school of origin whenever possible. When a student in foster care's living situation changes, BID meetings are convened, either by the school district or by a CYFD ESSA team member. These meetings are ideally a collaborative effort to prioritize student needs. This approach helps to preserve continuity in students' educational and social relationships. Once a decision has been made from the BID meeting, transportation assistance is then provided to students, with both CYFD and school districts contributing to transportation costs. However, when discussing transportation initiatives with school districts, many noted transportation still poses a significant challenge, as some school districts struggle to secure the resources necessary to keep students in foster care in their schools of origin, participating in extracurricular activities, and other supportive services.

In addition to the BID process, LESC staff also found there are other supports specifically for students in foster care, although the implementation and availability of these services varies across school districts:

- Financial support is available via CYFD's Care and Support of Children fund for students' educational needs, including up to \$500 per year for tutoring, educational devices, and services and up to \$750 for graduation activities to ensure participation in significant milestones. According to the General Appropriation Act of 2024, the Care and Support fund received \$5 million from the general fund.
- Students in foster care are also eligible for immediate school enrollment, even if they lack required documents, such as birth certificates.
- Mental health support is available to students in foster care through therapy and counseling services, with caseworkers discussing additional support during monthly home visits.
- The Fostering Connections program by CYFD offers transition planning support for older youth in foster care, including startup funds and subsidies as they prepare to age out of the system.
- While not exclusive to students in foster care, many school districts partner with local organizations to provide basic necessities, such as clothing, school supplies, and food assistance.
- The John H. Chafee Foster Care Program for Successful Transition to Adulthood provides federal funding to help current and former youth in foster care, aged 14-21, transition to adulthood by supporting education, employment, housing, and life skills development. The program also includes the Education and Training Voucher initiative, which provides financial assistance for post secondary education and training.

Challenges remain in ensuring uniformity across districts, particularly in rural or underfunded areas.

Funding for Foster Care Students

State Funding. There is currently no dedicated state funding specifically allocated for students in foster care within New Mexico's education system, presenting a significant challenge highlighted by education professionals across the state. However, students in foster care may be supported through the at-risk index in the state equalization guarantee (SEG), the state's public school funding formula. At the school district level, some districts and schools also allocate resources from their general budgets to support students in foster care, but this varies and lacks consistency across the state. Further, the FY25 CYFD budget, according to the [Legislative Finance Committee](#) (LFC), includes approximately \$387 million (with \$228 million allocated for protective services operating budget) and supports foster care maintenance but it is not an education-specific funding source.

Federal Funding. Students in foster care are also supported through broader federal funding sources:

1. **Title I funding**, a key provision of ESSA, can assist students in foster care but is not explicitly earmarked for them. This funding provides financial assistance to schools with high concentrations of low-income students to improve educational outcomes and ensure equity. Schools with at least 40 percent of low-income students can use these funds for schoolwide programs, while others focus on targeted

assistance for at-risk students. Title I supports a range of initiatives, including hiring additional staff, offering tutoring, and purchasing instructional materials.

2. Additionally, some students in foster care may qualify for funding under the federal **McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act**, which is designed for homeless students but can be extended to foster students who meet the homelessness criteria.
3. **American Rescue Plan (ARP) funds** have been utilized to support student needs in recent years, including students in foster care, though these funds are not specifically dedicated to this group.

Education professionals have emphasized the need for specific, targeted funding to address the unique needs of students in foster care, as they report current funding sources are insufficient. While some districts are exploring the use of Title I funds and working on budget requests to create dedicated support for students in foster care, school districts report the absence of statewide dedicated funding remains a persistent challenge.

Foster Care Liaisons Express Their Needs

Educational leaders identified several areas of need for students in foster care, underscoring the importance of coordinated efforts between schools, child welfare agencies, and foster families to ensure comprehensive support. These needs are identified below:

- Many cited a need to **improve transportation**, as social workers often spend considerable time transporting students in foster care to maintain school stability, highlighting the need for better funding and coordination.
- **Maintaining school stability** was reported to be vital for students in foster care, who frequently experience multiple moves, but this is complicated by placement changes and the lack of foster homes near students' schools of origin.
- Students in foster care also have **significant mental health needs**, which are often unmet due to a lack of resources such as adequate school mental health personnel. At the same time, **foster families require more training and support** to manage the needs of students who may have experienced trauma.
- Many cited a need for **timely sharing of information when a student enters foster care or changes placements**. Schools often face delays, which impede their ability to provide appropriate support and maintain educational continuity for foster care students.
- There is a need for **consistent, statewide processes, such as standardized BID meetings and dispute resolution protocols**, to ensure equitable support for students in foster care.
- Many expressed interest in an **improved system for data tracking and sharing between CYFD, PED, and schools** to allow for better service coordination.
- Finally, **dedicated personnel**, such as foster care liaisons, were seen as beneficial in addressing the unique needs of students in foster care and providing tailored support.

The Status of Students Experiencing Homelessness

[Research](#) shows that students experiencing homelessness face numerous challenges that significantly impact their academic success, including high rates of absenteeism, poor academic performance, and lower graduation rates, as illustrated in Figure 1 on page 3. Prolonged periods of homelessness exacerbate these issues, often leading to social isolation, rejection, and disengagement from school. These findings highlight the urgent need for targeted support and resources to help these students overcome their circumstances, build resilience, and thrive academically and socially.

Defining Student Experiencing Homelessness

The McKinney-Vento Act defines students experiencing homelessness as lacking a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence. This includes:

- Sharing housing with others due to loss of housing or economic hardship, commonly referred to as "doubled up";
- Residing in motels, hotels, trailer parks, or camping grounds due to lack of alternative accommodations;
- Living in emergency or transitional shelters;
- Children abandoned in hospitals; and
- Those whose primary nighttime residence is a location not typically used as a regular sleeping accommodation, such as park benches, cars, or abandoned buildings.

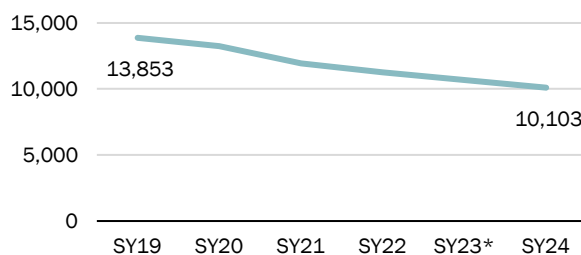
Migratory children who live under these conditions, and unaccompanied youth meeting the same criteria, are also included in this definition. This definition of homelessness is broader than commonly perceived, allowing schools to better identify and support students who may be living in unstable or inadequate conditions. Some school districts may consider additional local factors when determining a student's homeless status, such as inadequate housing without electricity or heating, particularly given harsh winters in their area.

Demographic Data

[Research](#) from the 2021-2022 school year (SY22) found that 1.2 million students in the United States experienced homelessness, accounting for 2.4 percent of the total public school population, which marked a 10 percent increase from the previous year. Despite this national rise in student homelessness, Figures 2 and 3 show a steady decline in the reported number of students experiencing homelessness in New Mexico both in terms of student counts and the rate of student homelessness among all students. As shown in Figure 2, the number of students experiencing homelessness in New Mexico declined from 13 thousand students in SY19 to just over 10 thousand students in SY24.

In the United States, students experiencing homelessness were disproportionately represented among marginalized groups, with 39 percent identifying as Hispanic or Latino, 25 percent as Black or African American, and 20 percent being English learners or students with disabilities—significantly higher than in the overall student body. As shown in **Figure 5: Student Homelessness Rate by Race and Ethnicity** on the following page, New Mexico shows similar trends, with nearly 6 percent of Native American students experiencing homelessness, 5 percent of Black students, 4 percent of Pacific Islander students, and 4 percent of multiracial students. These disparities are also reflected in the

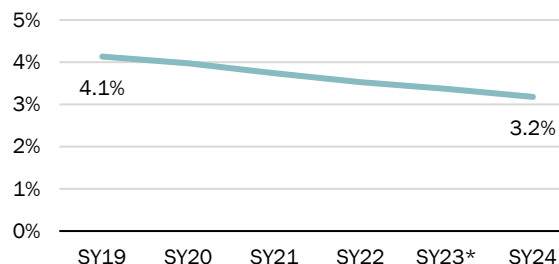
Figure 2: Number of Students Experiencing Homelessness in New Mexico
SY19 - SY24



*Note: Data available to LESC staff on homeless students for SY23 may contain errors. LESC staff estimated counts for SY23 based on prior year trend.

Source: LESC Analysis of PED Data

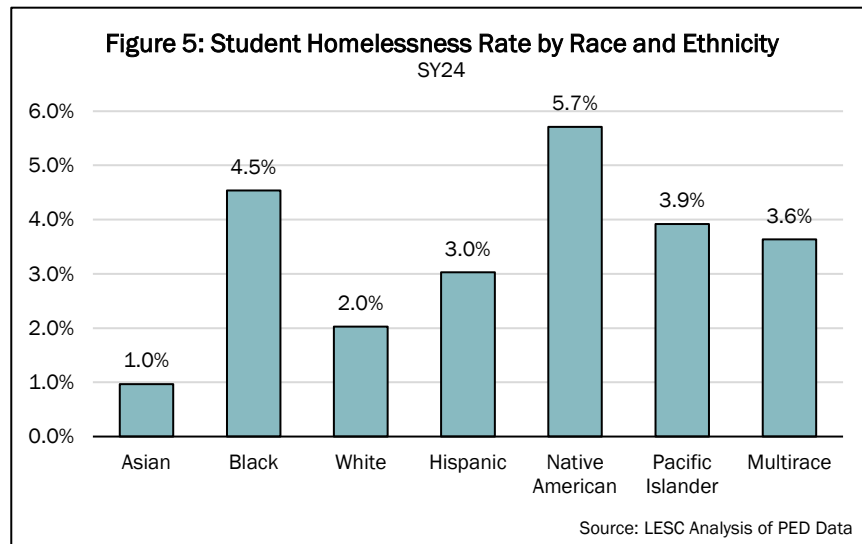
Figure 3: New Mexico Student Homelessness Rate
SY19 - SY24



*Note: Data available to LESC staff on homeless students for SY23 may contain errors. LESC staff estimated counts for SY23 based on prior year trend.

Source: LESC Analysis of PED Data

findings of the *Martinez-Yazzie* lawsuit, highlighting the state's failure to meet its constitutional obligation to provide an adequate education for historically underserved student populations, including Native American, economically disadvantaged, and disabled students. The disproportionate representation of homeless students among marginalized groups in New Mexico underscores the need for more targeted resources and interventions to support the education of vulnerable students.



Identifying and Tracking Students Experiencing Homelessness

Homelessness among students in New Mexico is identified through various methods, with a key approach being the inclusion of McKinney-Vento questions in school registration forms to assess family living situations. This allows for the early identification of students who may be experiencing homelessness, triggering intervention by school district homeless liaisons. Homeless liaisons play a critical role in this process, working alongside school staff, including teachers, counselors, and social workers, who interact daily with students and are trained to recognize signs of homelessness, such as frequent moves, poor hygiene, hunger, or lack of school supplies. In addition, local agencies, shelters, and community organizations collaborate with schools, referring families in need of support. In smaller communities, informal networks and word-of-mouth can also contribute to the identification of students experiencing homelessness. Homeless liaisons coordinate with these external partners and guide school personnel in identifying and supporting homeless students.

These liaisons are also responsible for ensuring that homeless students receive appropriate services, including transportation, access to extracurricular activities, and educational support. They work to build strong communication between schools, families, and community resources, ensuring students receive the full range of assistance they are entitled to under the McKinney-Vento Act. Homeless liaisons also lead community outreach initiatives, such as distributing informational materials and holding presentations, to raise awareness about available services. Given the stigma often associated with homelessness, it is crucial schools, guided by homeless liaisons, proactively identify and support these students, ensuring staff are well-trained in trauma-informed practices and creating a safe, supportive environment for accurate identification and assistance.

Homeless liaisons work to remove barriers to learning by addressing the specific challenges these students face, fostering cross-agency collaboration, and ensuring that students remain connected to their school communities.

Services and Support for Students Experiencing Homelessness

Students experiencing homelessness in New Mexico can access various services, although availability varies by school district. Immediate school enrollment is guaranteed, even without typical documentation such as birth certificates or proof of residency, which helps ensure continuity in education. Many districts provide essential supplies, including backpacks, school supplies, clothing, and shoes, and some also offer winter clothing to

State Law Related to Homelessness and Educational Disruptions

[Section 22-12A-14 NMSA 1978](#) ensures timely graduation and support for students who experience disruptions in their education, such as those caused by homelessness, adjudication, or placement in mental health facilities. It mandates prompt communication and record-sharing between schools when students transfer, prioritizes enrollment in required classes, and guarantees that students receive credit for completed work. Additionally, students must have equal access to graduation requirements, extracurricular activities, and special education services, along with timely assistance from counselors to support college and career readiness.

ensure students are adequately prepared for colder weather. Additionally, food assistance is common, with some districts offering weekly food distributions, shelf-stable food bags, and connections to local food pantries.

Transportation support is also provided to help students remain in their school of origin, even if they move to a different area, which may include bus services or other transportation arrangements. To support academic progress, some districts offer tutoring for students experiencing homelessness. Further, many districts collaborate with local organizations to provide additional resources such as rental assistance, utility bill support, and temporary housing through hotel vouchers. Mental health support and counseling services are available in some areas, recognizing the significant emotional challenges students experiencing homelessness often face. Other services offered by certain districts include hygiene supplies, access to laundry and shower facilities at schools, and assistance with obtaining essential documents like driver's licenses for older students.

Homelessness in Rural and Urban School Districts

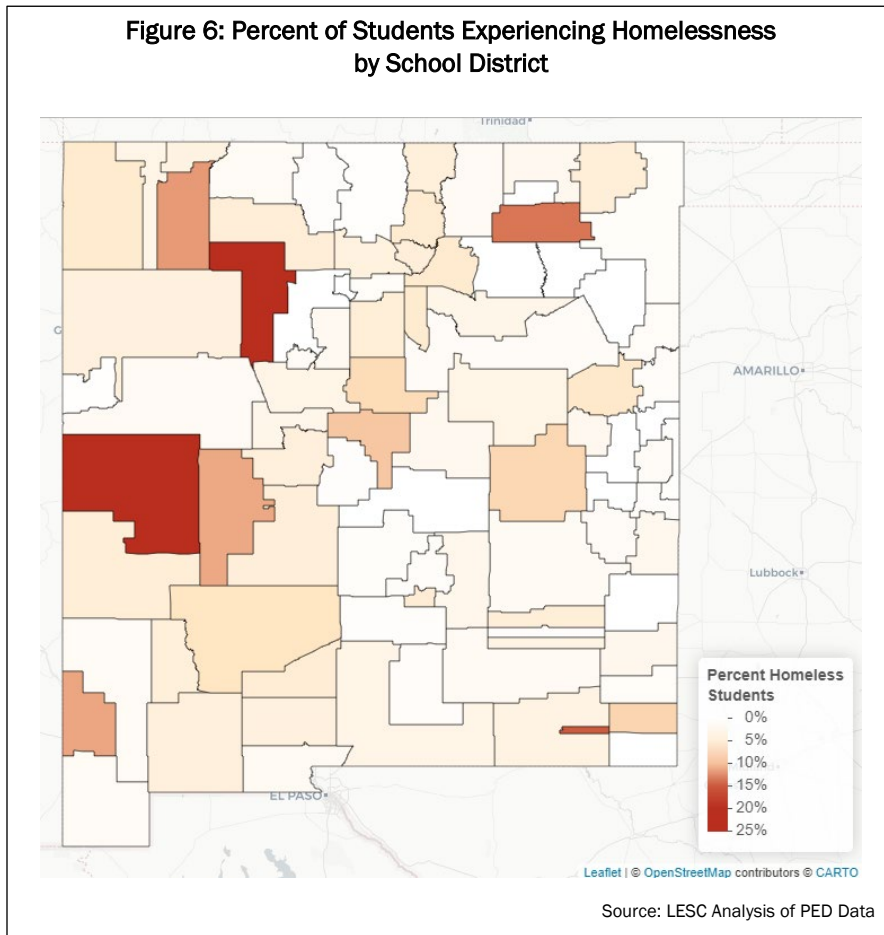
The services and support available for students' experiencing homelessness in New Mexico differ significantly between urban and rural school districts. The importance of homeless services is especially important in rural areas of New Mexico. As highlighted in **Figure 6: Percent of Students Experiencing Homelessness by School District**, the highest rates of students experiencing homelessness tend to be in rural areas of New Mexico, including Quemado (21%), Cuba (19%), Loving (15%) and Springer (13%).

Urban districts, such as Albuquerque Public Schools and Las Cruces Public Schools, often provide more services due to greater resources and infrastructure. These districts typically have dedicated McKinney-Vento liaisons and larger support teams, supported by more diverse funding sources, including larger McKinney-Vento grants, Title I funds, and local partnerships. Urban districts also benefit from a broader range of community resources, such as shelters, food banks, and healthcare providers, enabling them to offer more extensive support. Additionally, urban areas have broader transportation options, including partnerships with services like Uber, and can provide more academic support through tutoring and after-school programs.

In contrast, rural districts face unique challenges and often have limited services for students experiencing homelessness. These districts generally have smaller budgets and less funding for programs dedicated to supporting these students. Rural schools often lack dedicated homeless liaisons, with staff members filling multiple roles. Access to shelters and emergency housing options is limited or nonexistent in these areas, and fewer community partnerships are available to provide additional resources. Transportation is a significant challenge due to the larger geographic areas and limited public transit options, and access to specialized services such as mental health support or tutoring programs is often restricted.

Despite these challenges, some rural districts have developed creative solutions to meet the needs of students experiencing homelessness. These include relying on community donations and volunteer support, utilizing school facilities to provide essential services like laundry and showers, and partnering with nearby larger districts or towns for certain services. While urban districts generally have more resources and services available, rural districts often provide personalized, community-based support. However, the lack of infrastructure and resources in rural areas can make it challenging to effectively meet all the needs of students experiencing homelessness.

Figure 6: Percent of Students Experiencing Homelessness by School District



Funding for Students Experiencing Homelessness

The funding options available for supporting homeless students in New Mexico involve multiple sources, each playing a crucial role in providing resources and services.

One primary source of funding is the federal McKinney-Vento grant, which provides financial support specifically for students experiencing homelessness, with districts receiving their award annually in three-year cycles. PED explained New Mexico received a total of \$756 thousand in McKinney-Vento funding, which was allocated through a competitive grant process. In response, 39 applications were submitted by districts seeking to access these funds to support homelessness services. The total funding requested by the 39 applicants exceeded \$3 million, significantly surpassing the \$756 thousand available for distribution. As a result, only 16 of the 39 applicants were awarded funding, illustrating the high level of demand and the limited resources available. This discrepancy between the funding requested and the funding available underscores the challenges faced by school districts in securing adequate support for students experiencing homelessness and highlights the competitive nature of the application process due to limited financial resources.

In addition, many districts allocate a portion of their Title I funds to support students experiencing homelessness. The American Rescue Plan funds also served as a temporary source of financial support during the Covid-19 pandemic; however, that funding cycle ended on September 30, 2024. Another federal funding source is the Education of Homeless Children and Youth funds, which some districts report utilizing.

In addition to federal funding and state distribution, many districts rely on local grants and donations, collaborating with community partnerships, nonprofits, and private donors to supplement their funding. Districts

NM Appleseed: Guaranteed Payment for Attendance

New Mexico Appleseed launched the Students Experiencing Homelessness Conditional Cash Transfer Pilot program which provided monthly stipends of \$500 to high school students in two rural New Mexico districts (Cuba and West Las Vegas) who were inadequately housed, aiming to improve academic engagement and social-emotional wellbeing. The program required students to attend school, tutoring, and regular check-ins. Despite challenges like poverty, limited internet access, and pandemic disruptions, the pilot achieved a high retention rate of over 80 percent, with 13 out of 14 seniors graduating on time. Students, families, and staff reported positive outcomes, including better academic performance and a stronger focus on school due to the financial support. Based on these results, the pilot suggests that similar cash transfer programs could be scaled to support other vulnerable student populations, improving educational outcomes and addressing basic needs

also often use their general operational budget to support students experiencing homelessness when other funding sources are insufficient. Despite these efforts, funding for homelessness programs is often inconsistent and inadequate, especially in rural areas where resources are minimal. Some districts have experienced a loss of McKinney-Vento funding or face significant challenges in securing stable and consistent financial support. As such, there is a recognized need for more reliable and dedicated funding to ensure that students experiencing homelessness across all districts in New Mexico receive the support they require.

How Funds are Disbursed

Districts determine the allocation of limited McKinney-Vento and other funding sources for students experiencing homelessness in various ways, prioritizing both immediate and long-term needs. The primary focus is addressing basic needs, with many districts using funds to provide essential items such as clothing, school supplies, hygiene products, and food. Transportation costs also constitute a significant portion of the funding. Rio Rancho Public Schools, for example, reported spending \$85 thousand on transportation for McKinney-Vento students in a single year, far exceeding their \$30 thousand grant. Additionally, some districts allocate funds for staffing, such as homeless liaisons, whose salaries are sometimes split between Title I and McKinney-Vento funds, as reported by Carlsbad Municipal School District.

Academic support is another critical area of funding allocation, with some districts prioritizing tutoring services for students who experience homelessness and other at-risk environments. School districts shared they have partnered with online tutoring services to provide additional academic assistance. In emergency housing situations, districts may allocate funds for short-term hotel stays or rental assistance to support families in crisis. Extracurricular activities are also supported, with some districts using funds to help students participate in school programs, such as providing appropriate clothing for college and career events.

Many districts maintain flexibility in their funding to address unique situations, such as using funds for utility deposits or first month's rent. Leveraging community resources is another strategy districts employ to extend the impact of limited funds, often partnering with local organizations and seeking additional grants or donations. Additionally, some districts rely on data-driven decision-making, using information on the number of students experiencing homelessness and their identified needs to inform funding allocation decisions.

Overall, districts aim to balance immediate basic needs with long-term academic support while striving to maximize the impact of their limited resources. The specific allocation of funds often depends on the unique needs of each district's student population and the availability of additional community resources to supplement their efforts.

Homeless Liaisons Express Their Needs

Several key needs were identified for students experiencing homelessness across school districts, underscoring their challenges and the importance of supportive systems. One of the primary needs is **access to affordable housing options and emergency shelters**, particularly for unaccompanied youth and families. Many districts

emphasized the critical nature of stable housing as foundational to student well-being and educational success. **Transportation** also emerged as a significant challenge, with districts struggling to provide consistent services that would allow students experiencing homelessness to maintain stability in their school attendance.

Basic necessities such as clothing, food, hygiene items, and school supplies are consistently provided by schools to meet students' needs, yet these provisions highlight the ongoing material challenges faced by students experiencing homelessness. Alongside these needs, districts also stressed the importance of **mental health support**, including counseling services, recognizing the significant emotional impact of homelessness.

Academic support is another key priority, **with tutoring services** and additional resources mentioned as vital for addressing attendance issues and academic struggles faced by students experiencing homelessness. Additionally, districts noted the importance of having **dedicated staff—such as liaisons and social workers—**focused on supporting these students, as their expertise and attention are seen as essential. **Coordination with community partners** is also critical, with districts expressing the need for enhanced collaboration to provide comprehensive support, including access to medical care and job assistance for older students.

Districts shared a concern about the need for **consistent and flexible funding** to meet the needs of students experiencing homeless. Life skills training was also highlighted, particularly for older students, to equip them with practical knowledge in financial literacy and career preparation. Finally, **technology access** has become increasingly important, especially with the rise in online learning, and ensuring that students experiencing homelessness have access to devices and reliable internet connectivity was noted as a growing need.

Policy and Budget Considerations

Below, LESC staff offer several key policy considerations to ensure equitable educational opportunities for New Mexico's students who are in foster care, or who are experiencing homelessness or housing instability. These recommendations aim to address the unique challenges faced by these vulnerable student populations by enhancing funding, improving cross-agency collaboration, and expanding access to essential services. By implementing these measures, the state can better support these students in achieving academic success and overall well-being.

Ensure Adequate Transportation Funding

- Provide sufficient transportation funding to school districts to support transportation needs for all students, including homeless and foster care students. This funding should be expanded to provide equitable access to educational opportunities and related services.
- Include services beyond regular to-and-from school transportation, ensuring equitable access to extracurricular activities and other educational services for all students.

Improve Cross-Agency Collaboration Between PED and CYFD

- Strengthen collaboration between PED, CYFD, and school districts to improve BID meetings for students in foster care. Specifically:
- Clarify legal requirements and processes for BIDs.
- Standardize the structure and guidance for BID meetings.
- Enhance the transfer of educational records to support seamless transitions during BID processes.

Enhance Data Collection and Notification Systems

- Improve data collection and notification systems to support better communication and collaboration between PED, CYFD, and school districts regarding students in foster care and experiencing homelessness.

Provide Technical Assistance on At-Risk Funding

- Provide technical assistance from PED to school districts to clarify that at-risk funding in the SEG can and should be utilized to support students in foster care or experiencing homelessness, as well as other at-risk student populations.

Improve Communication on Partial Credits

- Enhance communication from PED to school districts regarding the availability and use of partial credits, with a focus on helping students who struggle to maintain or earn credits, particularly those in foster care or experiencing homelessness.

Implement Guaranteed Payment for Attendance (GPA) Program

- Introduce a “guaranteed payment for attendance” (GPA) initiative to support McKinney-Vento students with financial incentives aimed at increasing graduation rates. This program could alleviate financial barriers and motivate students to engage academically by ensuring regular attendance, homework completion, and active participation.