

Schools must track academic progress of homeless students, researchers argue

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Schools must track the academic progress of homeless students with as much care as they track special education, Title I and English language learner students, according to researchers at University of the Pacific.

"In an age of accountability, schools focus their efforts and attention on the students they are mandated to report on," said Ronald Hallett, associate professor of education and lead author of the study. "We need to realign our policies and procedures if we are going to improve academic outcomes for homeless and highly mobile students."

Hallett and his colleagues will report their findings at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association in Chicago on Sunday, April 19.

In their case study of a high-poverty northern California school district, the researchers found that schools were better at counting homeless students in order to qualify for state and federal funds than they were at tailoring services to help this vulnerable group succeed academically.

The district increased its annual state allocation of federal funds earmarked for homeless and highly mobile students from \$24,000 in 2009 to \$61,000 in 2013. The district accomplished this through better identification of students who qualify for the funds.

About 75 percent of families who meet the federal definition of homelessness are living doubled up with others or "couch surfing" with

friends rather than living on the streets or in cars—yet they may not be counted.

But while better counting brought more funds, the money went more to backpacks, school supplies and bus vouchers than to counseling or other services for the students.

"Principals and teachers usually know that they can use the funding for backpacks and bus tokens for homeless students, but district leaders can help them develop services such as counseling as a way of helping the students toward their academic goals," said Hallett, a first-generation college student whose family lived "doubled up" during part of his childhood.

Nationwide, up to 2.5 million students - one in 30—are homeless or highly mobile. Causes range from poverty and lack of affordable housing to racial inequities and trauma. The Great Recession magnified the problem.

As a group, homeless and highly mobile students perform poorly in math and English. Nearly one in three has been held back a grade at least once. They face high dropout rates.

Provided by University of the Pacific

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