Ensuring Equity: Homeless Education Program Review

Ensuring Equity: Policies and Practices Related to Supporting Students and Families Experiencing Homelessness

Rationale

This Homeless Education program review conducted in the 2017-2018 school year aimed to identify challenges in serving students and families experiencing homelessness in Baltimore County Public Schools (BCPS). Legislation exists to help protect the rights of students experiencing homelessness by requiring school systems to adhere to specific guidelines. For the purposes of this program review, legal mandates were used to benchmark current practices and to identify areas for improvement.

Overview

BCPS conducted this program review in order to develop a comprehensive picture of the current state of the BCPS Homeless Education Program. The BCPS Office of Research collaborated with a number of BCPS offices and staff to gather information about the program. The ultimate goal of the review was to inform system decision making in areas such as allocation of resources, staffing, and coordination of external and internal partnerships.

Theoretical Framework

Studies maintain that professional ethics should be conducted in the teacher education field in ways similar to other licensed professions, with direct teaching on the topic, and explicit statements regarding the rights of students and teachers (Barrett, Casey, Visser, & Headley, 2012). Thus, BCPS researchers felt it was important to consider ethical frameworks when examining a current mode of serving students and families experiencing homelessness. Figure 1 describes the theory guiding this research, the Ethic of Community framework (Mathur & Corley, 2014).

Figure 1. Ethic of community framework

This framework emphasizes the importance of community-based decision making in the best interests of the local community. The ethic of community incorporates the ethical frameworks of
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justice, critique, and care to create a lens by which educators solve problems by establishing what is just and fair; reflecting upon issues of access and inclusion; and viewing people as contributing members of the community (Wood & Hilton, 2012). The ethic of profession is also incorporated so that educators consider their professional codes and standards when making a decision (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2001).

In the current program review, BCPS researchers collaborated with members of the larger community to examine and critique existing practices and ensure just outcomes for students experiencing homelessness. Specifically, the ethic of justice is woven throughout this review in that BCPS researchers wanted to ensure that students experiencing homelessness receive equitable access to learning and resources. In line with the ethic of critique, the BCPS homeless education program was examined through a critical lens. The ethic of care connects to this review because it was important to capture the voices of BCPS students and families experiencing homelessness. Related to the ethic of profession, it is ethically imperative to support students and to consider the “best interests of all students” when making decisions.

Review of Literature

Common Barriers in the Education of Children and Youths Experiencing Homelessness

Barriers for children and youths experiencing homelessness can be described within four categories: logistical, physical, social-emotional, and educational. High rates of mobility, students changing schools during a school year, and absences (Walker, Brown, & Shinn, 2016), along with extended duration of travel on the bus (Canfield & Teasley, 2015) are some of logistical barriers students experiencing homelessness face. Physical barriers include high rates of illness (Crook, 2014), abuse and neglect (Sulkowski, 2016). Given the traumatic physical effects of homelessness, it is not surprising that students experiencing homelessness also have social-emotional barriers, such as trauma, shame, and self-doubt, related to receiving an adequate education (Mohan & Shields, 2014). The educational barriers may include developmental delays (Haskett, Armstrong, & Tisdale, 2016) and lower achievement in reading and mathematics (Masten, Fiat, Labella, & Strack, 2015). All of these barriers decrease the likelihood that children experiencing homelessness will succeed in school.

Legislation and Guidelines Related to Homeless Education

McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act. Legislation exists to help guide the work of educators in serving students and families experiencing homelessness, particularly related to the barriers for this population. The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act holds state and local education agencies accountable for identifying students who are experiencing homelessness and guaranteeing their educational rights to enroll in public schools and to access educational and transportation services (Uretsky & Stone, 2016). Specifically, the federal regulation allows students to immediately enroll in school without required documents (i.e., immunization records, birth certificates, school records); provides transportation for students to their school of origin; and ensures that students are not separated from the mainstream environment.

Further, McKinney-Vento outlines responsibilities of school districts in providing students with equal access to free, appropriate public education (including preschool), and other related services
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that enable them to meet the same challenging state academic standards as all students. (United States Department of Education, 2016). All school districts are required to designate a McKinney-Vento homeless liaison on their staff who helps address any barriers faced by students experiencing homelessness. BCPS applies for the McKinney-Vento grant every year and utilizes the funding to support students and families experiencing homelessness.

Revisions to Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). The Every Students Succeeds Act (ESSA) of 2015, reauthorized and amended the McKinney-Vento program to strengthen and improve the education of children and youths experiencing homelessness across the educational spectrum. Specifically, ESSA instituted an increased focus on services for pre-school-aged children experiencing homelessness; youths experiencing homelessness in secondary school to become college-and career-ready; and the integral role of school staff in the transition of secondary students to postsecondary education, along with implementation procedures for credit transfer for those students (Non-Regulatory Guidance for Education for Homeless Children and Youths Program, 2016). An emphasis was also placed on services for unaccompanied youths experiencing homelessness, those students who are homeless and not in the physical custody of a parent or guardian.

ESSA and Title I, Part A (Title I). ESSA also increases resources for students experiencing homelessness by expanding the use of Title I funds of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA). The ESSA amendments to Title I on homelessness focus on supporting student success and reserving funds for administering programs (National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth, 2016). In order to ensure the identification, enrollment, attendance, and school stability of children experiencing homelessness, the state Title I plans must describe the support that will be provided to the LEAs. The LEAs’ plans must describe how the services provided with Title I funds, in coordination with McKinney-Vento funds, will help ensure success in these same areas.

Local plans should also describe the method used for determining the amount of the homeless reservation, and how the liaison was involved in determining the amount. Additionally, state report cards, a public document that shares district and school specific results data (i.e. achievement, attendance), must disaggregate achievement and high school graduation data for students experiencing homelessness.

All LEAs that receive Title I funds must reserve funds to provide children experiencing homelessness services comparable to services provided in Title I schools. The amount must be based on the total LEA allocation and may be determined based on a needs assessment. The funds may be used for services not ordinarily provided to other students, such as financing the McKinney-Vento liaison or providing transportation to the student’s school of origin. BCPS utilizes both funding sources to support students and families experiencing homelessness.

Trends in Student Homelessness

Affecting more than 1 million youths, student homelessness is growing at an unprecedented rate in the United States (Stone & Uretsky, 2016; Tobin, 2016). According to the U.S Department of Education, a record number of students experiencing homelessness, 1.2 million, are now enrolled in public schools (National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth, 2014).
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Therefore, about two to three percent of the 50.1 million students that attend K-12 schools in the United States are homeless (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). Moreover, according to the National Center for Homeless Education (2014), rates of student homelessness have increased 72% since the beginning of the 2008 economic recession. In the 2014 – 2015 school year, Maryland had the 25th highest number of students experiencing homelessness in the U.S with 16,096 students experiencing homelessness in the state, an 11% increase from school years 2011 – 2012 to 2014 – 2015 (Institute for Children, Poverty, and Homelessness, 2017).

In BCPS, the population experiencing homelessness has more than doubled over the past decade, increasing steadily from one percent to two percent of the overall student population. The population experiencing homelessness increased at a greater rate than the general enrollment from school year 2007 – 2008 to school year 2017 – 2018. Specifically, BCPS has over 2,500 students experiencing homelessness with over 1,000 of the students living “doubled up,” living with family, friends, or other non-relatives (Institute for Children, Poverty, and Homelessness, 2017). The figures and tables included in this review reflect end-of-year data for the academic school years displayed (see Figure 2).

**Figure 2. BCPS Enrolled Students Experiencing Homelessness over a Ten-Year Period**

![Graph showing BCPS enrolled students experiencing homelessness over a ten-year period.](image)

**Homeless Education in BCPS.** Children and youths experiencing homelessness are defined as “individuals who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence” (Non-Regulatory Guidance for Education for Homeless Children and Youths Program, 2016, p. 5). Services are provided to students and families experiencing homelessness in Baltimore County through collaborative efforts between BCPS schools, BCPS central offices, and outside agencies. There are many moving parts (internally and externally) in serving students and families experiencing homelessness (see Figure 3).

Pupil Personnel Workers (PPWs) serve as the hub for the coordination of services for students and families experiencing homelessness and at each BCPS school, a school-based homeless liaison (who, in most cases, is also the school counselor) supports identified students experiencing homelessness and provides for their day-to-day needs. Because of legislation, students experiencing homelessness can attend their school of origin. Since BCPS is a large county, a major component of providing services for students experiencing homelessness is coordinating travel for students who currently reside outside of their zoned school’s area. Approximately 40% of all BCPS
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students experiencing homelessness attend schools outside of the zone in which they currently reside.

Figure 3. Services for Students and Families in Baltimore County Public Schools

The Present Review

Rationale
Dramatic increases in the BCPS population experiencing homelessness, along with the desire of stakeholders to develop a comprehensive picture of the BCPS homeless education program underscores the urgency and importance of engaging in this work. The goals of the program review are to identify challenges in serving students and families experiencing homelessness and to facilitate a collaboration around how to best meet those needs. Also, the information from this program review can be used to inform the design of effective program and policies for students and families experiencing homelessness, ensuring that all students and families experiencing homelessness are supported in an equitable manner.

Setting
BCPS is the 25th largest school district in the U.S and is comprised of 174 schools, centers, and programs, and more than 114,000 students encompassing urban, suburban, and rural landscapes. BCPS is a diverse school system; it is a majority/minority school system. Close to half of the students are eligible for free and reduced-price meals. About 12% of the students receive special education services, and about 6% are English learners (EL). As a system, a one-to-one device initiative has been implemented. All students K-12 have access to an individual device to support instruction. Specifically, this program review focused on students and families in the elementary, middle, and high schools that were identified as homeless during the 2017 – 2018 academic year.

Program Review Plan
The Office of Research collaborated with the Office of Title I to develop a program review that incorporated information they would like to gain (e.g., systemic challenges; challenges faced by
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students and families experiencing homelessness; suggestions for program improvement) about homeless education in BCPS. In addition, current literature on the barriers for students and families experiencing homelessness were considered when developing the interview questions.

Method

Participants

Students and families. The student and family participants were those identified as homeless during the 2017 – 2018 academic school year. Participants were from the elementary, middle, and high school levels. There were 30 interviews conducted.

School system staff. The staff participants included school counselors, PPWs, principals and staff members from the Offices of Transportation, Equity and Cultural Proficiency, Curriculum and Instruction, and School Climate. All staff members were knowledgeable about the 2017 – 2018 homeless education program. There were 20 staff members interviewed.

Measures

In order to develop a comprehensive picture of the current BCPS Homeless Education Program, a three-pronged approach was implemented (see Figure 4). First, feedback from BCPS school-based and central office staff was captured through either focus groups or one-on-one interviews. Then, the voices of BCPS students and families experiencing homelessness were captured. Finally, quantitative data were analyzed by disaggregating a number of factors.

Figure 4. Process of Inquiry for Homeless Education Program Review

Staff Interview Protocol

Staff members from the Office of Research conducted phone interviews and focus groups with the participants. Participants answered the interview questions and were given the opportunity to share
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any additional thoughts they had about the homeless education program. The participants were engaged in the interview for approximately 20 minutes.

**Student and Family Interview Protocol**
Since developing rapport and gaining trust is integral in the relationships with students and families experiencing homelessness (Mohan & Shields, 2014), the PPWs or school counselors interviewed the students and families and provided the responses to the Office of Research. The students and families were able to share their thoughts about the homeless education program verbally or could provide written responses, while maintaining confidentiality. The participants engaged in the interview for about 10 minutes.

**Procedure**

**Staff Interviews and Focus Groups**
In order to identify the major features of the BCPS homeless education program, the Office of Research engaged school-based and central office staff in semi-structured focus groups or one-on-one interviews. The participants were asked to answer questions across a number of categories, including: (1) description of the population experiencing homelessness that they serve, (2) challenges faced by students and families experiencing homelessness, (3) coordinating services with other BCPS offices to serve students experiencing homelessness, (4) challenges faced by BCPS staff in meeting the educational and social-emotional needs of students experiencing homeless, and (5) potential areas for program improvement. Staff from the Office of Research typed responses onto a questionnaire form during the one-on-one interviews and focus groups. The participant responses were then transcribed into a spreadsheet and coded in order to develop themes. A text analysis was completed within the themes, and the findings were situated within larger meanings to describe the current state of homeless education in BCPS.

**Student and Family Conversations**
In order to capture student and family voices, the Office of Research asked the PPWs and school counselors to conduct interviews with students and their families. The responses were handwritten on a questionnaire form and submitted to the Office of Research, then entered into a spreadsheet. The participant responses were then coded, and themes emerged.

**Data Analysis and Reporting**

**Qualitative Analyses**
To identify the major features of BCPS’s homeless education program, researchers engaged various stakeholders. Research questions focused on the challenges that students experiencing homelessness face as well as barriers to adequately serving this population. Qualitative data was collected through semi-structured focus groups and one-on-one interviews with staff, students, and families. Responses were collected, entered into a spreadsheet, coded, and organized to identify emerging themes related to describing the homeless education program and identifying areas for improvement.

**Quantitative Analyses**
In addition to the qualitative data, quantitative data on the overall enrollment of BCPS students experiencing homelessness was collected. This data was compiled and reported for the purpose of providing information about the current composition of the BCPS population experiencing
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homelessness as well as identifying any historical trends or shifts in the population. Quantitative data is presented, primarily in the form of frequency tables; no statistical analyses were conducted.

Findings

Composition of Students Experiencing Homelessness

Demographic characteristics. Over the past five years, homelessness in BCPS has been stable in elementary and middle schools (see Table 1). However, the number of high school students experiencing homelessness in BCPS has increased over the same time period. At each level, certain schools have a high concentration of students experiencing homelessness. For example, there are 26 high schools and 36% of the students experiencing homelessness are enrolled in 3 specific schools, with one of those high schools having 136 students experiencing homelessness enrolled. About 23% of all middle school students experiencing homelessness are enrolled in three schools, and 27% of all elementary students experiencing homelessness are enrolled in nine schools.

Table 1. Enrollment of Students Experiencing Homelessness by School Level

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Elementary</td>
<td>1,124</td>
<td>1,223</td>
<td>1,259</td>
<td>1,261</td>
<td>1,221</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>464</td>
<td>483</td>
<td>504</td>
<td>504</td>
<td>503</td>
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<tr>
<td>High</td>
<td>626</td>
<td>702</td>
<td>755</td>
<td>863</td>
<td>826</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>2,214</td>
<td>2,408</td>
<td>2,518</td>
<td>2,628</td>
<td>2,550</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2 shows that across five years, Black or African American students experiencing homelessness are overrepresented more than any other student groups. Specifically, about 50% of the population experiencing homelessness are Black or African American. In addition, the proportion of students experiencing homelessness who are Hispanic/Latino has nearly tripled over a 5-year period.

Table 2. Demographic Characteristics of Students Experiencing Homelessness

<table>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>% Black or African American</td>
<td>53.5</td>
<td>52.5</td>
<td>48.7</td>
<td>45.7</td>
<td>49.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Hispanic/Latino</td>
<td>6.7</td>
<td>8.2</td>
<td>12.5</td>
<td>19.7</td>
<td>19.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Two or More Races</td>
<td>6.7</td>
<td>6.9</td>
<td>7.9</td>
<td>7.8</td>
<td>7.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% White</td>
<td>31.7</td>
<td>30.6</td>
<td>29.0</td>
<td>25.3</td>
<td>22.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Support Services

| % Special Education          | 19.1    | 16.9    | 18.3    | 17.7    | 16.9    |
| % Free and Reduced-Price Meals | 99.2    | 97.2    | 99.0    | 98.7    | 98.6    |

Note: Certain racial groups are not included as their rates are less than 5%.

There has been a dramatic increase among students experiencing homelessness who are also EL. Figure 5 shows that over the past 5 years within the overall population experiencing homelessness, the proportion of EL students has increased from less than 3% to nearly 20%. Moreover, compared to their native English-speaking peers, EL students experiencing homelessness are more likely to
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be identified across the school year rather than at the beginning of the year. For example, in 2016 – 2017, there were 228 EL students experiencing homelessness enrolled as of September 30 and 452 enrolled at the end of the year.

Figure 5. English Learner (EL) Students Experiencing Homelessness

Challenges

Challenges associated with meeting the educational and social-emotional needs of students and families experiencing homelessness were identified by various stakeholders. The challenges are discussed in two categories: Student/Family Challenges and Systemic Challenges.

Student and Family Challenges

Traumatic circumstances. The student and family challenge reported at the greatest frequency was the traumatic circumstances of experiencing homelessness (see Table 3). Students are often exposed to chaotic home environments, negative behaviors, and abusive situations. The difficulty of their situation was illustrated by one student in the following comment: “In the beginning of the school year, getting to school on time and safely was a very big challenge. Now, readjusting to a more slowed down, settled life has been a bit tricky since I’m used to chaos.”

PPWs noted that students and families leave their home to escape violent situations and sometimes enter into a shelter, which does not always reduce the traumatic circumstances. Shelter living was reported as being “chaotic and not optimal for students,” by one PPW. A student also noted, “People are fighting at the shelter. It can be scary.”

A particular challenge to BCPS EL students and families is trying to escape turbulent and violent situations in other countries. One PPW emphasized, “Trauma of our EL students is often different, more extreme, due to destabilized countries and violence.” Fear of deportation and the potential detainment of the parents of EL students compound the existing trauma.
Adult responsibilities. Students experiencing homelessness are often required to engage in adult responsibilities, the second most frequently noted student and family challenge. While students and families live in a shelter, they must adhere to shelter requirements with obligations such as kitchen serving responsibilities, meal preparation or clean up duty. A BCPS shelter tutor shared, “Schedules at the shelter make it difficult to help students with their homework.” Therefore, while daily shelter life is often chaotic, the regimented structure can be problematic as well.

Students experiencing homelessness living outside of the shelter also undertake adult responsibilities such as working to pay bills, caring for an ailing parent/relative, and worrying about having a safe place to stay. One student emphasized, “Work does not equal school attendance - I have to choose.” Another student emphasized, “I need to help my family and I can’t because of school.” The impact of undertaking adult responsibilities was noted by a school counselor, “Having to work to support a household impacts students’ attendance.” One PPW further noted, “Homeless students need to be given the opportunity to just be kids.”

Shelter struggles. Although shelter struggles were depicted within traumatic circumstances and adult responsibilities, shelter struggles were also identified as a separate student and family challenge. The directors of the shelters often change and do not have similar mandates; therefore, according to a PPW, “It is difficult to collaborate with them.” In addition, mandates among the shelter directors are inconsistent. Specifically, some directors prioritize tutoring, mentoring and therapy services while others do not. One tutor noted, “I have three students that attend tutoring regularly and the remaining 18 kids participate sporadically.” Due to the limited time families spend in shelters, it is difficult for PPWs to connect families to additional resources beyond those provided in BCPS (e.g. co-pay money for doctor appointments, transportation, counseling services).

Language barriers and academic struggles. Language barriers and academic struggles were also identified as challenges faced by students and families experiencing homelessness. Learning English was the most commonly referenced barrier in these categories among the EL student population experiencing homelessness. A PPW also referenced that there are “differences in dialect among students and families” that exacerbate existing language barriers. Similarly, a school counselor suspects that, “Language may be a barrier for involvement among the homeless population.” Within academic struggles, understanding math concepts was also identified as a challenge along with homework completion, study skills, and being able to focus during the school
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day. Shelter life is disruptive, which affects the students’ abilities to handle academic responsibilities.

**Student belonging.** Students and families experiencing homelessness reported feelings of not belonging to the school and connecting with peers as challenges they experienced as a result of their situation. Various stakeholders mentioned that students experiencing homelessness often experience bullying due to perceived differences, and difficulty making connections with peers. “They are desperate to fit in and want to participate in all that others sometimes take for granted” (e.g. dances, field trips, clubs), noted one PPW. One particular student also noted: “Other students pick on me. It is hard to make friends. We keep moving.”

**General distrust.** A general distrust of agencies, schools, and processes also exists among some students and families experiencing homelessness. In some cases, particularly with the EL population, the distrust stems from being taken advantage of by organizations and individuals. The distrust that families living in a shelter experience is connected to mobility. A PPW shared, “Sometimes families will leave the shelter without telling anyone, which makes it difficult to reach them in order to support the students.”

**Systemic Challenges**

In addition to identifying the challenges that students and families experiencing homelessness face, systemic challenges linked to supporting the population experiencing homelessness also emerged. These systemic challenges were all related to equity and access for BCPS students experiencing homelessness and fell into two categories: coordination of services and transportation.

**Transportation**

**General transportation challenges.** Transportation was mentioned with the greatest frequency from all stakeholders as a challenge associated with meeting the needs of students experiencing homelessness and their families (see Table 4). Challenges related to transportation seem to be chronic in nature.

Transportation requests are completed using an “antiquated system.” Specifically, stakeholders shared that it is difficult to enter and retrieve data in the software program. Once the data is entered, an email is also sent to the Office of Transportation. The Office of Transportation legally has 5 days to arrange transportation. In support of the PPWs assertions, the Office of Transportation indicated that “consistency and uniform processes and procedures would be extremely helpful.” Stakeholders in transportation shared, “I don’t like the request process because it goes to a person’s email; if that person is out, it creates problems. The process of using just email is a risky practice. We have to send a notice out or redirect email in the event of a staff member’s absence.”

According to a number of stakeholders, travel is often not coordinated in the 5-day period. Participants mentioned this occurring for a number of reasons. A PPW and a transportation staff member mentioned that the 5-day window often resets due to the continued mobility of students and families experiencing homelessness:

*If I request transportation on Monday, then transportation must be in place by Friday, but sometimes there are moves that occur within that window of time. If a*
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request happens on a Monday and on Wednesday the student and family move, then the request starts over.

However, several PPWs mentioned a lack of responsiveness on the part of the Office of Transportation as a major contributor to the delay in the delivery of transportation services. PPWs mentioned having to repeatedly contact the office through a number of modes (e.g. e-mail, phone) before receiving a response. A PPW emphasized the endless attempts to connect with transportation to ensure students are able to get to school:

Consistent follow-up with transportation is needed throughout the school year to coordinate services. Even on the first day of school, a lot of students don’t have transportation arrangements, even though the Office of Transportation has known about the request for almost two months (since July 1).

Table 4. Structured Interview Responses Related to Systemic Transportation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reported Challenge</th>
<th># of References</th>
<th>% of Total</th>
<th># of Respondent</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Transportation, General</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Long Travel Time</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alternative Modes of Transportation</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>78</strong></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: Respondent could be counted more than once in a reference.*

**Long travel time.** Stakeholders reported that lengthy bus routes are created for students experiencing homelessness, and that at times it seems as though the routes are intentionally made long as a means to not have to provide services. Students experiencing homelessness are often picked up first in the morning and dropped off last in the afternoon. In several situations, students are on the bus for 2 hours despite the school being a few miles away from the student’s residence. A particularly egregious example was recounted by one PPW:

A kindergartener lives 8.8 miles away from the school and rides the bus for over two hours. The student gets on the bus at 6:30 a.m. for a 9:05 a.m. school start time. In the afternoon, the kindergartener has to transfer to a different bus at a high school before finally arriving home.

**Alternative modes of transportation.** Alternative transportation may be arranged for students rather than sending a school bus. Utilizing this strategy meets the legal requirements, but often presents challenges, particularly for elementary school students and families. Elementary age students must have a parent/guardian ride in the cab with them to school. A PPW shared, “Parents have a difficult time working when they are required to ride in a cab with their child to and from school.”

Middle and high school students are often provided bus tokens rather than a school bus. Stakeholders mentioned that the tokens are often ineffective, particularly for those outside of Baltimore County. A PPW explains that tokens are also ineffective for students living in the catchment area:
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It is challenging for students in 6th grade to navigate the MTA, but it is even more difficult for the EL students to figure out the public buses that they need to take in order to get to school.

In order to ensure that students receive transportation within the law’s required guidelines, representatives from the Office of Transportation confirmed that cabs are often used to “buy more time” in order to organize a bus route for a student. In addition, a staff member emphasized, “Sending a cab is easier than sending a bus from one area of the district to another area to pick up one student.”

Systemic Coordination of Services

Inefficient processes. As mentioned previously, several stakeholders expressed frustration with antiquated processes and tools (see Table 5). The antiquated software program used to identify students experiencing homelessness was mentioned unanimously by PPWs as a challenging tool to utilize. In addition, the process for entering identification data for students and families experiencing homelessness is an arduous and time-consuming task. PPWs also mentioned not being able to access data that would help support the students and families once it is entered.

As it relates to coordinating transportation, the delegation of duties has become ambiguous. Some PPWs assert that it is the school’s responsibility to request transportation while others request transportation themselves. It often creates a “too many hands in the pot” situation or the scenario of “pointing fingers.” In some instances, as many as five BCPS employees are handling the same enrollment. Similar to the stakeholders in the school building, the Office of Transportation was unclear as to who was responsible for contacting the students and families regarding the details of the transportation process.

Difficulty in the verification and identification process was mentioned by several PPWs. Specifically, inconsistencies in how PPWs re-verify EL students experiencing homelessness from year to year was cited. According to one PPW, “[There are] inconsistencies with identification. PPWs will typically just re-verify non-English speaking homeless students due to language barriers.” The lack of uniformity in this process has the potential to misidentify students as experiencing homelessness or not.

Shelter struggles. Another systemic challenge is supporting students and families within the parameters and rules the shelter has established. For example, some shelters require that residents must leave the shelter during business hours. Several PPWs noted that this made it difficult to contact families to assess needs and provide additional supports. In addition, the rule that parents must be at the shelter when the child gets off the bus makes it difficult for parents to maintain or seek employment during the day.

A specific challenge mentioned by shelter tutors was that conditions of shelters present challenges to providing services to students and families. According to one tutor, shelters have wretched conditions, which are not only unhygienic, but also prevent effective remediation tutoring and homework assistance. The same tutor provided one specific example, “Buckets are placed on the tables and chairs to catch dripping raw sewage, which does not create an environment conducive
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to learning.” In addition, the shelters can be very loud during the evening hours and lack internet access which also inhibits the tutors’ ability to help the students academically.

**Limited resources and heavy caseload.** BCPS current practices have had the unintended consequences of limiting access to opportunities/resources for students experiencing homelessness. Due to the coordination of transportation, many students experiencing homelessness have to board the bus immediately after school which prevents them from participating in school sponsored activities. In addition, the lengths of time students spend on the bus are often such that they are unable to engage in out of school extra-curricular activities or pursue employment. According to one PPW, many students experiencing homelessness are the first to get on the bus in the morning and the last to get off at the end of the day.

Stakeholders indicated that students experiencing homelessness often miss the opportunity to apply for magnet programs due to entering the country after the application deadline or difficult circumstances associated with homelessness. In addition, students at the secondary level do not have adequate supports to promote the pursuit of post-secondary college and career opportunities. One school counselor shared, “There are not enough hours in the day to support all of the students to the extent that we would like to provide support.”

**Perceived apathy.** According to various stakeholders, apathy exists towards the workload related to students and families experiencing homelessness. Specifically, there was a pervasive belief that some staff members in BCPS only do the bare minimum to meet legal requirements for students. Various stakeholders perceived: “Transportation creates long and difficult routes so that ultimately the service will not have to be provided.” Other stakeholders noted: “Schools are not sensitive to homeless families and require them to jump through hoops to enroll in school, especially because homeless students may have an impact on attendance data.”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reported Challenge</th>
<th># of References</th>
<th>% of Total</th>
<th># of Respondents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Inefficient Processes</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shelter Struggles</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limited Resources</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Equity Concern</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inconsistent Implementation</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identification/Verification</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apathy</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language Barriers</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heavy Caseload</td>
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<td>17</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>86</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: Respondent could be counted more than once in a reference.*

**Discussion and Recommendations**

In order to ensure equity for students and families experiencing homelessness, several themes emerged regarding the challenges that need to be addressed and areas of improvement of current practices for students and families experiencing homelessness. The recommendations were aligned
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to the findings of the program review and connect to the theoretical underpinnings identified in this review.

Professional Learning

Research emphasizes, “The first step in working with homeless students is understanding the conditions in which they live” (Bardack, Baharav, Leos-Urbel, & Obradovic, 2018). Implementing professional learning for central office and school-based staff will help to increase their knowledge and understanding of the conditions and challenges students experiencing homelessness face, particularly in the schools with the highest population of students experiencing homelessness. Professional learning needs to also focus on correcting any misconceptions regarding this population. As a result of the interviews, it seems that PPWs are the gatekeepers of information regarding the population experiencing homelessness. It is recommended that PPWs be given more agency to provide professional learning as they are the experts on the population experiencing homelessness and better understand their needs. Providing professional learning connects to the ethic of justice because as a system BCPS is establishing what is just and fair for this population.

Wrap-around Services

The majority of stakeholders mentioned the desire to provide additional wrap-around services to students experiencing homelessness. First, providing material resources for students and families experiencing homelessness is important (e.g. food, clothing). For example, several stakeholders mentioned having school-based clothing closets and food pantries; however, not all schools have these resources at this time. It is suggested to scale out clothing closets and food pantries such that every school has one.

Next, several participants mentioned barriers for providing mental health services for all students that need them. One school-based liaison mentioned that the external mental health service provider’s caseload was full and there were other students that needed services. Thus, it is suggested that efforts be made to reallocate staffing to support mental health needs, particularly at schools with a large population experiencing homelessness.

Research also indicates that involvement in extra-curricular activities serves as a protective factor for students experiencing homelessness (Voight, Giraldo-Garcia, & Shinn, 2018); therefore it is integral to brainstorm ideas about allowing students to participate in programs and activities beyond the school day (i.e. utilize system buses, hire local bus companies, collaborate with local shelters). Students experiencing homelessness must also be given the opportunity to complete assignments and access information in the same ways as their peers. Thus, students whose families are experiencing homelessness should be provided one-to-one devices or any other materials and resources that other children can access. Providing wrap-around services connects to the ethic of critique because it is asking stakeholders to reflect upon issues of access, inclusion, and distribution of resources.

Targeted Supports

Targeted supports for the EL students experiencing homelessness need to be provided to help ensure educational access and success. The influx of families from outside of the United States is driving the overall increase in the population experiencing homelessness; the population of EL
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students experiencing homelessness has more than quadrupled in just four years. Of particular note, in the 2017 – 2018 school year, of the 418 EL students experiencing homelessness, 196 were from El Salvador. This raised many questions regarding targeted supports for this population. Thus, a next step would be exploring more about this population and engaging knowledgeable stakeholders in order to best meet their needs. In line with the ethic of care, it is necessary to explore more about this population and engage knowledgeable stakeholders, including the EL students, in order to best meet their needs.

Program Review Limitations

Although this program review was implemented in a large school system, the number of participants was limited. Therefore, the voices of students and families from each grade level are limited. Additionally, many of the stakeholders mentioned the challenges linked to shelters; however, the perspective of the directors in the shelters was not captured. Finally, data availability and data integrity were limitations, specifically related to transportation and the type of living situation for students experiencing homelessness. Although transportation was a major systemic challenge, reliable data on the number of students transported outside of their zoned area was not readily available. Furthermore, this is a rapidly changing and dynamic population so maintaining timely, accurate data can be challenging. The data that were available were not necessarily in a format that was desired for this program review.

Implications for Research and Practice

Multiple perspectives of BCPS staff members, students, and families were elicited in the current program review to generate a comprehensive picture of the current state of the homeless education program in this school district. The systemic challenges, specifically related to equitable access to learning and resources for students and families experiencing homelessness, were ascertained through staff interviews. Even more, the voices of the students and families provide first-hand knowledge of the support needs of this population. Thus, this current program review can help inform the design of effective program and policies for students and families experiencing homelessness.

Next Steps

Consistent/efficient processes

A major concern amongst stakeholders was inefficient processes that made it difficult to support students and families experiencing homelessness. Several suggestions come out of this need. First, nearly all stakeholders desire the transportation request process to be revised. It is recommended that a ticketing process be used to request transportation for students experiencing homelessness. This may be accomplished through developing an online form. This standardizes the process as well as provides a level of transparency and accountability not currently available.

Additionally, PPWs complained of the time-consuming process associated with identifying and verifying families. The Office of Transportation also shared their frustration with the process in that there are students that remain identified as experiencing homelessness or shared domicile status from year to year despite seeming to have a stable residence. Options for streamlining this process should be explored. Finally, stakeholders mentioned not being able to access necessary
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student data. Steps should be made to ensure that all stakeholders be able to access the data needed to support students and families experiencing homelessness.

External Partnerships

Several stakeholders mentioned the desire to leverage relationships with community businesses and organizations in order to serve students and families experiencing homelessness. One fact that emerged from the focus groups was that not all PPWs are aware of the currently available resources and partnerships. Thus, it is recommended that a database be created to track all existing partnerships. This could enable various stakeholders to access potential services for students and families.

In addition to cataloging all existing partnerships, it is suggested that certain partnerships that may be particularly beneficial should be scaled out to a larger audience. Cultural or faith-based organizations should also be considered when pursuing partnerships, especially in light of the changing demographics of the BCPS population experiencing homelessness. Both school-based liaisons and PPWs mentioned a desire to engage community organizations to better support their population experiencing homelessness. Finally, it is important to engage other school systems to identify additional ways that funds from McKinney-Vento and Title I are being used to effectively support BCPS students and families experiencing homelessness. School systems should meet quarterly to share best practices, communicate challenges, and develop solutions related to serving this population.

Homeless Education Improvement Plan

There is a real sense of urgency among stakeholders to improve processes and programs for students and families experiencing homelessness. Developing changes to the homeless education program must be strategic and immediate. Creating a plan that includes timelines and measurable objectives will help ensure that the BCPS Homeless Education programming and practices meet the needs of the population experiencing homelessness while ensuring equitable access to learning and resources.

This collaboration presents an ideal opportunity in BCPS to explore how to best serve students and families experiencing homelessness and helps ensure that McKinney-Vento and Title I funds work together to provide a comprehensive level of coordination of services for students and families experiencing homelessness. Thus, the school system is dedicated to addressing the challenges students and families experiencing homelessness face and to ensuring equity. In summary, this program review must not serve as a culminating event but rather the beginning of a much-needed conversation.
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References


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