

January 28, 2019

Honorable Rudy Salas
Chair, Joint Legislative Audit Committee
1020 N Street, Room 107
Sacramento, CA 95831

Dear Chair and Members:

We respectfully request that the Committee approve an audit to examine Local Educational Agencies' (LEAs) procedures to identify, provide services to, and support homeless students in preschool and K-12 education.

On the national level, over 1.4 million children and youth experience homelessness in a given year. California has very high rates of homelessness across several demographic groups – including single adults, unaccompanied youth, families with children, and unsheltered individuals and families.

The federal McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act defines “homeless” broadly for the purposes of K-12 education to include any of the following situations:

- Children and youth who are:
 - Sharing housing due to loss of housing, economic hardship, or similar reason;
 - Living in motels, hotels, trailer parks or campgrounds due to lack of alternative accommodations;
 - Living in emergency or transitional shelters; or
 - Abandoned in hospitals.
- Children and youth whose primary nighttime residence is not designed for, or ordinarily used as, a regular sleeping accommodation for humans.
- Children and youth living in cars, parks, public spaces, abandoned buildings, substandard housing, bus or train stations, or similar settings.
- Migratory children and youth living in any of the above situations.

LEAs – school districts, county offices of education, and charter schools – are required by the McKinney-Vento Act and by state law to identify homeless students enrolled in their schools and to provide them certain rights and supportive services. These rights include access to

preschool; immediate enrollment without regard to immunization and other records; access to district-funded transportation services; exemption from certain local graduation requirements; the right to a fifth year of high school, if needed; and credit for partial coursework, among others. However, these rights and services are only granted once a designated McKinney-Vento liaison, teacher, or other district or school site employee has affirmatively identified a student as homeless.

As recently as 2017, over a quarter of California schools – about 2,700 of 10,500 schools – reported that they had identified no homeless students at all, and as a result provided no McKinney-Vento services. The largest of these include high schools with total enrollment over 2,500 students. According to the California Department of Education, at the district level, 400 districts statewide have reported enrolling zero homeless students.

As Chair of the Assembly Housing and Community Development Committee, and as the Assemblymember representing the school with the highest number of homeless students in the largest district in California, we are concerned at the number of schools reporting very low or no homeless students. Students who are homeless face additional barriers to accessing their education that other students do not face – including trauma, mental and physical health complications, disproportionate school discipline compared to their housed peers, and other academic performance challenges.

We know that students and families are being crushed by housing costs in this state, and that school districts alone cannot solve the issues of poverty, inequality, and access to safe affordable housing. However, we believe an audit would serve to shed light on why so many schools report having no homeless students, and would help identify the primary barriers at a school district and school site level to identifying and serving these students. We hope the audit will also identify best practices and successful strategies for districts and schools to use in providing support for some of the most vulnerable students in our state.

SCOPE OF AUDIT

1. Why are some school districts and schools identifying very few, or zero, homeless students? What identification activities are taking place at the district and school site level in some of the largest districts and schools reporting zero homeless students?

Honorable Rudy Salas

January 29, 2019

Pg. 3

2. Do schools use any standardized method of collecting information on housing status from students and families, and if so, what is the most successful or reliable method of identifying homeless students? What are best and worst practices in this process?
3. How do trends in identification differ among urban, rural, and suburban areas of the state?
4. What barriers do districts and schools face in collaborating and coordinating with other service providers (as required by the McKinney-Vento Act under the Every Student Succeeds Act) – including, for example, child welfare and social service agencies, providers of emergency/transitional/permanent housing, Runaway and Homeless Youth Act grantees, and agencies providing mental health services?
5. What barriers exist in the sharing of information and data across agencies, which might help districts more easily identify students who are homeless?
6. Each school district is required to designate a McKinney-Vento liaison to identify and support these students. What activities are McKinney-Vento liaisons undertaking in those districts reporting no homeless students?
7. Does the student population (demographics, amount of English Learner students, amount of students who identify as LGBTQ, etc.) of a school district impact a LEA's ability to identify and serve homeless students and families?
8. Is there an understanding at the school district and school site level of the requirements of federal and state law related to homeless students? What guidance is being provided by the California Department of Education on the responsibilities of school districts, McKinney-Vento liaisons, and other local and state agencies engaged in serving this population of students (and families)?
9. What steps has the California Department of Education taken to identify and provide guidance or support – or compliance monitoring – to medium- and large-sized school districts that are reporting no homeless students?

Honorable Rudy Salas
January 29, 2019
Pg. 4

10. The McKinney-Vento Act treats charter schools as local educational agencies and subjects them to the same requirements as traditional school districts. What barriers to identifying and supporting homeless students are unique to charter schools, and what are best practices for charters in this field?
11. County offices of education receiving McKinney-Vento Act funds are required to reach out to charter schools in their county and provide technical assistance. Have the largest charter schools reporting no homeless students received technical assistance from their county offices of education?
12. What school districts are serving their homeless students and families particularly well, and could serve as an example for other districts?

Thank you for your consideration of our audit request. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact us.

Sincerely,

DAVID CHIU
Assemblymember, 17th District

LUZ RIVAS
Assemblymember, 39th District