



Supporting Academic Success and Safety for Children and Youth Experiencing Homelessness During the COVID-19 Pandemic

What can homeless assistance providers and system leaders do to help the children and youth in their programs continue to progress academically during the COVID-19 crisis?

Every program should be prepared to support the remote education of children and youth. While some school districts may be planning to re-open (or have already re-opened), those plans may change suddenly with an uptick in COVID-19 transmissions.

The Alliance has been reaching out to local and national partners to identify the strategies providers and systems are adopting. What have we learned to date?

Keep Children Safe and Meet Basic Needs

Programs must have plans in place to keep children safe from acquiring COVID-19 and ensure their basic needs are met while they are attending school (remotely or physically). This includes:

- *Physical Distancing.* Learning spaces must allow for safe physical distancing.
- *PPE and Other Tools to Stay Safe.* Access to masks, handwashing stations, and sanitation supplies should be available to keep learning areas clean and prevent COVID-19 transmission.
- *Enhanced Cleaning.* Areas that will be regularly used by student learners should be subject to enhanced cleaning regimens as recommended by the CDC.
- *Places to Quarantine and Isolate as Needed.* Separate learning spaces should be accessible to children and youth who may be asymptomatic but may need to self-isolate.
- *Supervision/Care Arrangements When Parents are Working.* Programs must have plans in place to ensure safe and appropriate supervision is available to children when parents are unavailable.
- *Nutrition.* Programs must have plans to provide meals that normally would be provided in school settings including breakfast, lunch, and healthy snacks.

Provide Internet, Technology, and Resources to Address the “Digital Divide”

Increasingly, quality education requires robust access to the internet and technology. With many schools educating children online, high-speed internet connectivity and access to computers are a necessity, not a luxury. Homeless service programs and systems should ensure:

- *Internet Connectivity.* Homeless service programs should provide high-speed internet robust enough to accommodate each child's full participation in remote education.
- *Computers, Laptops and/or Tablets.* All students require regular access (within the learning area and in their home space) to computers, laptops, and/or tablets to participate in remote education, and to complete schoolwork after the end of the school day.
- *Electrical Upgrades and/or Battery Packs.* Homeless service programs may need to upgrade electric capacity and/or invest in battery packs to ensure computer, laptops and tablets remain charged.
- *Technology Expertise.* Programs should have access to help students, parents, and staff who have difficulty navigating the technology to keep students connected to school.

Create an Environment Conducive to Learning

Programs should provide environments for students that are conducive to learning. Some accommodations may be made to families' individual living areas, however, separate learning spaces will likely be required. Environments conducive to learning include:

- *Quiet and Private Spaces.* Students should have access to spaces that allow them to engage fully in remote education without the distraction of other learners. The visual background should be nondescript, allowing children to keep their residence in a shelter private.
- *School Supplies.* Programs should provide access to basic school supplies including notebooks, pencils, pens, and required books.
- *Educational Enrichment Resources.* Programs should offer a range of educational resources that will enable students to pursue their interests and build on their talents and passions. This may include books on arts, sciences and fiction; virtual "museum" visits and sporting events; and inviting outside experts in virtually to discuss topics of interest to students.
- *Addressing Students' Health and Well-Being.* Remote education can be highly stressful for students and families alike, even more so in cramped living situations. Programs can regularly attend to the health and well-being of children and provide appropriate linkages to mental health care as well as recreational opportunities to alleviate stress.
- *Staff or Volunteers with Educational Experience.* Few homeless service programs have expertise in teaching children, programs can seek staff, volunteers or inter-organizational partnerships to advise and support homeless programs' efforts. Staff and volunteers can also provide on-site tutoring support to small groups of students that can

strengthen their academic performance. This may also provide much needed relief to over-burdened parents who are struggling to meet their children's educational needs while also working to help their families escape homelessness.

Facilitate Seamless Connection to School and Other Supports Through Transitions

Programs should ensure transitions into and from homeless assistance programs do not disrupt students' participation in school or receipt of other critical supports (such as health visits, counseling, and opportunities for recreation and socialization) that can enhance their well-being and build resilience. This includes:

- *Facilitating Immediate School Enrollment and Connection.* Protocols should be implemented across all homeless assistance programs to ensure all children are enrolled in school, barriers to enrollment are immediately addressed, and every re-housing plan incorporates strategies to keep students connected to school.
- *Establishing Safe Transportation Plans.* Students will require CDC-compliant transportation to attend school (when open), after-school activities, appointments, and opportunities for safe recreation and socialization.
- *Ensuring Technology Follows the Student.* Homeless assistance programs should ensure students have access to computers, laptops, or tablets as well as robust internet services when they move from shelter into housing. This may require providing technology for each students' use (including internet connectivity, wifi hotspot devices and computers) when not available from the school.
- *Offering Warm Handoffs.* Programs can offer warm handoffs to other helping professionals when families exit homelessness assistance programs so that parents have continued access to advocacy support in meeting their children's educational needs.

Advocate and Support Parents' Advocacy for their Children's Educational Needs

Homeless assistance providers and system leaders should be strong advocates to ensure students' educational needs are met, and to support parents in their own advocacy on behalf of their children.

- *Assigning staff to serve as educational advocates.* Each homeless service program should have a staff person assigned to ensure students are receiving the educational supports they are entitled to receive. This may require ongoing advocacy to ensure appropriate accommodations are available to students with disabilities who require Individual Educational Plans (IEPs) and students who require language, speech, or other supports.
- *Monitoring Parents' Satisfaction with Educational Supports.* Homeless assistance programs should regularly assess children's participation and progress in school and parents' assessments of their children's educational needs. Programs and system leaders can use

this information to inform their own advocacy on behalf of students experiencing homelessness.

- *Facilitating Parent Advocacy Opportunities.* Ensure parents have ample opportunities to voice their concerns to teachers, counselors, school leaders and political leaders about their children's educational needs.

Engage in Ongoing System-Level Coordination and Advocacy with School Liaisons and Leadership

Homeless service system leaders can be effective "boundary spanners" by advocating at the system level to improve coordination between schools and homeless service programs. This will include:

- *Regular Input from Students, Parents, and Homeless Program Leaders.* Homeless service system leaders should receive periodic updates on challenges students experiencing homelessness are facing in staying connected to school and progressing academically.
- *Regular Communication with School and Political Leaders.* Homeless service system leaders should have regularly scheduled problem-solving oriented meetings with school and political leaders (including district- and state-level homeless school liaisons and coordinators) that are designed to address challenges students face in staying connected to school and to identify opportunities to improve educational opportunities and outcomes in safe environments.

Conclusion

Homelessness is already extraordinarily traumatic for the children and youth who experience it. Often, schools are the one constant in their lives. The COVID-19 crisis and the uncertainty and disruption it creates to students' educational plans only adds to the toll on already vulnerable children and youth.

The COVID-19 pandemic is an unprecedented challenge for our nation. Helping children thrive in light of so much uncertainty, particularly children and youth experiencing homelessness, is critical and should be a priority for homeless service system leaders and providers.

The Alliance looks forward to continuing to learn from local partners and updating the recommendations listed above accordingly. Please join the Alliance's [online forum](#) to share your own local strategies and successes in keeping students connected to school.