

The National Perspective

The Every Student Succeeds Act Improves Access and Achievement for Homeless Students

by Josef Kannegaard

Last December, President Obama signed the *Every Student Succeeds Act* (ESSA) into law. The law was a reauthorization of the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965*, the first since President George W. Bush's *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001*. The law implements a number of wide-ranging reforms, including giving states more latitude in the design of academic standards and long-term performance goals. Also included in the law are many provisions aimed at improving education for homeless students. These include increased funding for the Education for Homeless Children and Youth (EHCY) program, and stronger requirements for how states must plan for homeless students' educational needs.

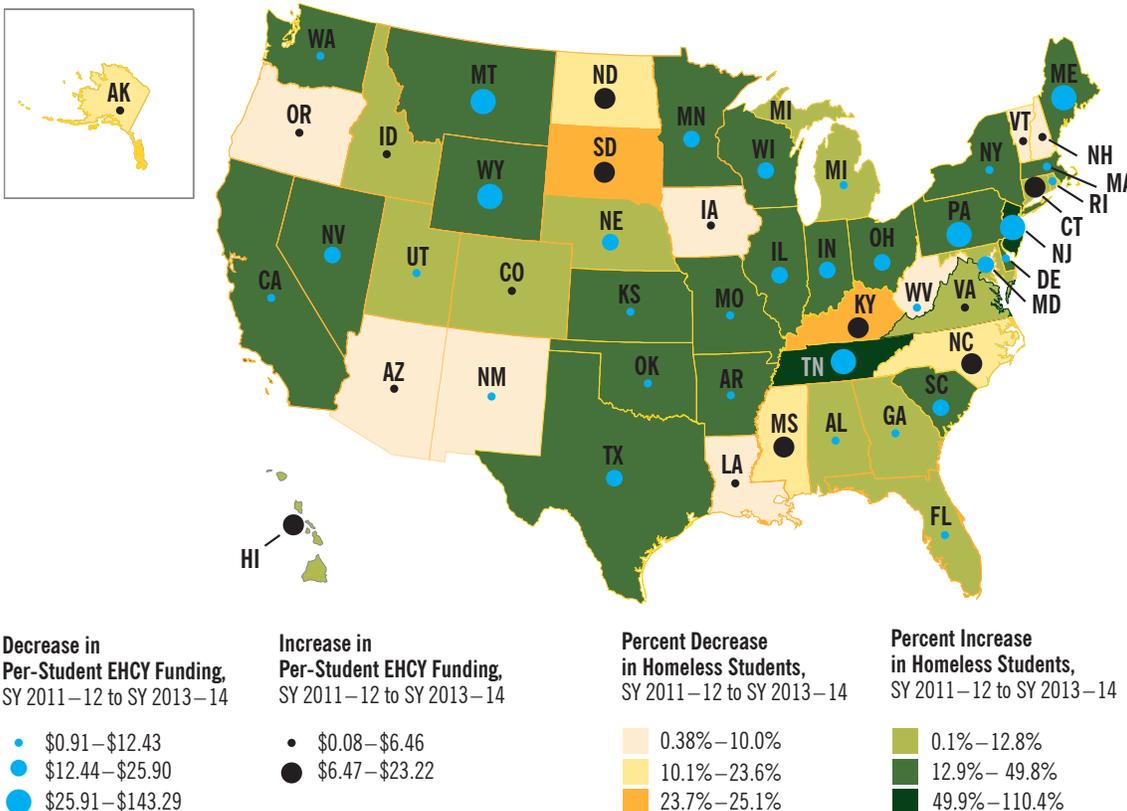
through grants from the Education for Homeless Children and Youth program at the U.S. Department of Education. Although state spending on homeless students comes from a variety of sources at all levels of government, the EHCY is the only dedicated source of federal funding for the identification and support of students in temporary housing. Funding for the EHCY has been stagnant in recent years, with annual spending hovering near \$65 million since 2009. The total amount of money distributed to states increased temporarily post-recession under the *American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009*, but this additional funding ended in 2011. Since that time, the total number of homeless students in the United States has increased 15%, to just over 1.3 million.

Increased Funding

Under ESSA, federal funding for homeless students could increase up to \$85 million per year through 2020. This money will be awarded to states

The combination of rising homelessness and flat funding means that the amount of money being spent averages to less than \$50 per homeless student nationwide. Of course, states do not all receive the same amount

Percent Change in Homeless Students and Change in Average Per-Student EHCY Funding SY 2011–12 to SY 2013–14



of funding from the federal government, and there is wide variation in how much each state receives per homeless student. As seen in the map (left), 37 states saw an increase in their number of homeless students between SY 2011–12 and SY 2013–14, and all but five of these had a net decrease in per-pupil funding as a result. For example, in Tennessee the number of homeless students more than doubled across those two years, to just under 30,000 students. At the same time, the state saw its total EHCY grant decrease by almost \$29,000, resulting in it having \$45 less to spend per homeless student compared to SY 2011–12.

In many states, the increasing number of homeless students

Source: National Center for Homeless Education, "National Overview," <http://profiles.nche.seiservices.com/ConsolidatedStateProfile.aspx>; National Center for Homeless Education, *Federal Data Summary School Years 2011–12 to 2013–14*, November 2015.

can be attributed to two factors: a rise in the number of students living in temporary situations with another household (“doubled-up”) and improved identification practices leading to more students being connected with necessary services. Nationwide, there was a 16% increase in the number of doubled-up students from SY 2011–12 to SY 2013–14, to approximately one million students. Eighteen states saw higher rates of increase over these two years, with 36 states total enrolling more doubled-up students. At the same time, 39 states had increases in the percentage of low-income students being identified as homeless, a common metric for how well schools are identifying homeless students. With the implementation of ESSA, identification rates could increase even further, with new requirements on how school liaisons are trained on the identification and assessment of homeless students and their needs.

Although being identified as homeless guarantees students certain federal protections, not all students receive services through the EHCY program. States are the direct recipients of EHCY grants from the federal government, and school districts must then apply for competitive subgrants awarded by proposal quality and the local level of need. In the 2013–14 school year, 36% of homeless students were enrolled in a school district that did not receive federal EHCY assistance, the same as in the previous year. Nationally, only 25% of local education agencies (an administrative unit often synonymous with school districts) received subgrants in SY 2013–14.

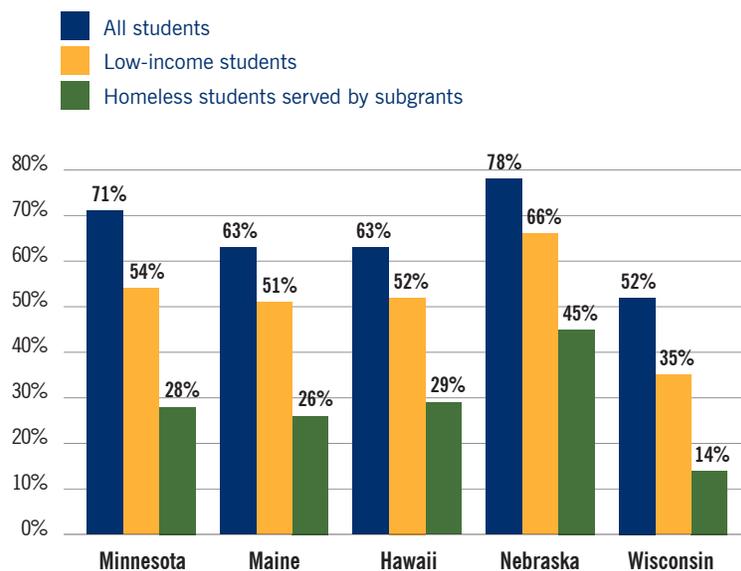
Improving Access and Achievement

In addition to increasing the funding available to support homeless students, ESSA also puts into place new procedures aimed at improving homeless students’ access to quality education at all grade levels. For example, states must now specify how they are ensuring that homeless children have access to pre-school programs that are available. States must also have procedures in place for students in high school to access college-readiness services through school counselors. Although many of these policies reflect practices already put into place in some areas, putting them into law ensures that all students will have the same protections nationwide.

Another step ESSA takes in encouraging states and school districts to prioritize homeless students’ education is to increase the visibility of their academic performance. After ESSA takes effect, states will include how homeless students score on standardized tests, as well as the rates at which they graduate from high school, as part of a publicly available “Report Card.” Under *No Child Left Behind*, states were only required to report these outcomes for subgroups based on race, ethnicity, gender, English language learners (ELL), migrant status, disability, or low-income status. Although homeless students fall into the low-income subgroup (and often have ELL or disability service needs), there has been recent research showing how housing status has an effect on academic performance even beyond the impact of poverty.

Improving the reporting of homeless students’ academic performance is important due to the wide variation in the achievement gap seen

Math Proficiency of 4th Graders in Select States



Source: U.S. Department of Education, “ED Data Express,” <http://www.eddataexpress.ed.gov>.

across states. The figure (above) shows the five states with the biggest difference in how homeless students scored on 4th-grade math tests compared to all students. In Minnesota, only 28% of homeless students in areas served by EHCY scored at proficient or above, well below the 71% rate for all students. In many states, the performance of homeless students also lagged behind that of low-income students, despite homeless students being included in the latter group. The gap may be even greater in other states who used the 2013–14 school year to field-test new exams and thus reported unreliable results for the most recent year.

One of the biggest threats to homeless students’ academic success is the disruption caused by having to change schools frequently. Studies have shown that not only do homeless students transfer to new schools more often than their classmates, but each transfer can set them back academically by as much as six months. In order to minimize these potentially dangerous effects, ESSA lays out new rules aimed at ensuring school stability. These include requiring school districts to presume that staying in the same school is in a homeless child or youth’s best interest, unless factors indicate that a change in schools would be better for the child or youth.

Although the changes to EHCY take effect in October of 2016, ESSA will not be fully implemented until the 2017–18 school year, meaning that the full effect of the reforms will not be clear for several years. Paradoxically, the first sign that the new law is effective may be an uptick in the number of homeless students nationwide, as identification practices improve and barriers to enrollment and school stability are reduced. With the emphasis on improving students’ access to a quality education from pre-K through college, the true measure of success will be the extent to which the achievement gap faced by homeless students narrows in the years to come. ■