



Office of the
Washington
State Auditor
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PERFORMANCE AUDIT

Report Highlights

Opportunities to Better Identify and Serve K-12 Students Experiencing Homelessness

Washington has the eighth-highest rate of identified student homelessness in the country. The number of identified homeless students in Washington's kindergarten through 12th grade (K-12) education system has grown to more than 40,000. This marks more than a 30 percent increase in student homelessness between the 2012-13 and 2016-17 school years. Student homelessness in Washington's schools is caused by a combination of factors, including economic trends and family crisis. School districts are responsible for identifying homeless students and ensuring their educational success. The Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) and the Department of Commerce (Commerce) are responsible for supporting school districts' efforts to assist these students. However, the needs of homeless students are diverse and complex, extending beyond services schools typically provide.

Homelessness is a stressful experience that profoundly affects students' well-being and ability to succeed in school. The growing proportion of homeless students in the state's K-12 population has prompted stakeholder interest into the problems facing homeless students, what educational and other agencies are doing to identify and help them, and which strategies can most effectively improve these agencies' efforts. This audit evaluated efforts by OSPI and school districts, and identified opportunities to strengthen how these agencies identify, support and connect homeless students to services they need to succeed academically. The audit also obtained insights about K-12 student homelessness and examined how school districts, OSPI and Commerce use dedicated funding to assist these students.

What can school districts do to improve the way they serve students who are homeless?

Comprehensive screening, communication and training strategies can help districts address gaps in their approaches to improve identification of homeless students. For example, nearly all school districts use three primary strategies to identify students experiencing homelessness: distributing a housing questionnaire, posting information on school grounds, and appointing and training a district homeless liaison. Addressing gaps in primary identification strategies can help districts improve identification of homeless students. In addition to improving existing strategies, districts could also use student data better to identify students who might be experiencing homelessness.

In another example, we found school districts could better connect homeless students to community services through improved partnerships with Coordinated Entry and other resources. Federal law requires school districts to connect homeless students with community resources to address needs that extend beyond services districts typically provide. The most important step districts can take in connecting students with resources is to partner with their counties' Coordinated Entry agencies. Improved partnerships and referrals can help districts better connect homeless students to other resources. Some school districts have taken extraordinary steps to further increase homeless students' access to services.

What can state agencies do to help districts?

OSPI and the Washington State School Directors Association (WSSDA) play supportive roles in helping school districts address student homelessness statewide. OSPI supports district efforts to assist homeless students by providing funding, guidance, training and resources. WSSDA supports districts' efforts through model policies and procedures. OSPI and WSSDA can address some school districts' needs by providing additional guidance, especially on best practices and interpretations of the law. OSPI could also expand its training delivery and content to address districts' needs. Finally, OSPI could consider facilitating an online forum for homeless liaisons to share information statewide, similar to what other states have implemented.

State Auditor's Conclusions

Homelessness among students in the K-12 education system is a significant and growing issue in Washington. It is a stressful experience that has real consequences for the student's education. It should come as no surprise that students who experience homelessness miss classes, change schools and fail to graduate high school far more frequently than other students.

The problem of youth homelessness is a far bigger issue than schools can reasonably be expected to solve. However, schools are in a unique position because they are a hub for the vast majority of children. Federal law requires schools to identify students who experience homelessness and connect them with the services and supports they need to succeed academically. Unfortunately, the cost for schools to meet these obligations far exceeds the dedicated state and federal funding that is available. In the absence of additional resources, the purpose of this audit was to identify actionable options to help schools. These options include actions schools can take themselves to better identify and serve homeless students. OSPI, WSSDA and the Department of Commerce also have options to better assist schools in their efforts.

Understanding the complex underpinnings of homelessness, especially as it affects children, is an important focus of public policy work in all levels of government. This audit provides key pieces of information on some baseline issues facing homeless students, including housing and transportation needs, as lawmakers and communities consider how to respond to this growing challenge.

Recommendations

We made a series of recommendations for school districts to implement strategies that can help them strengthen identification of, provision of in-school supports for, and connections to community services for students experiencing homelessness. We also recommended that OSPI and WSSDA increase support for school districts through additional guidance, training and resources. Finally, we recommended that OSPI and Commerce make it easier for districts to access and use available funds to meet students' needs.