



**National Association
for the Education of
Homeless Children
and Youth**

Building futures through education

Using What We Know: Supporting the Education of Unaccompanied Homeless Youth

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The National Association for the Education of
Homeless Children and Youth
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NAEHCY

The National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth (NAEHCY) a national grassroots membership association, serving as the voice and the social conscience for the education of children and youth in homeless situations. NAEHCY connects educators, parents, advocates, researchers, and service providers to ensure school enrollment and attendance, and overall success for children and youth whose lives have been disrupted by the lack of safe, permanent, and adequate housing. NAEHCY accomplishes these goals through advocacy, partnerships, and education.

The policy suggestions contained in this report were distilled from interviews with over one hundred NAEHCY members from across the country. The author interviewed NAEHCY members in person or on the telephone between April and June of 2007. Interviewees included local homeless education liaisons, McKinney-Vento State Coordinators, attorneys, school nurses, and other advocates. Additional information was obtained from a 2006-2007 survey of over 300 unaccompanied youth in California. The youth survey will soon be available from the California Research Bureau (<http://www.library.ca.gov/crb/>).

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Executive Summary	Page 4
Quick-Reference Table of Model Policies and Programs	Page 10
Introduction	Page 12
Using What We Know to Support the Education of Unaccompanied Homeless Youth	
1. Young people’s basic needs must be met if they are to achieve their educational goals.	Page 15
2. If young people feel that school is a safe and supportive place for them, they will be much more likely to enroll, attend, and succeed.	Page 20
3. More consistent implementation of the McKinney-Vento Act, through increased personnel and uniform procedures, will facilitate the educational attendance and success of youth on their own.	Page 26
4. When schools adopt flexible policies and programs to accommodate the demands of homelessness and independence, they offer unaccompanied youth an environment where they can be more engaged and successful.	Page 32
5. Many unaccompanied youth have become disengaged from school and must be drawn back in by caring, persistent adults.	Page 38
6. Improvements in child welfare policies and practices to reduce the number of youth in the child welfare system who are homeless, and to make supportive services accessible to unaccompanied youth, are essential for youth to achieve their educational goals.	Page 40
7. Any effort to support unaccompanied youth’s educational success will be more effective if all youth-serving agencies coordinate their efforts, accept joint responsibility for outcomes, and involve young people as active partners.	Page 43
Appendix A: List of Interviewees	Page 51

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

“...Through it all, school is probably the only thing that has kept me going. I know that every day that I walk in those doors, I can stop thinking about my problems for the next six hours and concentrate on what is most important to me. Without the support of my school system, I would not be as well off as I am today. School keeps me motivated to move on, and encourages me to find a better life for myself.”

Carrie, 2002 LeTendre Scholar and formerly homeless youth

“From my experience, I can say that most unaccompanied youth do want to be in school, exactly because they’re homeless and on their own—they know how rough it is out there. It’s a misconception that they don’t want their education. They may be too overwhelmed by the rest of their lives, but there is that desire to be in school.”

Cathy Requejo, Project Supervisor of Project HELP
Austin Independent School District, Texas

Unaccompanied youth are young people who lack safe, stable housing and who are not in the care of a parent or guardian. They may have run away from home or been forced to leave by their parents. Unaccompanied youth live in a variety of temporary situations, including shelters, the homes of friends or relatives, cars, campgrounds, public parks, abandoned buildings, motels, and bus or train stations. Although they can be spoken of as a group, each unaccompanied young person is an individual, with a unique voice.

Studies, the experience of educators and service providers, and most importantly, interviews with unaccompanied youth, show that the vast majority wants to go to school and thinks their education is very important.¹ In fact, in many cases unaccompanied youth value school more than their housed peers, recognizing all too well that school is their only hope for a brighter future. Sadly, research also shows that as many as three quarters of older homeless youth do not finish high school.² Being disconnected from school robs youth of a critical resource for meeting immediate needs and building a stable future. In one study, formerly homeless youth reported that leaving school was a turning point in their lives and that their situations worsened afterward.³

If unaccompanied youth value education so much, why are so many out of school? The most significant barrier to unaccompanied youth’s educational success is the fact that they must struggle daily to provide for their basic needs, while managing the extreme physical and emotional stress of homelessness.⁴ In a recent survey of unaccompanied homeless youth in California, one youth starkly summarized the reality of going to school while homeless. Responding to the question “What kind of support do you feel you need in order to return to school?” the youth declared: “Stable housing, you know? That’s pretty much it... To try to go to school and live on the street or hold a job down living on the street-- I don’t know anybody that’s done it.”⁵

While some youth are able to succeed in school despite their homelessness, they do so only with extraordinary effort, extensive assistance from educators and other caring adults, and numerous supportive services. Even those youth who are able to find safe housing and positive adult support face constant uncertainty regarding how long those arrangements will last. The implication is clear: to confront the educational challenges of unaccompanied young people, policymakers must confront homelessness. This includes policies to meet youth's basic physical and emotional needs, both in and out of school. When unaccompanied young people receive the physical and emotional resources they need to meet their educational goals, they can be successful. For example, at least one study has demonstrated that most unaccompanied youth who are in school are working at grade level.⁶ Many unaccompanied youth do graduate high school and continue on to stable jobs or higher education – but only when they are able to access school.

Interviews with youth corroborate this approach. When asked what support they need to attend school, unaccompanied youth generally focus on their basic needs, such as housing, employment, family support, financial stability, personal hygiene, mental health, and emotional well-being.⁷ Perhaps most importantly, “the vast majority of those who answer questions about education said they would want to go back to school if they could.”⁸

The following principles present seven steps and strategies to support the education of unaccompanied youth. They include action steps for national policymakers, state legislatures and agencies, local policymakers, school district staff and administrators, and service providers. Each principle is based on what we know as educators and advocates dedicated to the individualized education and development of children and youth experiencing homelessness.

1. Young people's basic needs must be met if they are to achieve their educational goals.

Lack of life's basic necessities is the most significant barrier to educational success for unaccompanied youth. Many of the policies necessary to meet unaccompanied youth's needs are simple. First, improvements to housing and shelter policies could provide many more youth with a safe place to stay. If states create more emergency and transitional shelters, independent living programs, and affordable permanent housing for unaccompanied youth and ensure access to existing programs, then fewer young people will be forced to sleep in unsafe, public places. Increasing the maximum length of stay at emergency shelters would also increase the likelihood that youth who are in school can continue to attend the same school and focus on their education and mental health needs.

Second, improved access to social services would help meet other basic needs. By ensuring that unaccompanied youth are not denied public benefits or social services, including medical and mental health care, due to their age and the lack of parental consent, states can ensure that youth are able to benefit from social programs that are already in existence.

Finally, schools themselves have been critical resources in meeting the basic needs of unaccompanied youth. Many school districts have adopted policies and practices to ensure unaccompanied youth access to school-based resources such as showers, school meals, clothes closets, school nurses, lockers, and laundry facilities. If more schools adopt such practices, more youth will avail themselves of those resources.

2. If young people feel that school is a safe and supportive place for them, they will be much more likely to enroll, attend, and succeed.

Generally, unaccompanied youth's circumstances require them to be experts in self-preservation. As such, they are very unlikely to enroll in school if they perceive it as unsafe. There are at least three basic steps school districts and state policymakers can undertake to make school a safe and supportive place for unaccompanied youth.

First, assigning each unaccompanied youth a consistent educational advocate or mentor can offer the youth ongoing support and safety. It is likely that supplemental state or federal funding will be necessary to establish such mentoring programs, particularly in parts of the state with higher concentrations of unaccompanied youth. Second, schools should implement programs to assist and welcome groups of young people who tend to be over-represented among unaccompanied youth, including those who are lesbian, gay, bisexual and/or transgender, pregnant or parenting, older than traditional high school age, recovering from trauma, or recently returned to school after an extended period of nonattendance.

Finally, it is critical that state policymakers revise laws that require school personnel to report unaccompanied youth to law enforcement or the child welfare system. Such laws create significant barriers to school attendance for unaccompanied youth, who fear involvement with police and child welfare. Reporting laws can and should be revised with a goal of protecting young people's safety, providing measures that encourage youth to engage in school and community resources.

3. More consistent implementation of the McKinney-Vento Act, through increased personnel and uniform procedures, will facilitate the educational attendance and success of youth on their own.

The federal McKinney-Vento Act is a powerful tool to remove barriers to educational access and success for unaccompanied youth. It mandates many policies and activities at both the state and local levels to identify unaccompanied youth, enroll them in school, provide support for their basic needs, and ensure they have access to all the services for which they are eligible. There are many fairly simple strategies that improve implementation of the McKinney-Vento Act statewide.

First, ensuring adequate McKinney-Vento staff at the state and local levels is an essential step to ensure more consistent implementation of the Act statewide. At the state level, the Office of the State Coordinator for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth must have the capacity to provide professional development and technical assistance on both the McKinney-Vento Act and unaccompanied youth, so that every local educational agency in the state is aware of its legal requirements and practical strategies to meet the needs of homeless young people. The State Coordinator should also be empowered to conduct monitoring of local compliance with those legal requirements and ensure compliance. At the local level, increasing dedicated McKinney-Vento staff in school districts would enhance compliance with every aspect of the McKinney-Vento Act.

Additionally, states should establish clear, statewide procedures for enrolling unaccompanied youth and determining educational decision-making for them. Such policies would help schools implement youth's enrollment and full participation in school activities.

4. When schools adopt flexible policies and programs to accommodate the demands of homelessness and independence, they offer unaccompanied youth an environment where they can be more engaged and successful.

Unaccompanied youth's educational needs and interests vary as widely as those of all young people. However, unaccompanied youth often require greater flexible and varied educational options that best meet their specific needs. State-level policy initiatives should support and encourage such flexibility by providing local educational agencies with resources to explore alternative schedules and credit award systems. School policies must seek to accommodate the demands of homelessness and independence faced by unaccompanied students.

For example, schools should create exceptions to enrollment deadlines and fees that highly mobile homeless youth cannot meet. Second, state policies to streamline the awarding of partial credits and facilitate credit recovery programs would allow youth to continue earning credits and advancing toward graduation despite their instability and mobility. Finally, unaccompanied youth must have access to alternative programs, as necessary to meet their needs.

5. Many unaccompanied youth have become disengaged from school and must be drawn back in by caring, persistent adults.

With as many as three quarters of older homeless youth out of school, intensive efforts to support their reengagement in education are essential. Such efforts require a greater investment in dropout recovery programs specifically focused on unaccompanied youth. For example, funding more local McKinney-Vento staff (called "liaisons" by the Act) could help reengage youth in school, since liaisons' duties include conducting outreach, identifying and enrolling unaccompanied youth, and supporting their attendance and success. The existing dropout recovery programs should receive specific training on homelessness and conduct specific outreach to homeless youth. Finally, states could establish new dropout recovery programs focused on unaccompanied youth.

6. Improvements in child welfare policies and practices are essential for youth to achieve their educational goals.

A disproportionate number of unaccompanied youth are or have been in the care of the child welfare system. Many others were eligible to receive child welfare services, as they fled abusive homes or were forced out of their homes by neglectful parents. This significant overlap between the child welfare system and unaccompanied youth must be addressed.

First, state policies to increase rapid-response family crisis support in abusive and neglectful homes could help reduce the number of youth who are compelled to run away from home or are forced out of their homes. Second, to reduce the number of youth who abscond from child welfare placements, the state should consider a requirement that older youth's wishes be given significant consideration in selecting placements. In addition, serious improvements in transition planning for foster youth are obviously needed, as a significant number of foster youth become homeless upon leaving care.

Finally, programs that support foster youth should be accessible to all unaccompanied youth, regardless of whether they have been served by child welfare. Opening these programs to all unaccompanied youth would eliminate an artificial distinction and increase the services available to youth on their own.

7. Any effort to support unaccompanied youth's educational success will be more effective if all youth-serving agencies coordinate their efforts, accept joint responsibility for outcomes, and involve young people as active partners.

At both the state and local level, youth-serving agencies must coordinate their efforts and adopt joint strategies for educational success among unaccompanied youth. Such coordination would facilitate service delivery to youth, meeting many of their basic needs and promoting their educational success. It would also engage a variety of agencies and systems in improving youth's educational outcomes. Young people should be active participants in all collaborative efforts.

Specifically, given the importance of shelter and housing programs in the lives of unaccompanied youth, several simple state policies could help ensure that shelter and housing providers support the educational success of youth in their care. For example, shelters and housing that receive state funding or are subject to state licensing could be required to post notice of students' rights under the McKinney-Vento Act, to explain those rights to young people upon intake, and to assist students in exercising those rights. Funding and licensing procedures could also impose a degree of accountability on shelter and housing providers for the school enrollment and attendance of young people in their care and require such programs to collaborate with local schools.

CONCLUSION

The seven principles described in this report encompass a continuum of strategies to meet youth's basic needs; increase enrollment, attendance, and success in school; and reengage young people who have left school. While each of the policies and practices suggested has proven successful in helping unaccompanied youth meet their educational and professional goals, they are most successful as a continuum. For unaccompanied youth truly to be able to achieve their educational and professional goals, states and local communities must make significant advances in each of the seven areas highlighted.

In implementing these or any strategies to support youth, policymakers and educators must keep in mind that each unaccompanied young person is a unique individual. Flexibility must be a touchstone in serving unaccompanied youth. No initiative implemented as a one-size-fits-all panacea is likely to be successful. Policymakers and educators must constantly listen to young people express their own needs, strengths, and goals and implement strategies in that context.

Quick-Reference Table Of Model Policies And Programs

California state law to combat age discrimination in shelter programs	Page 16
Alaska state law allowing minors to consent for medical and dental care	Page 17
List of school-based resources that can assist youth to meet their basic needs	Page 18
Alameda Unified School District's school-based health clinics	Page 19
Examples of three school district-based mentor programs	Page 21
Youth On Their Own community-based mentor program	Page 22
California's Pupil Motivation & Maintenance Program (Outreach Consultants)	Page 22
Strategies to make schools safe and welcoming for unaccompanied youth	Page 24
How to verify if an unaccompanied youth has been reported missing	Page 25
How to maximize state educational agencies' professional development and technical assistance on the McKinney-Vento Act and unaccompanied youth	Page 28
New York state law designating who makes enrollment decisions for unaccompanied youth	Page 30
Texas state law waiving residency requirements for foster youth to participate in any school activity	Page 33
Virginia and Delaware high school athletic association policies waiving certain requirements for homeless students	Page 33
California state law requiring schools to award partial credits	Page 34
Fresno Unified School District's database for awarding partial credits	Page 34
Key elements of credit recovery programs	Page 36
Suggested alternative programs that have served unaccompanied youth successfully	Page 37
Strategies to reengage youth who have left school	Page 39
Suggested principles to reduce the number of youth who abscond from child welfare placements	Page 41
Eureka City Schools, California collaborative procedure to expedite assessments and enrollment for youth in shelters	Page 44

Anchorage, Alaska procedure to give homeless youth priority for subsidized housing	Page 45
Examples of state-level interagency collaboration to support homeless youth in Colorado, Oregon and Maine	Page 45
Ohio's Youth Empowerment Program's state-level collaborations	Page 46
List of key agencies and organizations to include in local-level interagency collaborations	Page 46
Portland, Oregon's Homeless Youth Continuum (local-level interagency collaboration)	Page 47
Bangor, Maine's Rapid Response Program (local-level interagency collaboration)	Page 48
Florida's information-sharing protocols between school districts and the Department of Children and Families	Page 48

INTRODUCTION

“I haven’t met a single runaway youth yet who didn’t leave home for a good reason.”

Sue Kanthak, Homeless Program Coordinator
Rockford Public Schools, Illinois

In this report, the term “unaccompanied youth” refers to teenagers and young adults who lack safe, stable housing and who are not in the care of a parent or guardian. They may have run away from home or been forced to leave by their parents. Unaccompanied youth live in a variety of temporary situations, including:

- Sharing the housing of friends or relatives temporarily (sometimes known as “couch-surfing”)
- Living in an emergency shelter or transitional living program
- Living in a car or campground
- Staying in a park, abandoned building, train or bus station, under a bridge, or in another public place

Between 1.6 and 2.8 million youth run away from their homes each year.⁹ Generally, youth leave home due to severe dysfunction in their families, including circumstances that put their safety and well-being at risk. Unfortunately, physical and sexual abuse in the home is common. Studies of unaccompanied youth have found that 20 to 50 percent were sexually abused in their homes, while 40 to 60 percent were physically abused.¹⁰ Parental drug use or alcoholism and conflicts with stepparents or partners also provoke youth to run away from home.¹¹ In a survey of unaccompanied youth in California, over half felt that being homeless was as safe as or safer than being at home.¹²

Many young people are forced out of their homes by parents who disapprove of their sexual orientation or pregnancy. For example, 20 to 40 percent of homeless youth in one study identified themselves as gay, lesbian, bisexual and/or transgender, compared to only 3-5 percent of the overall population.¹³ Over 50 percent of youth in shelters and on the streets have reported that their parents either told them to leave or knew they were leaving but did not care.¹⁴ As a result, less than half of unaccompanied youth are considered to have a realistic prospect of family reunification.¹⁵ Finally, many unaccompanied youth should be receiving foster care services. Several studies have shown that between 20 and 55 percent of homeless youth are under the care of the child welfare system.¹⁶

Tragically, homelessness places youth at extreme risk of victimization and violence. Youth living in public places are often victims of physical and sexual assaults and robberies. Crowded living situations and exposure to the elements lead to higher rates of illness. Some youth are forced to engage in “survival sex” in exchange for shelter, food, or money. The mental and emotional stress of homelessness leads to increased risks of substance abuse, depression, and even suicide. In

that context, school can be an oasis for unaccompanied youth, where they can find security and support and obtain the skills they need to survive safely on their own.

Subtitle VII-B of the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act (hereafter referred to as the McKinney-Vento Act) is a federal law designed to increase the school enrollment, attendance, and success of children and youth experiencing homelessness. The McKinney-Vento Act was passed in 1987 and reauthorized as part of the No Child Left Behind Act in 2001. At root, the McKinney-Vento Act requires that state and local educational agencies provide students experiencing homelessness with school access and support their attendance and success. Key provisions of the Act include:

- Students who are homeless can remain in one school, even if their temporary living situation is located in another school district or attendance area, if that is in their best interest. Schools must provide transportation.¹⁷
- Children and youth who are homeless can enroll in school and begin attending immediately, even if they cannot produce normally required documents, such as birth certificates, proof of guardianship, immunization records, or proof of residency.¹⁸
- Every school district and county office of education must designate a homeless liaison to ensure the McKinney-Vento Act is implemented in the district or county. Homeless liaisons must do outreach to identify unaccompanied youth, assist them with school enrollment and refer them to health and other community services.¹⁹
- Every state must designate a state coordinator to ensure the McKinney-Vento Act is implemented in the state.²⁰
- Both state coordinators and homeless liaisons must collaborate with other agencies serving homeless youth and families to enhance educational attendance and success.²¹
- State departments of education, county offices of education, and school districts must review and revise their policies and practices to eliminate barriers to the enrollment and retention in school of homeless children and youth.²²

The McKinney-Vento Act contains many other provisions designed to support the education of children and youth experiencing homelessness. It is a critical tool in any effort to help unaccompanied youth meet their educational goals.

USING WHAT WE KNOW TO SUPPORT THE EDUCATION OF UNACCOMPANIED YOUTH

The following principles and the continuum of strategies they encompass can guide the efforts of state policymakers, local policymakers, educators and service providers to support unaccompanied youth in meeting their educational and professional goals. They were developed through interviews with over one hundred NAEHCY members from across the country. The author interviewed NAEHCY members in person or on the telephone between April and June of 2007. Interviewees included local homeless education liaisons, McKinney-Vento State Coordinators, attorneys, school nurses, and other advocates. Appendix A contains a list of those interviewees whose contributions were most significant. Additional information was obtained from a 2006-2007 survey of over 300 unaccompanied youth in California. The youth survey will soon be available from the California Research Bureau (<http://www.library.ca.gov/crb/>).

1. Young people's basic needs must be met if they are to achieve their educational goals.

"It's very difficult to talk to youth about education when he doesn't have a place to stay. We need to provide the whole package for these kids."

Karen Fessler, Education Advocate
Project Connect-Cincinnati Public Schools, Ohio

The most significant barrier to unaccompanied youth's educational success is the fact that they must struggle daily to provide for their basic needs, while managing the extreme physical and emotional stress of homelessness.²³ Interviews of unaccompanied youth reveal that the young people's reasons for leaving school are entangled with their trajectories into homelessness and with the realities of homelessness itself.²⁴

To help unaccompanied youth meet their basic needs, states and communities should: create more emergency and transitional shelters, independent living programs and affordable permanent housing programs for unaccompanied youth, and ensure access to existing programs; ensure that unaccompanied youth are not denied public benefits or social services, including medical and mental health care, due to the lack of parental consent; and ensure that unaccompanied youth have access to school-based resources to assist them in meeting their basic needs.

Create more emergency and transitional shelters, independent living programs and affordable permanent housing programs for unaccompanied youth, and ensure access to existing programs.

It is extremely difficult for young people to concentrate on school when they are sleeping on the street. Not surprisingly, the last evaluation of the federally-funded youth shelter program found that shelters and transitional living programs produced positive outcomes for participating youth in the area of education: School participation among youth in shelter doubled after services commenced, compared to the participation rate 30 days prior to accessing the shelter, and the proportion of youth in transitional living projects attending college was three times that of homeless youth who were not in a transitional living program.²⁵ Another study found that shelter use resulted in decreased school expulsions, suspensions and detentions, and increased self-esteem.²⁶

Although shelter programs for unaccompanied youth do exist, such as the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act, these initiatives barely scratch the surface of the need for emergency shelter, transitional housing and independent living programs for unaccompanied youth. For example, the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act Basic Center shelter program turned away 2,887 youth during 2006 and 2,253 in the first three quarters of 2007. The Transitional Living Program turned away 2,232 in 2006 and 1,511 in the first three quarters of 2007.²⁷ It is important to note that these figures do not account for the well-documented fact that most homeless youth do not come into contact with shelters at all.²⁸ In fact, studies have found that as few as one in twelve homeless youth ever come into contact with the shelter system.²⁹

An increase in funding for existing shelter and housing programs and the establishment of significant additional programs would have a direct impact on the number of young people forced to sleep in parks, abandoned buildings, and on the street. It would help reduce assaults, robberies, and illnesses among unaccompanied youth. In short, increasing federal and state funding for such programs would significantly impact the physical and emotional well-being of unaccompanied youth. With greater physical and emotional stability, unaccompanied youth will have greater capacity to attend and succeed in school.

At the same time, policies to ensure unaccompanied youth can access existing shelter and housing resources would also increase their access to safe housing. Many shelters and housing programs refuse to serve youth based on their age, gender, or lack of a guardian. Other shelters do not accept homeless families intact, which often separates teenage boys, in particular, from their families and forces them to fend for themselves. Eliminating such barriers would increase youth's access to safe living situations. Further, many emergency shelters limit youth's stay to two or three weeks, forcing them into almost constant mobility. Increasing the maximum length of stay at emergency shelters would increase the likelihood that youth who are in school can continue to attend the same school and focus on education and mental health needs.

An example of efforts to combat age discrimination in shelter programs is a recent amendment of California state law to extend access to shelter and housing programs to unemancipated youth under age 18 who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless or who have run away from home. Cal. Govt. Code §11139.3, as amended by SB198 (July 30, 2007).¹

Finally, it is important that youth's access to services, shelter, or housing is not limited based on the youth's particular living situation. Homeless service programs funded through the US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) are unable to serve youth who are staying temporarily with friends or relatives or in motels. This is because HUD defines the term "homeless" to exclude individuals staying temporarily in others' homes or in motels. However, due to the shortage of shelter space and exclusionary shelter rules, and to avoid sleeping outside, many unaccompanied youth stay in such temporary accommodations. Public schools, which are required by the education subtitle of the McKinney-Vento Act to serve youth staying temporarily in others' homes or in motels, have documented that a full 63 percent of homeless children and youth nationally live in such situations. None of those youth are eligible for HUD-funded services for homeless individuals.

Since current federal law limits HUD's services to hundreds of thousands of homeless youth who find temporary shelter in motels or with friends or relatives, other federal programs and state programs are even more critical resources for these young people. Therefore, state-funded shelter and housing programs must be available to all homeless youth and not limited based on their particular living situation.

¹A copy of the bill is available at http://info.sen.ca.gov/pub/07-08/bill/sen/sb_0151-0200/sb_198_cfa_20070709_132652_asm_comm.html.

Ensure that unaccompanied youth are not denied public benefits or social services, including medical and mental health care, due to the lack of parental consent.

Access to public benefits and social services, including medical and mental health care, is a critical step in ensuring that youth can attend and succeed in school. Unaccompanied youth are at an elevated risk for illnesses and mental health problems. Without access to health care, these difficulties will severely limit young people's ability to attend school consistently and to concentrate on their educational goals. Despite this reality, most unaccompanied youth legally are unable to access even the most basic health care without the consent of a parent.

Many states have statutes that permit access to certain kinds of medical and mental health care for unaccompanied youth. Commonly, youth are able to consent for treatment related to pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases. Some statutes allow youth to access a limited amount of mental health and substance abuse treatments. Most allow youth with children to consent for their children's health care (though, ironically, not their own). Despite these policies, most unaccompanied youth seeking general medical care and dental care will be refused treatment, because their state laws require the consent of a parent or legal guardian. Similarly, youth struggle to obtain medical insurance without the signature and advocacy of a parent. Policies to address these barriers and ensure that unaccompanied youth are not denied health care will make a significant difference in young people's physical and mental health.

The Alaska state legislature has recognized the reality that many young people are on their own and need to be able to access medical care without parental consent. Alaska state law provides that "a minor who is living apart from the minor's parents or legal guardian and who is managing the minor's own financial affairs, regardless of the source or extent of income, may give consent for medical and dental services for the minor."³⁰ Similar laws in other states would ensure that unaccompanied youth do not have to live without medical care.ⁱⁱ

Since they are not in the care of parents or guardians, homeless youth must meet their own basic needs. Public benefits such as food stamps, Supplemental Security Income and Temporary Aid to Needy Families (TANF) offer youth access to nutrition and income that can help them meet their basic needs. However, homeless youth face many barriers to accessing public benefits. For example, TANF programs have housing requirements that homeless youth may not be able to meet. Although a parental signature is generally not required, youth on their own are often refused benefits without their parent's signature.

Homeless youth may also lack information about the services for which they are eligible, transportation to benefits offices, and the capacity to advocate on their own behalf or obtain

ⁱⁱA copy of the statute is available at http://www.youthrights.net/index.php?title=Alaska_Consent_Age_for_Medical_Procedures.

representation to ensure they receive the services to which they are entitled. Sue Kanthak, the McKinney-Vento liaison from Rockford, Illinois noted that: “Minors are eligible for food stamps, a medical card, and a cash grant. But the public aid workers usually won’t give them the benefits. They just tell the youth to go home. Now, if a caseworker or I go with them, then they get the benefits.” Service providers need to know about current law and receive instructions regarding how to eliminate barriers for unaccompanied youth, to ensure they are not denied access.

Barriers that prevent homeless youth from accessing public benefits and social services are barriers to their educational success.

Ensure that unaccompanied youth have access to school-based resources to assist them in meeting their basic needs.

The public school system offers a wealth of resources that can help unaccompanied youth meet their basic needs, including:

- School meals (unaccompanied youth are automatically eligible for federal free breakfast and lunch programs and are not required to complete an application)³¹
- Resources of home economics classes, such as laundry and cooking facilities
- Showers
- Lockers
- Clothing banks
- Personal hygiene supplies
- Bus passes
- School counselors and social workers
- School nurses and on-campus health clinics
- Parenting classes, daycare, and other resources for teen parents

These resources are already in existence on thousands of school campuses. Making them accessible to unaccompanied youth does not require additional funding. It merely requires creativity and a willingness to “think outside the box” to support unaccompanied youth. Many schools have adopted policies and practices to provide young people with access to these resources. States should support such policies and practices that protect the dignity and privacy of unaccompanied youth by ensuring that youth can take advantage of services discreetly, often before or after school.

Some examples of schools opening up their pre-existing resources to homeless youth include:

- A high school in Bethel, Washington provides homeless youth with access to the school nurse, school showers and locker rooms before school; study space in the school library after school; and a supply of socks, underwear, toiletries, and school supplies in all the counseling centers, which youth access as needed.
- A high school in Cincinnati, Ohio lets homeless youth use school showers and do their laundry in the home economics class laundry facility, before school.
- Alameda Unified School District, California partnered with its County Public Health Department to open a full-service health clinic on every high school campus in the district. The clinics were funded by a grant from the California Department of Public Health to support such collaborations between county public health departments and public schools. They are open to anyone in the community, which allows them to help engage young people who are not attending school, as well as serving those who are enrolled. Each clinic contains information on school enrollment and at least one staff member who has received training on the McKinney-Vento Act, the needs of unaccompanied youth, and strategies to attract youth to school.³

ⁱⁱⁱ More information about the Alameda County School-Based Health Centers is available at <http://www.alamedafs.org/index.php?id=7> and <http://www.schoolhealthcenters.org/>.

2. If young people feel that school is a safe and supportive place for them, they will be much more likely to enroll, attend, and succeed in school.

“Your reputation precedes you. Students start to bring friends in. If you help them, they will come.”

Jonathan Zook, Teacher/Homeless Liaison
Project Return, Portland Public Schools, Oregon

The risks inherent in being homeless and on their own force unaccompanied youth to become experts at protecting themselves and fighting for their daily survival. Despite their desire to pursue education, they are very unlikely to engage in school if they perceive school as a dangerous place for them. In fact, many studies have found that homeless youth tend to distrust adults and rarely initiate contact with service providers.³² Implementing strategies to make schools safe and supportive environments for unaccompanied youth will attract youth to school and nurture their academic success.

The purpose of this section is to suggest policy initiatives relating to school safety specific to the needs and experiences of unaccompanied youth. As such, it focuses on three basic tactics that have been proven to be successful:

- Assigning each unaccompanied youth a consistent educational advocate or mentor in the school;
- Offering programs to make schools safe and welcoming for groups of young people who tend to be over-represented among unaccompanied youth, including young people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual and/or transgender, pregnant or parenting, older than traditional high school age, recovering from trauma, or recently returned to school after an extended period of nonattendance; and
- Clarifying state child welfare reporting requirements to ensure that youth do not hesitate to enroll in school due to fears that they will be referred to police or child welfare or taken into custody.

Each of these strategies is based on the same basic tenet, which educators and service providers working with unaccompanied youth highlight as the key to establishing partnerships with youth for their educational and personal success: schools must build trust with youth.

Assign each unaccompanied youth a consistent educational advocate or mentor in the school.

“Personal contact right from the outset is key. Youth who have every reason not to trust anyone find out they can trust people here. We are cheerleaders, advocates, and nags, depending on what the youth needs. And they find out we are on their side and want to work with them.”

Diane Demoski, School Nurse
Burchell High School, Matanuska-Susitna School District, Alaska

“Research shows that when at-risk youth are linked with a well-matched, screened, and trained mentor, they are likely to improve their academic achievement while decreasing their involvement with the juvenile justice system.”³³ Educators who have worked successfully with unaccompanied youth advise that assigning a consistent adult educational advocate or mentor to partner with each student from the moment she arrives at school until she graduates is the key to engaging youth and making school a safe and supportive place. Many school districts have implemented mentorship programs for unaccompanied youth. Their experience shows that mentoring significantly increases youth’s engagement, attendance, and success in school. State policies to encourage mentoring/educational advocates and state funding to expand existing programs for unaccompanied youth would advance this proven strategy.

Mentorship and educational advocacy programs for unaccompanied youth take various forms. For example, the following school district-based programs require little or no extra funding and have proven highly successful in supporting youth.

Location	Primary staff	Structure
Portland Public Schools, Oregon	McKinney-Vento homeless liaison	The liaison acts as an educational advocate for unaccompanied youth. The liaison is a certified teacher, with his office in the high school with the highest concentration of homeless youth. He keeps updated records on youth’s attendance and grades and checks students’ progress regularly. If a student’s attendance level or grades fall, the liaison intervenes to help the student get back on track.
Rockford School District, Illinois	Full-time tutor (funded through Title I, Part A)	Tutor works exclusively with homeless seniors, spending one day a week at each of the district’s five high schools. Like Portland’s liaison, the tutor reviews each student’s attendance records and grades and sets individual goals with the students. They meet weekly, so the students are constantly monitored and kept on track for graduation.
Burchell High School, Mat-Su School District, Alaska	Every adult at the high school	Each unaccompanied youth is assigned a mentor from among high school staff. No one works with more than fifteen students. The mentor follows the student’s attendance, progress, and needs on a daily basis.

Private, non-profit organizations have also partnered with school districts to create successful, consistent mentor programs. One example of such a program is Youth On Their Own in Tucson, Arizona.

Youth On Their Own (YOTO) is a community-based project that has spread to over 30 schools in Pima county and has assisted over 8,600 young people. YOTO works with unaccompanied youth ages 13 to 21, who are referred by school counselors, teachers, social service agencies, or their peers. Each youth partners with a mentor who remains with the youth until high school graduation. Working together, the mentor and youth identify a safe, long-term place to stay and concentrate on educational goals. YOTO provides clothing, hygiene items, funds for emergency assistance with basic needs or school fees, bus passes, health care, tutoring, jobplacement, collegescholarships, and a monthly stipend dependent on grades and school attendance. The program has a 90 percent graduation rate, in a county with a dropout rate of 57 percent.⁴

State education agencies also sponsor mentor programs, often as part of their efforts in dropout prevention and recovery. California's Pupil Motivation and Maintenance Program is an example of a highly successful state-sponsored mentoring program.

The defining feature of California's Pupil Motivation and Maintenance (M&M) Program is a dedicated dropout prevention specialist, or Outreach Consultant. Outreach Consultants create "success plans" for students, which set individual student goals and courses of instruction based on educational strengths and interests. They provide the kind of individual attention, consistency, and accountability youth need to focus on their educational goals despite the demands of their living situation. Outreach Consultants can also be a resource to draw out unaccompanied youth who have been hesitant to identify themselves as homeless.⁵

The California Department of Education has collected data demonstrating the success of Outreach Consultants:

"The employment of an outreach consultant has proven to be a remarkable support for some of the most challenged schools in California. Dropout rates in the high schools are down... Although the M&M program is focused on preventing school dropouts, it also has a significant impact on school-wide student achievement... In 2002, 65 percent of M&M schools in California met or exceeded their API [Academic Performance Index] target compared to 52 percent of California schools."³⁴

^{iv} For more information about Youth On Their Own, visit <http://www.yoto.org/>.

^v For more information about the M&M Program, visit <http://www.cde.ca.gov/ls/ai/dp/sb65progsumm.asp>.

McKinney-Vento liaisons have attested to its particular benefits for unaccompanied youth:

“Most Butte County high schools employ Outreach Consultants who provide outreach, referral, and support to any students in need on their campuses. They are not specifically hired to reach out to homeless or unaccompanied youth, but they are great resources for this population. Our County Office McKinney-Vento program works closely with all of the outreach consultants at the school sites.”

Meagan Meloy, Program Coordinator
Butte County Office of Education, California

The educational and professional success of unaccompanied youth would be greatly enhanced by a significant increase in funding for programs, such as those described, that provide unaccompanied youth with consistent, intensive mentoring/educational advocacy.

Develop programs and procedures to make schools safe and welcoming for groups of young people who tend to be over-represented among unaccompanied youth.

It is never easy to feel different from one’s peers. This is particularly true during adolescence. If young people feel unwelcome, marginalized, or uncomfortable in school, they are less likely to attend. Therefore, programs and procedures to welcome and support students who may feel isolated are important elements in enhancing their engagement and success in school.

Several subgroups of young people who sometimes stand out from their peers tend to be overrepresented among unaccompanied youth. For example, in one study 20 to 40 percent of homeless youth identified themselves as gay, lesbian, bisexual and/or transgender, compared to only 3-5 percent of the overall population.³⁵ Unaccompanied youth are also more likely than other youth to become pregnant, to have large gaps in school attendance, and to have experienced trauma both at home and while homeless.

Mentors and educational advocates can play a key role in welcoming students and assisting them to find their niche in the school community. Other helpful programs and procedures might include:

- Designating a safe, drop-in space where youth can go any time they feel overwhelmed or stressed, such as the school nurse’s office;
- Offering ongoing orientation activities throughout the school year, so youth entering after the start of the year can tour the school, meet key staff, be informed of school rules and expectations, and learn about academic and non-academic activities;
- Assigning new students a compatible peer mentor to orient them to school customs and activities;
- Establishing clubs and support groups for those who tend to be marginalized in school; and
- Conducting campus-wide sensitivity and awareness activities.

These and other measures to make schools safe and welcoming for unaccompanied youth will enhance their educational success.

Clarify state child welfare reporting requirements to ensure that youth do not hesitate to enroll in school due to fears that they will be referred to police or child welfare or taken into custody.

Every state has laws that require school personnel to contact law enforcement or child welfare services in certain circumstances, to protect students' health and safety. Without reasonable limitations, these reporting requirements erect significant barriers to the enrollment of unaccompanied youth. If young people believe that enrolling in school will result in them being taken into custody by the police or the child welfare system, there is little chance they will enroll in school. To eliminate this barrier, state reporting requirements must be clarified to ensure that unaccompanied youth are able to enroll in school without being referred to law enforcement or child welfare, unless there is an immediate danger to their health or safety.

In many cases school personnel could reasonably suspect that an unaccompanied youth has been neglected. However, such reporting often hurts youth, rather than helping. It is hard to imagine a youth desiring to be taken into police custody or returned by police to a home the youth has fled. Although one may assume that child welfare involvement would be less chilling than law enforcement, it is also important to recognize that a very high percentage of unaccompanied youth are or have been under the care of child welfare and feel the system has failed them. In that context, requiring schools to report unaccompanied youth to law enforcement or child welfare creates a nearly insurmountable barrier to school enrollment for many young people.

There are less hostile ways to provide protection and services to unaccompanied youth and preserve the rights of parents who truly desire to care for their children. One option would be to revise reporting requirements to clarify that school personnel should not refer unaccompanied youth to law enforcement or child welfare in the absence of an immediate danger to their health or safety. This would help eliminate young people's uneasiness about enrolling in school. At the same time, parents who fear their children have been abducted or want their children to come home can report the youth as missing. School personnel can check the missing children's database to see if a youth has been reported and, if so, report the youth to child welfare. That agency can then investigate the situation and protect the safety of the youth.

It is important to clarify that unaccompanied youth should not be presumed to be missing. If school staff suspect that a young person may have been reported missing, they can immediately investigate that suspicion by contacting the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children at www.missingkids.com or 1-800-THE-LOST. Some states have streamlined this process by requiring law enforcement and schools to work together to mark the school records of students reporting missing.

Whatever the policy, school staff should inform youth of reporting requirements upfront, so youth can choose what to disclose.

3. More consistent implementation of the McKinney-Vento Act, through increased personnel and uniform procedures, will facilitate the educational attendance and success of youth on their own.

The sole purpose of subtitle VII-B of the federal McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act is to improve educational access and success for children and youth experiencing homelessness. As such, the McKinney-Vento Act requires schools to enroll homeless youth immediately, even if they cannot produce documents typically required for enrollment, such as school records, proof of guardianship, immunizations, and proof of residency.³⁶ The Act gives youth the right to remain in one school the entire time they are homeless, with transportation provided, as long as it is in their best interest.³⁷ Even if their living situation forces them to move frequently, they do not have to change schools. To ensure these rights are implemented, the Act requires every state to establish an Office of the State Coordinator and every school district and county office of education to designate a homeless liaison.³⁸

Many provisions of the McKinney-Vento Act are designed to support the school attendance and success of unaccompanied youth, specifically. For example, states are required to create professional development and awareness programs for school personnel about runaway and homeless youth.³⁹ States and homeless liaisons are required to identify youth who are homeless, with particular emphasis on those who are not in school, and provide them access to appropriate secondary education and support services.⁴⁰

To address systemic barriers to educational success for homeless students, the McKinney-Vento Act requires both state and local educational agencies to revise their policies to eliminate barriers to the enrollment and retention of homeless young people in school.⁴¹ Therefore, state departments of education, county offices of education, and school districts throughout the state must ensure that unaccompanied youth can enroll in school and become positively engaged so that they remain there.

While states and school districts have made great strides in implementing the McKinney-Vento Act over the last five years, noncompliance continues. There is more work to be done to ensure that law becomes practice and unaccompanied youth are enrolled, attending, and succeeding in school. Policies to advance that goal include: increasing state and local McKinney-Vento staff; increasing states' technical assistance to and monitoring of local school districts; and enacting state policies for educational decision-making for unaccompanied youth.

Increase dedicated McKinney-Vento staff at the state level.

The Office of State Coordinator has many mandated duties, including providing technical assistance to all local educational agencies and ensuring they comply with the McKinney-Vento Act.⁴² In many states, the State Coordinator is responsible for other federal programs and does not have sufficient time or capacity to accomplish these duties. Depending on the size of the state and the number of school districts, it is difficult to imagine how one, part-time employee could fulfill the statutory duties of the State Coordinator.

Increase dedicated McKinney-Vento staff in local educational agencies.

The McKinney-Vento Act requires every local educational agency in the country to designate a homeless liaison.⁴³ The law does not require that the position be full-time. However, it enumerates a long list of legal responsibilities for the liaison, including ensuring that:

- “homeless children and youths are identified by school personnel and through coordination activities with other entities and agencies;
- “homeless children and youths enroll in, and have a full and equal opportunity to succeed in, schools of that local educational agency; [and]
- “(iii) homeless . . . youths receive educational services for which such . . . youths are eligible . . . and referrals to health care services, dental services, mental health services, and other appropriate services.”⁴⁴

While many homeless liaisons have developed model programs and been recognized as leaders in their field, others struggle to comply with their basic duties due to lack of time, training, or capacity. Particularly in areas with a higher concentration of homeless children and youth, full-time homeless liaisons would be able to do more outreach, reach more youth, ensure enrollment, connect youth with appropriate services, serve as mentors or educational advocates, and increase community collaborations.

Further, with more time to dedicate to the McKinney-Vento Act, homeless liaisons would be able to provide more technical assistance and training on school campuses. As McKinney-Vento liaisons have noted:

“In the traditional high school, the most important thing is that the staff has been trained and understands the challenges the youth are facing, and they don’t set up barriers to these kids every day. The principals, attendance officers, teachers and front office staff need to ‘get it’ and come at it from the right perspective.”

Karen Fessler

Increasing dedicated McKinney-Vento staff would require additional funding in many school districts. The state may encourage the use of funds reserved for homeless students under Title I, Part A of the No Child Left Behind Act to increase the capacity of homeless liaisons. However, an infusion of additional federal and state funding, at least to those school districts and county offices of education that are heavily impacted by homelessness, would allow more homeless liaisons to spend more time serving homeless youth.

Enhance state educational agencies' professional development and technical assistance on the McKinney-Vento Act and unaccompanied youth, so that it reaches every local educational agency in the state.

The McKinney-Vento Act requires State Coordinators to provide professional development and technical assistance to local educational agencies.⁴⁵ Further, the McKinney-Vento Act requires every state to enact "programs for school personnel (including principals, attendance officers, teachers, enrollment personnel, and pupil services personnel) to heighten the awareness of such personnel of the specific needs of runaway and homeless youths."⁴⁶

It may be unreasonable to expect a State Coordinator to visit every local educational agency in the state every year or to provide personal professional development about unaccompanied youth to every school district. However, statewide training and technical assistance can occur. Some state initiatives to meet this mandate include:

- Adequately staffing the State Coordinator's office;

- Adopting a state-level "train-the trainer" program, through which the State Coordinator provides a modest grant and a variety of McKinney-Vento training tools, including a Power Point presentation, video, and toolkit to designated trainers, accompanied by a workshop on key issues in raising awareness about homelessness, unaccompanied youth, and providing training on the McKinney-Vento Act;
- Enacting a state policy requiring all homeless liaisons to participate in at least one McKinney-Vento training annually, which includes information about unaccompanied youth;
- Enacting a state policy mandating that basic information about the McKinney-Vento Act and unaccompanied youth is included at least once a year in the ongoing, mandatory trainings of principals, school counselors, teachers, school security officers, child welfare and attendance officers, secretaries, school nurses, and other staff. The State Coordinator could provide professional development tools to facilitate these trainings; and
- Making good use of technology. (For example, in Indiana, a full-time State Coordinator supports the implementation of the McKinney-Vento Act in 335 school districts serving 7,547 identified homeless children and youth. To maximize the reach of her technical assistance efforts, the State Coordinator has developed a web-based training program, which allows her to share key information, track who is attending the training session, and give participants a quiz at the end to see if they were paying attention.)

The National Center for Homeless Education also offers web-based trainings on a variety of issues, at no cost.^{vi}

^{vi} Visit www.serve.org/nche for more information about the National Center for Homeless Education and their web-based trainings.

Increase states' monitoring of compliance with the McKinney-Vento Act statewide.

To increase statewide implementation of the McKinney-Vento Act, more local educational agencies must be monitored for compliance. Such monitoring could include desk monitoring of school district compliance, in which the State Coordinator reviews districts' policies to verify that they have eliminated barriers to the enrollment and retention of unaccompanied youth in school. It should also include site-visits with the specific purpose of monitoring compliance with the McKinney-Vento Act. The National Center for Homeless Education has developed standards and indicators for quality programs that can assist with monitoring.

Further, to maximize the breadth of monitoring, McKinney-Vento performance measures should be included in the monitoring of other programs. If the State Coordinator is allowed to train other members of the state's monitoring team, they could monitor compliance with basic McKinney-Vento requirements on a much larger number of monitoring visits. For example, McKinney-Vento monitoring could easily be incorporated into Title I monitoring. Such increased monitoring would improve McKinney-Vento Act compliance statewide.

Oregon includes some McKinney-Vento performance measures in special education monitoring.

Adopt statewide procedures for enrolling unaccompanied youth and for educational decision-making for youth without caregivers.

“You can set up lots of programs, but if people don’t have protocols and procedures in place to make sure unaccompanied youth can access them, it’s not much good.”

Cathy Requejo

Since unaccompanied youth by definition live apart from their parents and legal guardians, they generally attempt to enroll in school independently or with the assistance of a friend, relative or mentor. Under the McKinney-Vento Act, schools cannot turn unaccompanied youth away from school based on the lack of a parent or guardian.⁴⁷ To facilitate statewide implementation of this requirement, the McKinney-Vento Act mandates that states address enrollment delays caused by guardianship issues.⁴⁸ The most effective way for states to eliminate such enrollment delays is to establish uniform procedures for the enrollment of unaccompanied youth.

Several states have created caregiver’s enrollment forms to allow non-guardian adults who are taking care of youth to enroll them in school.⁴⁹ While these laws have streamlined school enrollment for unaccompanied youth with caregivers, they do not assist the many unaccompanied youth who are not in an adult’s care. The lack of state guidance regarding how schools should go about enrolling youth on their own leads to delays in enrollment and, tragically, to youth being turned away from school. A state law clarifying the right of unaccompanied youth to enroll in school and establishing uniform procedures for such enrollment would help ensure that young people are not denied entry into school.

For example, New York has passed an Education of Homeless Children statute, which establishes a “designator” to choose the school district and enroll the student in school. The definition of designator includes a parent, guardian, “the homeless child, if no parent or person in parental relation is available,” or “the director of a residential program for runaway and homeless youth... in consultation with the homeless child, where such homeless child is living in such program.”^{vii}

State laws establishing youth’s rights to enroll in school would be even more powerful if they included a liability shield, such that schools would be protected from liability by reason of enrolling the youth without parent or guardian consent. Unfortunately, many school administrators have turned youth away for fear of being sued by parents. A limited liability shield would help address this concern.

Once unaccompanied youth are in school, questions about educational decision-making often erect barriers to their participation in school activities. Generally, school procedures are based upon the fundamental assumption that a parent, guardian, or adult caregiver is present. They do

^{vii} N.Y. ED. LAW §3209(1)(b)(2). For more information about this statute, visit <http://nysteachs.org/faqs/unaccompanied.html> or <http://nysteachs.org/info-forms/laws-policies/state.html>.

not adequately address educational decision-making for youth on their own. State policies for educational decision-making for unaccompanied youth would help ensure youth can participate fully in school services and activities that normally require parental notification, signature, or consent, (e.g., special academic programs, extra-curricular activities, athletics, school-based health care, and field trips). In addition, states should enact procedures for appointing temporary surrogate parents for unaccompanied youth pursuant to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvements Act of 2004.

4. When schools adopt flexible policies and programs to accommodate the demands of homelessness and independence, they offer unaccompanied youth an environment where they can be more engaged and successful.

"I work weird hours and I don't really have a place to do anything. It makes it kind of hard to do work and turn it in."

Unaccompanied youth in California

"The key for us has been a huge variety of academic programs. There have to be many paths to success. Some youth do fine in a traditional high school program. Other kids need a change. The variety is fantastic."

Steve Brown, Director of Community Schools / Community Connections
Bethel School District, Washington

Unaccompanied youth share the characteristics of being homeless without their parents. However, beyond that status, they are as unique and varied as all young people. Their educational needs and interests also vary widely, from students who will experience success in traditional high schools and continue on to college, to those who prefer to pursue career and technical training, to those who are returning to school after a long absence and need more flexible alternatives. To permit unaccompanied youth to access the educational options that best meet their specific needs, schools must accommodate the realities and demands of homelessness and independence. Most importantly, such accommodations require flexibility.

For example, one immediate way for schools to accommodate the demands of homelessness is to ensure that unaccompanied youth do not face barriers to participating in the academic and non-academic services that are available. This requires creating flexible exceptions to enrollment deadlines and fees that highly mobile homeless youth cannot meet. Second, unaccompanied youth often struggle to earn credits in a traditional high school system. Adopting state policies to ensure that partial credits are awarded and accepted and establishing credit recovery programs can help address this need. Finally, youth whose experiences or responsibilities make attending a traditional high school difficult must have access to appropriate alternative programs.

Create flexible exceptions to enrollment and application deadlines and fees for unaccompanied youth for academic and non-academic school activities.

Many unaccompanied young people can benefit from special academic services such as supplemental education services, gifted and talented programs, and career and technical education. Non-academic activities, such as sports and clubs, are often critical for engaging young people in school and guiding them toward graduation. Therefore, it is important to ensure that unaccompanied youth can access all the academic and non-academic school activities for which they are eligible.

Unaccompanied youth face many barriers to full participation in school, including many that result from school policies that are not designed with unaccompanied youth in mind. For example, Principle 3 addressed the need for a statewide policy on educational decision-making for unaccompanied youth. Many school activities require parental notification, signature, or consent (e.g., field trips, certain academic programs or classes, extra-curricular activities, and athletics). In the absence of policies to address the participation of unaccompanied youth in such activities, there is a risk that youth will be denied access.

Enrollment and application deadlines also present barriers to unaccompanied youth's participation in a wide variety of academic and non-academic programs, such as charter schools and other alternative programs, supplemental education assistance, and athletics. Due to the instability of their living situations, many unaccompanied youth are highly mobile, changing communities and schools several times a year. Enrollment and application deadlines can effectively bar these youth from activities simply because they were not in the school or the community when the deadline passed.

This barrier could be addressed easily by a policy mandating that enrollment and participation deadlines cannot prevent unaccompanied youth from participating in classes, programs, and activities for which they are eligible. Open enrollment policies are critical for unaccompanied young people, so they can begin attending school and participating fully in school activities whenever they attempt to enroll.

For example, Texas has enacted such a policy for foster youth, which states that "a durational residence requirement may not be used to prohibit that child from fully participating in any activity sponsored by the school district."^{viii} A law applying this standard to homeless youth would help ensure that young people can participate fully in school.

Similarly, the high school athletic associations of Virginia, Delaware and other states have revised their participation policies to eliminate barriers to homeless youth. Such policies greatly facilitate implementation of the McKinney-Vento Act's requirement that homeless youth be allowed to participate fully in school activities immediately.^{ix}

Fees to participate in certain classes or activities also pose barriers to homeless youth. As they struggle to meet their basic needs, homeless youth rarely have money for extra costs such as athletic uniforms, lab fees, or school trips. When fees prevent youth from participating in school activities, school districts have responded in a variety of ways, including waiving fees, using funds reserved for homeless students under Title I, Part A of the No Child Left Behind Act, coordinating with community agencies to pay fees, and using donations. Such flexible practices ensure that homeless youth are not denied access to school services and activities due to their dire financial circumstances.

^{viii} Tex. Ed. Code §25.001(f), available at <http://www.utdanacenter.org/theo/laws/texascode.php>.

^{ix} Virginia High School League Policies 28-6-1 and 28-6-2. Virginia High School League, Inc. (2006). Handbook and Policy Manual, 2006-2007. Charlottesville VA: Author. Available at <http://www.vhsl.org/Handbook.pdf>. Delaware Interscholastic Athletic Association Policy 1008:2.2.1.6 and Policy 1009:2.2.1.8 and 2.4.2.6. Delaware Interscholastic Athletic Association. (2006). Official Handbook 2006-2008. Dover: Author. Available at http://www.doe.state.de.us/files/pdf/diaa_handbook200607.pdf

Adopting state policies to ensure partial credits are awarded and accepted and establishing credit recovery programs.

“Highly mobile youth are not served well by the semester system. A kid who loses stability for two weeks could fall so far behind that he loses the whole semester. Too many students are enrolled and told they have no chance of earning credits for a given semester because of late enrollment or lack of usable ‘exit’ grades from another school. This is setting kids up for failure and using the system as a bludgeon against the situations of these students.

“Increased flexibility will only help the students in these situations.”

Jonathan Zook

Due to their inherent instability, it can be very challenging for unaccompanied youth to earn credits and advance toward graduation in the traditional semester system. A short absence from school can lead to losing credit for the entire semester. A move from one school district to another can make it difficult for them to keep advancing toward graduation. Laws and policies to require school districts to award and accept partial credit are necessary to allow youth to piece together their educational experiences and graduate from high school.

In 2004, the state of California responded to this reality by enacting a novel law that requires schools to accept partial credit for coursework satisfactorily completed in another school. Where it has been implemented, this law has benefited homeless and other highly mobile students significantly. For example, Fresno Unified School District uses a computer database called Power School, which calculates and awards partial credits automatically. Teachers put student grades into Power School, and the database awards one credit when the student completes fifteen hours of work. Currently, every middle school and high school in Fresno is on-line, and elementary schools are in the process of adopting the database. Fresno has also developed detailed policies for awarding partial credits upon enrollment and withdrawal of highly mobile students and a simple credit verification form to facilitate the process.^x

Such laws can greatly benefit unaccompanied youth, whose mobility and daily struggle to meet their basic needs make it challenging to earn a full semester’s credit in one school. Unfortunately, implementation of partial credit laws may be inconsistent across a state.⁵⁰ Inter-district issues

^x Cal. Educ. Code §48645.5. For more information about this law, visit <http://www.abanet.org/child/rclji/education/ab490overview.pdf>. Fresno’s policies and additional information is available at <http://www.fresno.k12.ca.us/divdept/stafed/nd/training.html>. Fresno Unified School District Secondary Division Memo. Enrollment and Recording Partial Credit for Foster Students, Group Home Students and Homeless Students. March 24, 2004; reissued February 28, 2007.

appear to be a significant barrier to homeless students receiving their credits. One school district does not have the authority to hold another school district accountable; yet, without inter-district collaboration and accountability, the partial credit system cannot function.

“There needs to be someone who has more jurisdiction to hold stakeholders accountable. With youth assigned from out of county, we have trouble finding the units or documentation proving they should have some units. Worse yet, sometimes we don’t find them in enough time to stop the student from repeating a course. Once the student is gone, we can’t hold an out of county agency accountable. Often, we post credits, but don’t even know where to send the records, and no one asks.”

Ann-Maura Cervantes, Assistant Director of Student Services and School Attendance
Clovis Unified School District, California

State educational agencies could help ensure that unaccompanied youth and other highly mobile students receive partial credits by issuing statewide policies regarding how to calculate and accept partial credits, with specific protocols for inter-district records transfers and awards. To enhance its effect, the policy should make schools accountable for compliance.

The logical companion to the award of partial credits are credit recovery programs. These programs allow youth to fill in the gaps left by partial credits to obtain a full semester’s or year’s worth of credit. Further, by allowing youth to work at their own pace and outside typical school hours, credit recovery programs can greatly accelerate students’ graduation. Particularly for older unaccompanied youth, this flexibility can be the key to their success.

Commonly, credit recovery programs use accredited computer-based courses or written packets to award youth credits in the context of supervised independent study programs. They tend to be offered before or after normal school hours or during study hall periods, so students can participate simultaneously in a regular education program, a job, or other responsibilities. Importantly, the youth are enrolled in high school and can access all school activities and services, including regular classes, meals, mentors, counselors, nurses, tutoring, clubs and sports. A teacher provides support and structure, and youth complete the work at school. Those two elements are critical for many unaccompanied youth, who lack adult guidance and a quiet place to study.

Credit recovery programs are self-paced. Youth experiencing a time of great instability in their lives might work more slowly, while youth who are able to focus intensely on school can earn credits in a matter of weeks. Credit recovery programs are most successful if the computer courses and packets are adapted to match the student’s interests.

Ensure unaccompanied youth have access to alternative programs, as necessary to meet their needs.

“We have an alternative high school that works really well for many of our kids. They can go to school in three-hour chunks, either in the morning or afternoon. They attend a classroom with a teacher there to help them, but they work at their own pace, with packets or on the computer. They have a celebration every time a youth gets a credit. As soon as they get their credits, they graduate, but they still participate in our big, regular graduation ceremony in June.”

Sue Kanthak

Most unaccompanied youth have many more responsibilities than their housed peers, as they struggle to meet basic needs and make decisions without parental guidance. In some cases, these responsibilities may make attending a traditional high school difficult. Particularly those young people who are working full-time, pregnant or parenting, or older than typical high school students may prefer alternative education programs. For them to meet their educational goals, they must have access to alternative programs that meet their needs.

Of course, since unaccompanied youth’s educational strengths and needs vary greatly, it would be highly inappropriate for educators or service providers to presume that an unaccompanied youth cannot succeed in a traditional high school or would prefer an alternative program. For this reason the McKinney-Vento Act prohibits segregated schools for homeless youth or policies that place youth into education programs based on their housing status, rather than their specific educational needs. Unaccompanied youth should be informed of all available options and assisted in accessing the program that can best meet their preferences, needs, goals and interests.

Ensuring access requires adopting flexible exceptions to enrollment and application deadlines and fees for unaccompanied youth, as described above. However, it also requires ensuring that alternative programs have sufficient capacity to serve all the unaccompanied youth who need them. It also requires adequate monitoring to ensure high quality among alternative programs.

Some of the alternative programs that have successfully served unaccompanied youth include:

- Evening High Schools: provide high school curriculum after normal school hours.
- Alternative High Schools: provide high school curriculum to youth at-risk of not graduating from high school and offer flexible school hours, career orientation, work-study, and other specialized services.
- Career Technical Education: teach youth skills that can help them find stable employment
- Work Experience programs: provide paid or unpaid on-the-job experiences for secondary school students through training agreements with employers.

- **Workforce Development:** create partnerships with the Workforce Investment Act and other programs to provide high school credit for work experiences.
- **Middle College High Schools:** allow students to attend classes at flexible hours and earn high school and community college credits simultaneously, in a personalized environment, generally located on college campuses.
- **Portable Assisted Study Sequence (PASS) program:** self-contained, semi-independent study courses that enable students to earn high school credits while accommodating challenges of scheduling and mobility.

Most of these programs share certain key features, including a high degree of individualized support, flexible scheduling, an emphasis on career education and employment, rolling enrollment, and the freedom for students to work at their own pace. Further investment in these and other alternative programs would provide many unaccompanied youth the opportunity to meet their educational and professional goals.

5. Many unaccompanied youth have become disengaged from school and must be drawn back in by caring, persistent adults.

As many as three quarters of unaccompanied youth leave school without graduating.⁵¹ Clearly, more efforts are desperately needed to help unaccompanied youth remain in school and to reengage those who have been forced to leave. Such efforts are also required by federal law.⁵²

Many states have developed dropout prevention and recovery programs. However, more focus on unaccompanied youth is clearly needed. States could generate that focus by funding more full-time homeless liaisons, as suggested in Principle 3, whose duties include identifying and enrolling unaccompanied youth in school. States could also require existing dropout recovery programs to receive specific training on homelessness and conduct specific outreach to unaccompanied youth. Finally, states could establish a new dropout recovery program targeted to unaccompanied youth.

To engage unaccompanied youth in school, any dropout recovery program must include hands-on outreach in the community by adults who are trained in effective communication with homeless youth, the needs of unaccompanied youth, and the services and activities schools can provide. These "Engagement Specialists" must be prepared to meet young people where they are and must be equipped to respond to their most urgent needs immediately, either through resources at school or collaborations with the community. Engagement Specialists who provide tangible, immediate benefits to meet the needs the youth expresses are more likely to build the trust necessary to reengage youth in their education.

Most importantly, Engagement Specialists must listen to youth:

"Well-intentioned people sometimes come with their perspective of what the needs are, or ought to be. They put their energies into working toward what they believe the youth needs, instead of asking the youth and putting their energies into working with the youth as a team to meet what the youth identifies as his or her needs."

Cathy Requejo

Many school districts have found success partnering with Peer Outreach Workers, who go to skate parks, campgrounds, convenience stores, fast food restaurants, parks, and other areas where youth on their own can be found. If these Peer Outreach Workers feel comfortable and successful in their school program, they will recommend it to other young people. This word-of-mouth publicity has been one of the most effective strategies to reengage youth in school.

As soon as a young person is ready to return to school, the Engagement Specialist must have the ability to connect the student immediately with the educational environment that is appropriate for her preference, needs, and interests. If youth must wait to reenter school, they may lose faith, or they may redirect their energies back to basic survival. Therefore, unaccompanied youth must be exempt from waiting lists or enrollment deadlines. The student should also immediately be involved in programs to provide support for reentry and ongoing guidance, such as mentors and education advocates.

McKinney-Vento Act homeless liaisons with experience drawing unaccompanied youth back into school offer the following tips for Engagement Specialists:

“You have to build trust. It takes time. The youth are not used to having people stand by them, so they will challenge you and wait for you to abandon them, too. So be as unconditional as you can with your support and commitment. You may not agree at all with the decisions they are making, but try not to judge them. Be honest and talk to them like real people.

“Ask simple questions, like, how are you? Did you do your homework today? Carry bus tokens and referral information in your purse, so you can always provide something tangible for the kids. Value their natural abilities—take the time to find out who they are, and then find outlets for them. Show them they have something to contribute back to society, by organizing service projects and advocacy activities for them.

“See yourself as their teammate, not the boss.”

Karen Fessler

“When choosing a school program, talk with youth about their needs, strengths, experiences, and goals. Then make sure they have immediate access. Be consistent, tangible and reliable, and word will travel. Kids will come.”

Jonathan Zook

“First, listen. Then, let them know the services that are available related to what they’ve told you about their situation. Name three specific services you will provide them or things you will do for them immediately, and tell them you will continue to be engaged together to help them meet their goals. Then say, ‘I know it’s difficult engaging with adults, so if you hear something from an adult that doesn’t sound or feel right to you, or conflicts with what I’m telling you or what you believe or know to be right or true, call me, and we’ll work through it together.’

“And then, follow through.”

Cathy Requejo

6. Improvements in child welfare policies and practices are essential for youth to achieve their educational goals.

“They need the freedom to make the mistakes that typical adolescents make, without homelessness being the consequence.”

Deanne Pearn, Director of Community Relations
First Place, Oakland, California

“Don’t just place us, help us! And follow up on us!”
Homeless youth in Chicago⁵³

Parental abuse and neglect is a primary cause of homelessness among unaccompanied youth. Therefore, a very significant number of unaccompanied youth should have received, are receiving, or have received services from the child welfare system.

First, unaccompanied youth who should have received services are those who ran away from abusive homes or were forced out of their homes by neglectful parents without ever receiving assistance from the child welfare system. Although the child welfare system’s mandate is to care for children and youth who are victims of parental abuse or neglect, many homeless youth are never served.

Other unaccompanied youth received services and remain under the care of the state, but with dubious outcomes. Statistics reveal that many youth abscond from child welfare placements they perceive as inappropriate, choosing life on the street over the services child welfare offers. Studies show that of youth who are in foster care at age 16, one in five “exit” foster care by running away.⁵⁴ That one in five older youth run away from child welfare services indicates a failure of the system to serve such young people appropriately. A study in New York found that young people who ran away from child welfare are even more at risk for homelessness than those who age out when they turn 18.⁵⁵

Finally, many studies have shown that being in the care of the child welfare system leads many youth into future homelessness. Nationally, 26 percent of homeless adults and 34 percent of homeless young people aged 20-24 spent time in the care of the child welfare system. Among homeless teenagers aged 18-19, the figure jumps to 61 percent: six of every ten homeless 18- and 19-year olds have been in the care of the child welfare system.⁵⁶ This is grossly out of proportion with the 3 percent of people in the general population who have spent time in the child welfare system.

These statistics demonstrate that the child welfare system nationally fails to combat youth homelessness successfully and fails to prepare many of its wards for independence. Even upon completing their eligibility for services, many do not have a place to live when they leave care.

Strong state policies are essential to help sever the connection between child welfare services and subsequent, or simultaneous, homelessness. For example, more rapid-response family crisis services

in abusive and neglectful home situations could prevent some youth from needing to run away or being forced out of their homes. These services should concentrate on populations known to be overrepresented among unaccompanied youth, such as lesbian, gay, bisexual and/or transgender youth and pregnant teenagers. As poverty is a significant contributing factor to abuse and neglect, programs to support the economic well-being and stability of families would also alleviate pressure at home and allow more youth to remain with their families rather than become homeless.

Policies and procedures designed to reduce the number of youth who abscond from child welfare placements are critical. These should include policies to create more appropriate placements for older youth, strengthen connections with supportive adults, and supervise placements more closely. However, the most important element of such policies is to require that young people's wishes be given significant consideration in selecting placements. Essentially, the youth must consider that child welfare services are the best option. Unfortunately, statistics indicate that one out of five young people chooses homelessness over child welfare.

In addition, child welfare agencies must improve transition planning for youth, including discharge planning and independent living skills. Transition planning should begin early and provide intensive, concrete planning and services.

Finally, the child welfare system should also shoulder greater responsibility for the educational achievement of their wards. For example, when making out-of-home placements, child welfare agencies should actively strive to promote educational stability. The choice of placement always should be based in part on its proximity to the youth's school. Additional state policies to support those goals would help ensure that foster youth can continue to advance in their education.

Notably, many federal, state and local programs exist to support the independence and education of foster youth. Given the significant overlap between foster care and homelessness, these programs offer services of great value to both groups. Opening these programs to all unaccompanied youth, those who have a history of child welfare involvement as well as those who do not, would increase the services available to youth on their own. Most unaccompanied youth who have not received child welfare services should have received them, as they either fled their homes to escape abuse or have been kicked out of their homes by neglectful parents. Therefore, restricting important services to those who have been involved in the system is an artificial distinction that denies appropriate services to young people who need them.

7. Any effort to support unaccompanied youth's educational success will be more effective if all youth-serving agencies coordinate their efforts, accept joint responsibility for outcomes, and involve young people as active partners.

"Interagency collaboration is essential to developing effective services for homeless students. Issues such as education, healthcare, mental health, housing, and alcohol or other drug abuse can be addressed through a coordinated, multidisciplinary approach."⁵⁷

Joane Heflin, Council for Exceptional Children

"If we're talking only to the adults in their lives and not to them, we're failing."

Cathy Requejo

In their quest to meet their basic needs, unaccompanied youth may seek help from a wide variety of public and private agencies. For example, there are 339 federal programs serving disadvantaged youth in 12 different federal departments. These services and target populations frequently overlap. This federal fragmentation translates into state and local fragmentation, as state and local governments receive the bulk of federal funding through a variety of different state and local agencies. "The fragmentation of federal youth policy is compounded by fragmented state spending which leaves local communities piecing together program dollars from a wide variety of funding streams, each with its own regulatory and reporting requirements."⁵⁸

Unfortunately, few agencies other than schools design their procedures with youth's educational success in mind. To obtain services, youth are generally forced to travel to several different offices. This may take time away from work or school and entail significant transportation expenses. Since different agencies have different application processes, youth are forced to explain personal and often painful details to many different caseworkers and complete countless forms. Young people may feel the need to miss school to deal with bureaucratic demands so their basic needs can be met.

Collaborations enable agencies to work together to craft more comprehensive strategies to help homeless youth meet their basic needs and achieve long-term self-sufficiency. Broad-based collaborations can also help young people navigate the maze of agencies by supplying more integrated services, cutting down on paperwork, and reducing delays in service provision. In addition, collaborative efforts can increase efficiency and reduce duplication of services, which can translate into an expansion of services. For all these reasons, the (then) US General Accounting Office recommends that programs with similar goals, target populations and services be coordinated, consolidated or streamlined as appropriate, to ensure that goals are consistent and that program efforts are mutually reinforcing.⁵⁹

Collaboration Between the Education and Housing Systems

Among the most important collaborative partners for schools are emergency and transitional shelters, independent living programs, and affordable housing providers. The McKinney-Vento Act requires state and local educational agencies to collaborate with such programs.⁶⁰ However, such coordination frequently does not occur. This may be due in part to the lack of time, training, and capacity necessary to initiate collaboration among homeless liaisons. The Runaway and Homeless Youth Act also requires its shelters and transitional living programs to coordinate with homeless liaisons.⁶¹ However, other housing programs generally do have similar requirements.

Several simple policies could help ensure that shelter and housing providers support the educational success of youth in their care. For example, federal or state funding or licensing regulations could require shelters and housing agencies to post notices of students' rights under the McKinney-Vento Act, to explain those rights to young people upon intake, and to assist students in exercising those rights. Funding and licensing procedures could also impose a degree of accountability on shelter and housing providers for the school enrollment and attendance of young people in their care, while ensuring that such policies do not restrict shelter access for young people who may be out of school but are in need of shelter.

Shelters, independent living programs and street outreach programs could also be required to engage in ongoing coordination with schools in their area.^{xi} Such coordination can facilitate school enrollment and attendance for young people.

For example, Eureka City Schools and local shelters in California jointly developed a procedure for assessing youth's educational needs and goals upon intake to the shelter. Shelter case managers complete an education referral form and immediately fax it to the homeless liaison. The liaison travels to shelters to conduct school enrollment on-site and offer services and referrals.

"As soon as a youth checks into one of these shelters, the person doing the intake faxes me the education referral form. I then immediately contact the kid and go enroll and/or deliver services, like backpacks, school shoes, and connections to school and community services."

Maureen Chase, Director of the Homeless Education Project
Eureka City Schools

In Anchorage, Alaska, a dynamic collaboration between one of the school district's homeless liaisons and shelter and housing providers led to a protocol that actually increases homeless youth's access to housing. The homeless liaison and youth complete a form stating that the liaison identified the youth as homeless, the liaison forwards the form to the housing agency, and the youth receives a priority for housing.^{xii}

^{xi} Federal law already requires state and local educational agencies to collaborate with such programs. 42 USC. §§11432(f)(4)&(5), 11432(g)(5)&(6).

^{xii} For more information about the homeless priority, visit http://www.ahfc.state.ak.us/rental/application_instructions.cfm

State Level Collaborations

The McKinney-Vento Act contains specific coordination requirements for states, including coordinating and collaborating with providers of services to unaccompanied youth, such as domestic violence agencies, shelter operators, transitional housing facilities, runaway youth centers, and transitional living programs for youth.⁶² As suggested under Principle 3 above, it is important that the State Coordinator's Office have sufficient staff to accomplish the coordination required by law and necessary for unaccompanied youth to meet their educational goals.

State-level collaboration can streamline young people's access to a wide variety of critical services. "Coordination allows the state to reduce or avoid duplication, improve service delivery, and address service gaps by departments."⁶³ An increase in state-level coordination would facilitate service delivery to youth, providing them with many of their basic needs and promoting their educational success.

Many states have developed strong interagency collaborative structures to coordinate youth policy and service delivery to homeless and other disadvantaged youth. For example:

In 2002, Colorado passed the Homeless Youth Services Act "to create a vehicle through which services to homeless youth statewide could be improved by coordinating current services and facilitating interagency collaboration to identify gaps, remove barriers, improve access and share information."^{xiii}

In Oregon, the Governor created a 24-member Ending Homelessness Advisory Council with a specific mandate "to coordinate programs relating to homeless youth."^{xiv}

The Maine Children's Cabinet has created a Homeless Children's Initiative, which led to passage of an Act to Help Homeless Young People Return to Home or Safe Living Situations in 1999.^{xv} The Act mandated the development of comprehensive community plans for youth who become homeless.

Private, non-profit organizations can play an important role in supporting state-level collaboration and ensuring that the voices and wisdom of youth are part of the conversation.

^{xiii} Office of Homeless Youth Services. (2005). 2004 Annual Report. Available at http://www.cdhs.state.co.us/shhp/Documents/2004_Annual_Report_OHYS_final.doc.

^{xiv} State Interagency Council to End Homelessness and Interagency Council on Hunger and Homelessness. Oregon Executive Order 06-05, April 4, 2006. Available at <http://governor.oregon.gov/Gov/pdf/eo0605.pdf>.

^{xv} Resolve 55. LD 2181. "Resolve, to Help Homeless Young People Return to Home or Safe Living Situations." Effective June 9, 1999. Available at <http://maine.gov/cabinet/03StateHomeless.htm>.

The Youth Empowerment Program of the Coalition on Homelessness and Housing in Ohio has developed a model state-level collaboration, led by youth. The State Youth Board, the Youth Housing Committee (which includes all youth-serving state agencies) and the state coalition on homelessness and poverty have developed a list of common goals and are working together to meet the needs of youth from high school to age 24.

“We’ve spent the last seven years developing this. Education is a key piece: any homeless agency that serves youth under 18 and receives state money has to demonstrate that they partner with schools. Also, any agency receiving state money has to attend at least one annual youth issues training that covers educational rights and needs. 260 people participated in our last training.”

Angela Lariviere, Youth Advocacy Director
Coalition on Homelessness and Housing in Ohio (COHHIO)^{xvi}

Local Level Collaborations

Broad, multi-agency coordination on the local level is also essential to ensure that unaccompanied youth can enroll in, attend, and succeed in school. These collaborations streamline service delivery for homeless youth. They can also support schools’ efforts to identify homeless youth, conduct outreach, and support youth’s enrollment, attendance, and success in school. Some of the myriad agencies that must be brought to the table include:

- School districts and county offices of education
- Emergency and transitional shelters and independent living programs
- Street outreach programs
- Housing authorities and other providers of permanent, affordable housing
- Child welfare agencies
- Social service departments
- County health and mental health departments
- Mayors and city governments
- Continua of Care funded by the US Department of Housing and Urban Development
- Family reunification services
- Legal services providers
- Juvenile justice and juvenile probation
- Faith-based organizations
- Food banks
- Workforce Investment Act services

^{xvi} For more information about the Youth Empowerment Program, visit <http://www.cohhioyep.org/>.

Colleges and universities
Community organizations
Hotlines for youth and homeless individuals
Businesses and the chamber of commerce
Community foundations

Many local communities have developed highly successful collaborations to support homeless youth. Portland, Oregon and Bangor, Maine offer two examples.

Portland, Oregon's Homeless Youth Continuum, a collaboration among three private agencies and Multnomah County, is considered to be a national model of excellence. In 1998, Multnomah County redesigned its homeless youth services because of a report citing a fragmented and uncoordinated service delivery system and a lack of accountability for youth outcomes. The new configuration resulted in the forming of a "Continuum" of services for homeless youth with coordinated services, a shared data collection system, and shared outcomes. The three agencies share:

- A centralized triage process — one screening shared by all partners, with youth agreeing to cooperate with all the agencies involved;
- A central database that applies to all agencies and is able to evaluate system outcomes;
- Shared best practice philosophies about goals, methods and outcomes; and
- A comprehensive continuum of support, with partners providing treatment programs for addiction and mental health.^{xvii}

^{xvii} For more information about the Homeless Youth Continuum, visit [http://www.lwvrv.org/pdf_docs/homeless-youth percent202006.pdf](http://www.lwvrv.org/pdf_docs/homeless-youth%20percent202006.pdf) and read the 2006 report of the League of Women Voters of Oregon Education Fund, Oregon's Homeless Youth.

Bangor, Maine was the birthplace of another national model, the Rapid Response Program. Created with an initial \$150,000 funding stream from the state legislature, Rapid Response brings together over 25 state and local agencies, both public and private, to work as a team to provide intensive intervention within the first 72 hours of a youth's homelessness. The program focuses on providing stable housing, keeping the youth in the same community and school, and delivering family intervention, support, and mediation in a search for long-term solutions.

An independent evaluation of the program by the University of Maine School of Social Work found stunning results. The program resulted in significant decreases in drug and alcohol use, victimization, suicide, gang involvement, police involvement, pregnancy and prostitution; overall health and well-being were significantly improved; and school attendance and success were so profoundly impacted that 100 percent of the youth served were enrolled in school or working and functioning well. The Rapid Response Program is now spreading across the state of Maine.^{xviii}

Local level collaborations can streamline service delivery and lead to policies and practices to support the educational success of unaccompanied youth.

As part of such extensive collaborative efforts or on their own, memoranda of understanding among agencies to address barriers to information-sharing can help all agencies work together to meet youth's needs and keep each other apprised on educational progress and warning signs. Information-sharing is a strategy to ensure that all service providers, and particularly educators, have the information they need to support youth's educational success. Many agencies have created protocols to permit the sharing of information pertinent to education, while adopting strong policies to protect youth's privacy.

^{xviii} For more information about Rapid Response, visit <http://maine.gov/cabinet/03RegionalHomeless.htm>.

For example, the Florida Legislature passed a law requiring that the Department of Children and Families (DCF) and school districts establish information-sharing protocols.^{xix} As a result, 33 school districts have agreed to provide school reports and transcripts to DCF; 27 counties agreed to increase efforts to gain consent from the natural parents, legal guardians or the court to share school records; 31 counties agreed to improve technology to facilitate the efficient sharing of information; in 15 counties, DCF provides schools with a regularly updated electronic list of children in care; and school districts in 23 counties agreed to provide the DCF information about available school services.^{xx} To evaluate the impact of information-sharing, Broward County is currently developing a comprehensive data collection and research protocol to assess the effectiveness of the interagency agreements.

Youth as Partners

Young people should be active participants in all youth-serving efforts. Unaccompanied youth are the most experienced and well-informed experts available regarding their own strengths, challenges, needs and goals.

“Young people have a lot to contribute. They bring energy and fresh and unique perspectives; they may offer ideas and solutions that have not been considered, or offer a new approach to an old idea. Youth also bring a unique range of knowledge about youth issues.”⁶⁴

In addition to benefiting the collaborations, service providers, and youth receiving the services, youth involvement also contributes to the self-esteem and success of those who participate. For example, the homeless young people who participate in the Youth Empowerment Program (YEP) of the Coalition on Homelessness and Housing in Ohio (explained above) tend to experience more educational success than their peers. Two YEP youth have even received national awards for their individual contributions to the needs of homeless young people.

Many states have established vehicles to involve youth directly in policymaking and youth-serving efforts. A survey of each state’s activities to ensure the active participation of young people in youth policymaking is available in the publication, “Involving Youth in Policymaking and Coordinating Youth Policy: State-Level Structures in California and Other States,” available at <http://www.library.ca.gov/crb/05/05/05-005.pdf>.

^{xix} Florida Statute §39.0016, available at http://www.flsenate.gov/statutes/index.cfm?mode=View percent20Statutes&SubMenu=1&App_mode=Display_Statute&Search_String=39.0016&URL=CH0039/Sec0016.htm.

^{xx} For more information about information-sharing between DCF and Florida school districts, read: Moore, A and Williams, K. (2007). *Interagency Agreements: Improving Educational Outcomes for Florida’s Children in Foster Care*. Coral Gables, FL: University of Miami School of Law, Children & Youth Law Clinic. The report is available at <http://www.law.miami.edu/pdf/728.pdf>.

CONCLUSION

The preceding Principles offer strategies to guide national, state and local policymakers; school districts, and service providers in their efforts to ensure that unaccompanied youth can meet their educational goals. They encompass a continuum of strategies to meet youth's basic needs; increase enrollment, attendance and success in school; and reengage young people who have left school. Each has proven successful in helping unaccompanied youth meet their educational and professional goals. However, a meaningful, long-term initiative to enable unaccompanied youth to achieve their educational and professional goals will require significant advances in all of the seven areas highlighted and the active participation of young people.

APPENDIX A

The following individuals generously shared their time and expertise with the author of this report. The key findings and strategies contained herein are largely the fruit of their creativity and commitment.

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Footnotes

¹ A copy of the bill is available at http://info.sen.ca.gov/pub/07-08/bill/sen/sb_0151-0200/sb_198_cfa_20070709_132652_asm_comm.html.

² A copy of the statute is available at http://www.youthrights.net/index.php?title=Alaska_Consent_Age_for_Medical_Procedures.

³ More information about the Alameda County School-Based Health Centers is available at <http://www.alamedafs.org/index.php?id=7> and <http://www.schoolhealthcenters.org/>.

⁴ For more information about Youth On Their Own, visit <http://www.yoto.org/>.

⁵ For more information about the M&M Program, visit <http://www.cde.ca.gov/ls/ai/dp/sb65progsumm.asp>.

⁶ N.Y. ED. LAW §3209(1)(b)(2). For more information about this statute, visit <http://nysteachs.org/faqs/unaccompanied.html> or <http://nysteachs.org/info-forms/laws-policies/state.html>.

⁷ Tex. Ed. Code §25.001(f), available at <http://www.utdanacenter.org/theo/laws/texascode.php>.

⁸ Virginia High School League Policies 28-6-1 and 28-6-2. Virginia High School League, Inc. (2006). Handbook and Policy Manual, 2006-2007. Charlottesville VA: Author. Available at <http://www.vhsl.org/Handbook.pdf>. Delaware Interscholastic Athletic Association Policy 1008:2.2.1.6 and Policy 1009:2.2.1.8 and 2.4.2.6. Delaware Interscholastic Athletic Association. (2006). Official Handbook 2006-2008. Dover: Author. Available at http://www.doe.state.de.us/files/pdf/diaa_handbook200607.pdf.

⁹ Cal. Educ. Code §48645.5. For more information about this law, visit <http://www.abanet.org/child/rclji/education/ab490overview.pdf>. Fresno's policies and additional information is available at <http://www.fresno.k12.ca.us/divdept/stafed/nd/training.html>. Fresno Unified School District Secondary Division Memo. Enrollment and Recording Partial Credit for Foster Students, Group Home Students and Homeless Students. March 24, 2004; reissued February 28, 2007.

¹⁰ For more information about the homeless priority, visit http://www.ahfc.state.ak.us/rental/application_instructions.cfm.

¹¹ Office of Homeless Youth Services. (2005). 2004 Annual Report. Available at http://www.cdhs.state.co.us/shhp/Documents/2004_Annual_Report_OHYS_final.doc.

¹² State Interagency Council to End Homelessness and Interagency Council on Hunger and Homelessness. Oregon Executive Order 06-05, April 4, 2006. Available at <http://governor.oregon.gov/Gov/pdf/eo0605.pdf>.

¹³ Resolve 55. LD 2181. "Resolve, to Help Homeless Young People Return to Home or Safe Living Situations." Effective June 9, 1999. Available at <http://maine.gov/cabinet/03StateHomeless.htm>.

¹⁴ For more information about the Youth Empowerment Program, visit <http://www.cohhioyep.org/>.

¹⁵ For more information about the Homeless Youth Continuum, visit http://www.lwvrv.org/pdf_docs/homeless-youthpercent202006.pdf and read the 2006 report of the League of Women Voters of Oregon Education Fund, Oregon's Homeless Youth.

¹⁶ For more information about Rapid Response, visit <http://maine.gov/cabinet/03RegionalHomeless.htm>.

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