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Youth Experiencing Homelessness

California's Education System for K–12 Inadequately Identifies and Supports These Youth

Background

To address challenges that youth experiencing homelessness may face, federal law requires states to ensure that these youth have equal access to the same free, appropriate public education. Further, states receive federal funds to identify these youth and provide services to enable them to enroll in, attend, and succeed in school. The Department of Education (Education) oversees and administers the State's education and local education agencies (LEAs)—school districts, charter schools, and county offices of education—designate local liaisons who identify youth experiencing homelessness and provide them with educationally related support services. In the 2017–18 academic year, LEAs identified nearly 270,000 unaccompanied youth and families with children experiencing homelessness, or about 4 percent of the State's K–12 population.

Key Findings

- LEAs have not always ensured that youth experiencing homelessness have the access to education and the level of services needed to succeed academically. During academic year 2017–18, these youth were chronically absent, suspended from school, and dropped out of school at twice the rate of their peers.
- LEAs are not doing enough to identify and report youth who are experiencing homelessness during academic years 2015–16 through 2017–18.
 - » While most homeless education experts use 10 percent of economically disadvantaged youth as a benchmark for identifying youth who may be experiencing homelessness during an academic year, most of California's LEAs identified less than 5 percent of such youth as experiencing homelessness.
 - » Four of the six LEAs we visited identified 3 percent or fewer of their economically disadvantaged students as experiencing homelessness.
- Most of the LEAs we visited used ineffective methods to identify youth experiencing homelessness.
 - » None adequately trained staff to ensure they had information to identify these youth.
 - » Only one disseminated information related to their homeless education programs in public places frequented by youth experiencing homelessness.
 - » Two did not provide annual housing questionnaires to identify these youth.
- Education's oversight of the State's homeless education program is inadequate.
 - » It monitors less than 1 percent of all LEAs' homeless education programs each year.
 - » It does not leverage data it collects to identify and provide guidance to LEAs that do not effectively identify youth experiencing homelessness.
 - » It claimed that it did not have enough resources to properly oversee the program, but had not conducted a staffing analysis to determine resource needs.

Our Key Recommendations

- To ensure the State identifies youth experiencing homelessness, the Legislature should do the following:
 - » Require LEAs to distribute annual housing questionnaires to all families and youth, and ensure staff who provide services to youth experiencing homelessness receive annual training on the program.
 - » Require Education to develop and implement a risk-based LEA monitoring plan that focuses on those LEAs that may be at greater risk of underidentifying youth experiencing homelessness.
- LEAs should ensure staff who provide services to youth experiencing homelessness are trained on homeless education program laws and best practices, and distribute information about educational rights of youth experiencing homelessness in public places frequented by families of such youth.
- Education should ensure that all LEAs receive necessary guidance and training, update all guidance documents to reflect current best practices, and ensure LEAs receive revised documents. It should also complete a staffing analysis to determine resource needs for the program.