



Looking Back to Plan Ahead

A Review of the School District of Philadelphia's Report on
Students Experiencing Homelessness, Part 1



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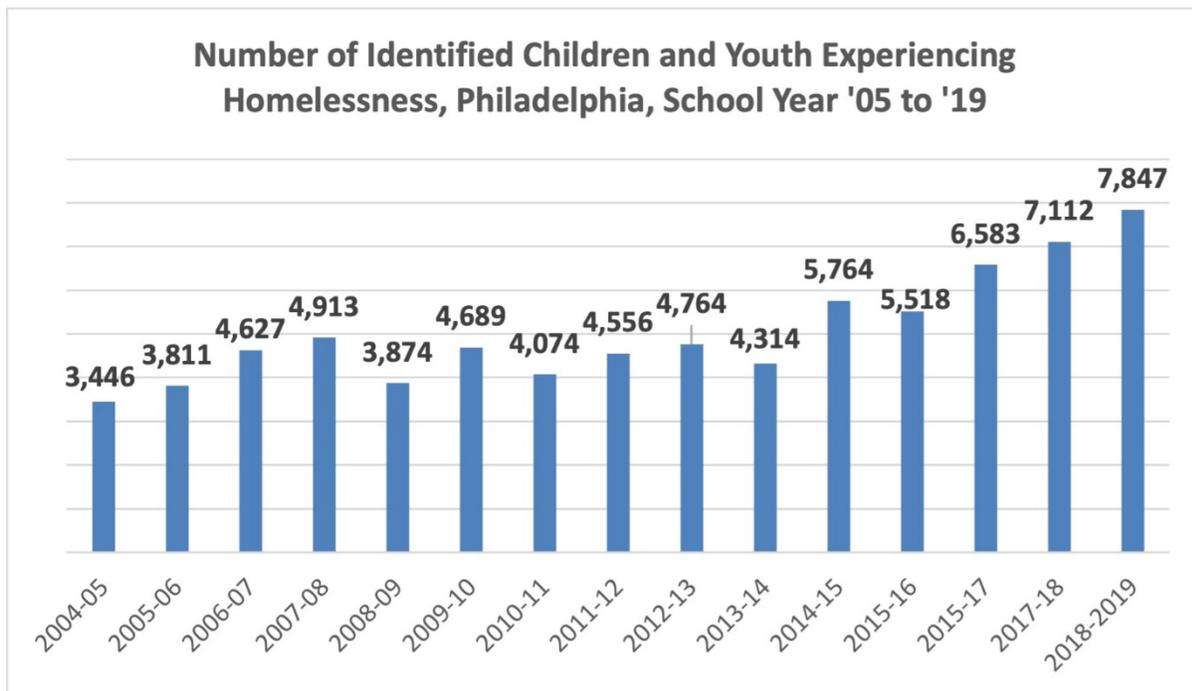


Figure 1 Number of Identified Children and Youth Experiencing Homelessness, Philadelphia, School Years '05 to '19

This publication is Part I in a series of reports People’s Emergency Center (PEC) will publish in 2021 called *Looking Back to Plan Ahead*. Part I looks at information from the School District of Philadelphia (SDP)’s *Education of Children and Youth Experiencing Homelessness in the School District of Philadelphia, Analysis of 2018-19 Data*.

This analysis also includes references to a report from the national advocacy group Schoolhouse Connection, and interviews with local schools who teach children residing at a PEC housing program.

The School District of Philadelphia’s Report

The number of children and youth who experienced homelessness as identified by the School District of Philadelphia was 7,847, according to an analysis of 2018-2019 School District of Philadelphia (SDP) reportⁱ of its “Education of Children and Youth Experiencing Homelessness” (ECYEH) program.

Read the [full School District report here](http://bit.ly/3olaqJB) (<http://bit.ly/3olaqJB>).

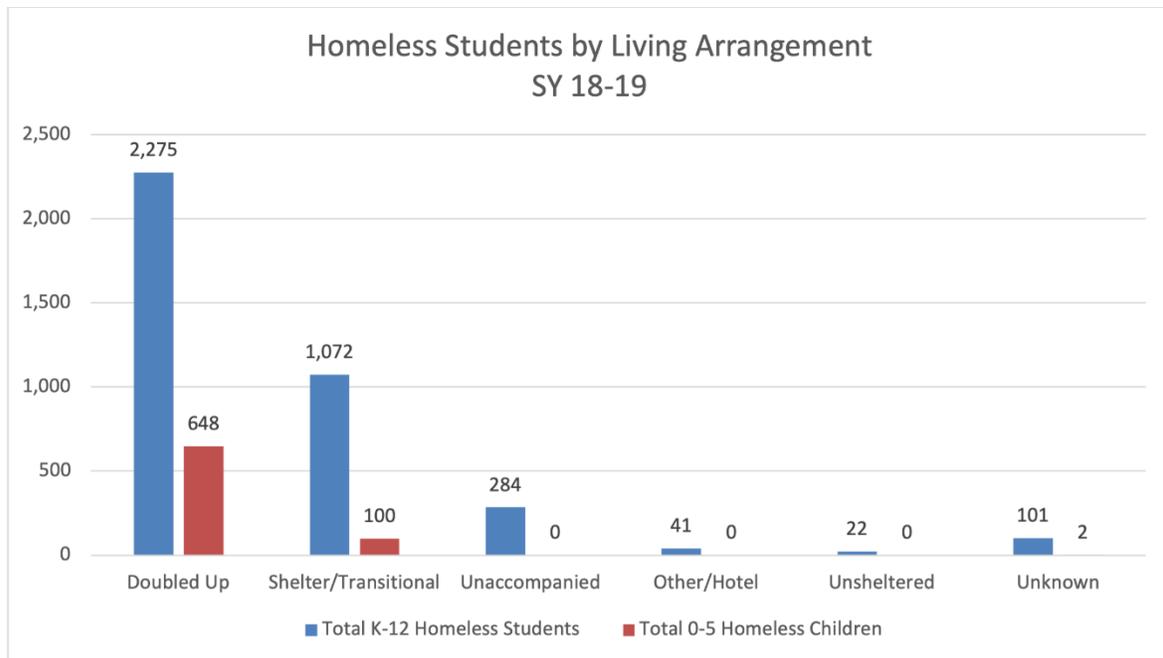


Figure 1 Homeless Students by Living Arrangement School Year 2018-19.

Highlights

Philadelphia identified **7,847 children and youth identified as experiencing homelessness** (using the US Department of Education definition of homelessness). **This number (Figure 1, page 2) represents:**

- **2,329 more** children and youth since 2016, a 42% increase.
- 10% increase since last year
- **67% increase** in 10 years

It is notable that 16% of all students (School District of Philadelphia, charter, and 'other') identified as homeless were charter school students.

Also, **most** homeless students were living **doubled up** and not in shelter.

Furthermore, homeless students fare **worse** on outcomes of **attendance, standardized test scores, and grade promotion** compared to all SDP students.

Housing Situation/Nighttime Residence

Most of the students identified as homeless in 2018-2019 were identified as living doubled-up (see Figure 2, this page). The number of K-12 children and youth who were doubled up was 2,275, or **65 percent** of the total for this age group. In addition:

- **86 percent** of children aged birth to five were living doubled up.

Service	2017-18		2018-19	
	Number of Identified K-12 Students who Received Service	Percentage of Identified K-12 Students who Received Service	Number of Identified K-12 Students who Received Service	Percentage of Identified K-12 Students who Received Service
Uniform vouchers	1,987	60%	1,752	50%
Transportation assistance ^a	556	17%	466	13%

Figure 2 Services provided by the ECYEH Program to Identified K-12 Students in 2017-18 and 2018-19

- The number of K-12 children and youth who resided **in shelters** was 1,072, or **31 percent** of the total for this age group.
- 13 percent of children (100 children) ages birth to five resided in shelters.
- 284 youth in the K-12 group (8%) were identified as being unaccompanied by a parent or other adult caregiver.
- 41 K-12 youth (1%) were identified as primarily residing in **hotels or “other” shelter sources**.
- Only 22 (<1%) were identified as ‘**unsheltered**,’ i.e., living outdoors or in a place considered not fit for human habitation.
- **Twenty-two percent** of K-12 students identified as homeless required **enrollment assistance**.
- Half (50%) of students identified as homeless required assistance in purchasing a **uniform** which is a decrease from 60% in the 2017-2018 school year.
- **Thirteen percent** of K-12 homeless students required transportation assistance.

Use of Services

The SDP’s homeless education program offers several services to help alleviate the costs of a child going to school (see Figure 3, this page). Students used the following services during the past two school years:

Chronic Truancy

Chronic truancy is defined as having ten or more unexcused absences. Students who demonstrate chronic truancy may also display lower academic performance. The instability of experiencing homelessness often results in increased truancy. In fact, in 2018-19:

- **56 percent** of homeless students were chronically absent, compared to 30 percent of all District students. These

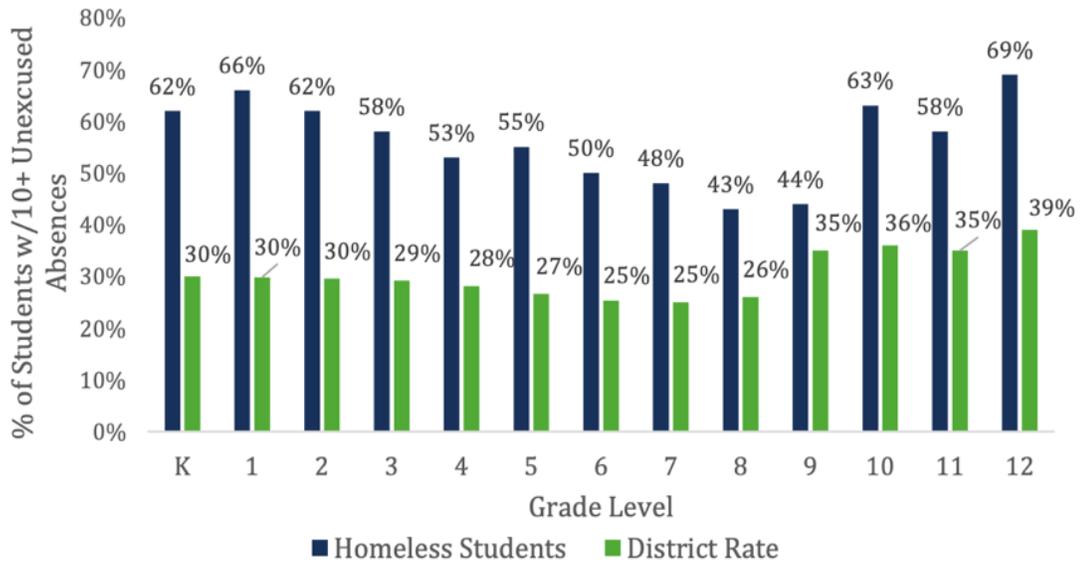


Figure 3 Chronic Truancy of Homeless Students Compared to District Rate Overall 2018-19

rates are similar to the previous school year for both homeless and all District students (52% and 31%, respectively).

See Figure 3 on this page for more information.ⁱⁱ

Academic Achievement

Homeless students had **lower rates of proficiency** on standardized tests compared to other District students:

- Only 6.1% of students experiencing homelessness scored proficient or advanced on the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA) math test, compared with 20.7% of SDP students.
- 16.2% of students experiencing homelessness scored proficient or advanced on the PSSA English test, compared with 37.6% of SDP students.

The charts on page 6 (Figures 4 and 5) show a significant gap between the Math and English proficiency scores of these two groups of students.

Student Grade Promotion

At the high school level, students experiencing homelessness were promoted at lower rates than their peers across all high school grades, as even with supports in place they continued to lag behind peers.

Figure 6 on page 6 shows the sharp decline in grade level advancement from grades nine through 11. It is worth noting that **31 of the 209 9th graders experiencing homelessness did not advance to 10th grade** last year.

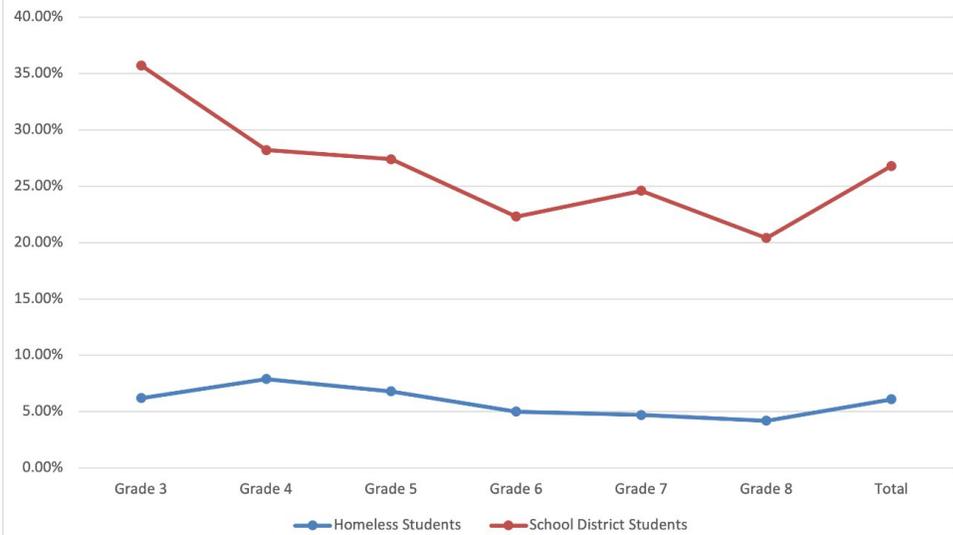


Figure 4 PSSA Math Proficiency Rates for Grades 3-8 Homeless and District Students SY 18-19

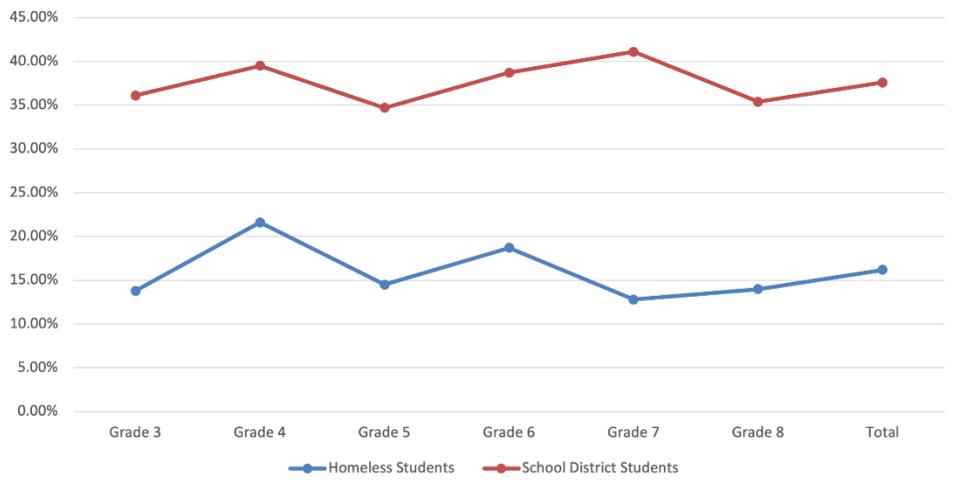


Figure 5 PSSA English Proficiency Rates for Grades 3-8 Homeless and District Students SY 18-19

Grade	Number of Homeless Students	Percent of Homeless Students Promoted to the Next Grade	Percent of SDP Students Promoted to the Next Grade
9	209	85.2%	91.5%
10	90	86.7%	93.0%
11	97	85.6%	95.9%

Figure 6 Homeless 9-11 grade students advancing to the next grade level compared to overall SDP rates of promotion

A National Perspective

A report released by SchoolHouse

Connection, the nation's leading expert on the early care and education of children and youth experiencing homelessness, provides **national** findings that explain why we need to prioritize education for students experiencing homelessness. The full article is here (link to full article here: <https://bit.ly/3bxrnOt>).

Their findings include:

- Students experiencing homelessness are **chronically absent** from school at a rate at least twice that of the overall student population, and significantly more often than their housed, low-income peers.
- The mobility, poverty, and trauma associated with homelessness **affects students' emotional and physical health**, hygiene, preparedness for school, transportation options, and other factors that increase absenteeism.
- Chronic absences increase the **likelihood** that a student will **drop out** of high school. This can perpetuate child and youth homelessness. Homelessness causes students to miss school, which can lead them to drop out, which then

makes them **3.5 times more likely to experience homelessness as young adults**. And finally,

- Not completing high school is the **greatest single risk factor** for young adult homelessness.

SchoolHouse Connection shares **strategies** that schools, districts, and communities are implementing to help ensure students experiencing homelessness are in school, every day.

1. Help students meet their basic needs.
2. Be creative with transportation supports.
3. Foster a supportive school climate.
4. Invest in and implement proven intervention models.
5. Collect data and implement early warning systems that are specifically and intentionally responsive to students experiencing homelessness.
6. Take a team approach to attendance.

Interviews with Local School Staff

PEC interviewed social service staff at **three schools** who serve students from PEC's housing programs. We spoke with the Assistant Director of ECHYEH, two case managers, two school counselors, and PEC staff who work with children living in shelter.

The goal was to learn about the **identification process** of homeless students and the **common barriers** to attendance and academic achievement that these students experience.

Highlights

- The **pandemic** has compounded inequities and challenges experienced by families living in extreme poverty communities.
- Social workers double as the helper and the antagonist for families as their role requires compliance within punitive systems of truancy policies. One social worker described this as "a difficult dance" to be hired for helping kids emotionally, while having to threaten their parents with state involvement.

- Families' relationship with school employees is essential for participation and academic achievement.
- More social work professionals are needed in the schools to address complexities of truancy.
- We received **positive comments** on the SDP's homeless education office. The social service staff all praised the SDP office's responsiveness during difficult situations and constantly providing new resources and trainings that employees find extremely helpful.
- Truancy monitoring is essential for ensuring students have their basic needs met.

Schools Resources That Help

When schools use these methods, student engagement in families experiencing homelessness may improve.

- **Trainings** that are provided for teachers on what to look for when identifying housing instability in their students.
- During school registration, parent surveys which target issues of housing and safety, can help to ensure schools are meeting the needs of every family.

- All students experiencing homelessness should be identified as McKinney-Vento students and involved in truancy programs of the school. Once they are identified as McKinney-Vento, the school delivers Chromebooks and sets up each student with free internet and school supplies.
- **Weekly truancy meetings** held to try to figure out how to reach all families effectively.
- The status of students who are identified **automatically receive** school supplies, meals, free internet, working computers, and more.

Frequent Barriers to Attendance

Social service staff at these schools identified three barriers to attendance that they often encounter. They include:

- **Housing instability.** When a family does not have a place to live, school falls low on their priority list. Even if it is a priority, it is often difficult to receive all necessary means to attend and succeed in school.
- **Poverty.** A lot of parents are completely focused on getting and keeping jobs so that they can maintain housing for their family.

Without a parent available, children are either left unsupervised, or under supervision from older siblings who are also expected to participate in school. This impacts the education for all siblings in the family.

- **Parental mental health challenges.** The inability for some parents to function or get out of bed due to mental health challenges often prevents their children from attending school.
- **Inability to form relationships with families.** There are not enough social workers to effectively communicate with all families. One of the schools we spoke with had only two social workers responsible for 175 chronically truant students, which is an additional task to their direct services role.
- **Policies from school district.** Current truancy policies encourage attendance only through punitive measures while only looking at number of absences, rather than addressing root causes of truancy.

Implications for policymakers

The social services staff identified the following as policy changes that might help them better support their students who experience homelessness.

- **Increase funding for social services in the school district.** With a higher staff to student ratio, truancy work is more feasible and meaningful. Social workers currently juggle impossible tasks of trying to form relationships with families while also threatening them with involving the state for truancy. A case manager from the Philadelphia **Support Team for Education Project (STEP)**ⁱⁱⁱ was able to name each student at PEC and their family situation. She suggested that a higher staff-to-student ratio is resulting in more effective relationships with families that, to her, results in less truancy. The STEP program aims to consider all the factors affecting the student's participation; not just the number of days missed, but why each day was missed.
- **Truancy policies** need to address the reasons for absenteeism, including providing more time for staff to address the student's situation. One charter school we spoke to changed its truancy policy so that logging onto 'Zoom' for one class counted as being present for the entire day. Staff from this school suggested that this perpetuates the problems because chronic truancy is a sign that students basic needs are not being met. If chronic truancy is ignored by adjusting policies like this, more children will get lost in the academic system.
- **Universal Basic Income** was suggested by four school employees as necessary to increase academic attendance and achievement. Staff said that poverty and parental mental health were one of the most common reason for truancy. Some staff suggested that if we can meet the poverty gap, then parents will not have to constantly stress, and can invest more time into their children.
- **PEC staff suggested that every family shelter should partner with licensed childcare facilities to intervene** with the instability of childcare that causes students to miss school. Childcare should also be accessible in high poverty communities to include children who are living doubled up. Having a safe and consistent place for students to learn during the pandemic is essential for academic achievement. Accessible childcare is a priority because the lack of

supervision by parents was identified by school staff as one of the most significant barriers to attendance and achievement. A partnership between shelters and childcare facilities would help to

monitor and reach the needs of students who are currently chronically truant.

About Us

People’s Emergency Center (PEC) nurtures families, strengthens neighborhoods, and drives change. We are committed to increasing equity and opportunity throughout our entire community. We provide comprehensive supportive services to homeless women and their children, revitalize our West Philadelphia neighborhood, and advocate for social justice.

PEC is located at 325 N. 39th Street, Philadelphia, PA 19104. Review its web site at www.pec-cares.org. For more information about our policy work, contact Joe Willard at policy@pec-cares.org or 267-777-5851.

We thank Julie Gillen and Dominique Marshall for contributing to this publication.

ⁱ Kelly Linker, Melissa Karakus, School District of Philadelphia: Education of Children and Youth Experiencing Homelessness in the School District of Philadelphia, Analysis of 2018-19 Data

ⁱⁱ There are two sources for this comparison. We used SDP data for the number of homeless students with chronic truancy and the total yearly enrollment of students experiencing homelessness to obtain the percentage of homeless students who display chronic truancy. We used Qlik Climate Matters App data for the overall SDP chronic truancy rates.

ⁱⁱⁱ STEP is a social work driven program that highlights the importance of working on our mindset about homelessness and the ill effects a child can bring with them into the school setting. The STEP team recognizes that it is not productive to hold every student to the same standard. More staff per student allows the counselor to maintain a daily record that leads to a multitiered system for students who miss a concerning amount of school. This system involves the entire STEP where they identify specific barriers and create an individualized plan that meets the needs of each student.