



Santa Ana Unified School District

Jerry Almendarez
Superintendent of Schools

August 22, 2023

The Honorable Maria Hernandez
Presiding Judge of the Superior Court
700 Civic Center Drive West
Santa Ana, CA 92701

Dear Honorable Judge Hernandez,

The Santa Ana Unified School District commends the Grand Jury for its time and attention devoted to studying this important issue and publishing the Grand Jury Report dated May 25, 2023, entitled: *The ABCs of Educating Children Experiencing Homelessness in Orange County* (Report). The District is committed to serving all students. It recognizes that there are unique challenges facing children and families experiencing homelessness and challenges for our District and our school personnel devoted to identifying and serving these students and families.

The District has thoroughly reviewed and considered the Findings and Recommendations in the Report. Following California Penal Code sections 933 and 933.05, the Grand Jury has requested that the District respond to the Findings and Recommendations in the Report. The District responds to the Grand Jury's Findings and Recommendations with the following:

F #	Finding	Agree/ Disagree	Response And Explanation (if Required)
F1	Many children experiencing homelessness are not identified as such and do not receive the support and benefits authorized by the McKinney-Vento Act.	Disagree. The Respondent disagrees wholly or partially with the finding (see right for explanation)	SAUSD has made significant efforts in identifying and educating school-based homeless liaisons on identifying unaccompanied youth. We follow district-wide identification efforts twice during the school year, once at re-enrollment and once in the Spring. We identify throughout the school year via one-on-one relationship-building with various school personnel. Our district handbook for students and families, released annually, has an enrollment page for McKinney-Vento along with simplified verbiage for the form for the 2023-2024 school year. This simplified verbiage is also available for re-enrolling students in 2023-2024. Over one thousand brochures have

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			been printed in English and Spanish for distribution to parents and families in SAUSD, describing McKinney-Vento services and how to enroll in the program.
F2	The lack of mandatory McKinney-Vento Act training for school site office staff, counselors, and teachers contributes to a failure to identify children experiencing homelessness.	Agree. The Respondent agrees with the finding	Annually, we train all school site Liaisons with the McKinney-Vento Act at the start of the school year. These liaisons are located at each of our schools. In 2022-2023, we trained all counselors. We are working on a plan to create a video training to be completed by school site office staff, counselors, and teachers by 12/31/2023.
F3	There is a disparity in the application of McKinney-Vento regulations across Orange County public school districts, resulting in unequal access to educational benefits for children experiencing homelessness.	Agree. The Respondent agrees with the finding	McKinney-Vento students in SAUSD have the same educational benefits as all other students. SAUSD provides additional resources and support to meet the needs of homeless students and families. Santa Ana Unified ensures that all newly enrolled students complete the McKinney-Vento Assistance Act Declaration Form at initial registration or when returning for the new school year. Additionally, our McKinney-Vento Program Specialist, Social Service Specialist, and School Site McKinney Vento Liaisons outreach efforts ensure students in need receive all the support and assistance to which they are entitled. SAUSD participates in OCDE and CDE training on the McKinney Vento rights, regulations, and benefits to support students experiencing homelessness with access to educational benefits.
F4	Most McKinney-Vento Liaisons are in full-time positions, but because their work includes multiple non-McKinney-Vento responsibilities, most do not have sufficient time to do the work required by the McKinney-Vento Act.	Disagree. The Respondent disagrees wholly or partially with the finding (see right for explanation)	In SAUSD, the McKinney Vento District Liaison/Program Specialist and Social Service Specialist support homeless education full-time. Most of their time is taken up with programming to address the needs of our McKinney Vento population and in a support role for district employees in guiding educators regarding the

			McKinney-Vento Act. Both are 12-month employees.
F5	Many McKinney-Vento Liaisons lack needed experience due to a high turnover rate in those positions.	Agree. The Respondent agrees with the finding	While SAUSD has had some turnover, our District Liaison/Program Specialist and Social Service Specialist have combined more than five years of experience directly working with McKinney Vento students.
F6	McKinney-Vento Act training is not mandatory for the majority of McKinney-Vento Liaisons.	Disagree. The Respondent disagrees wholly or partially with the finding (see right for explanation)	In SAUSD, the District Liaison/Program Specialist and Social Service Specialist are annually trained. Additionally, at the beginning of the school year, we train on the McKinney-Vento Act, and the site liaisons at each school, as they are student-facing positions. We want to ensure liaisons know students' rights and responsibilities as they serve inside our school sites. We also have nine paid in-person professional development meetings with our McKinney-Vento liaisons, where we train and offer resources and support to liaisons on the Act and how its provisions help remove educational barriers on behalf of students.
F7	Students experiencing homelessness who are enrolled in an elementary district often do not continue to receive McKinney-Vento benefits when they move to a high school district because the Federal Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) prevents the sharing of this information between districts.	Disagree. The Respondent disagrees wholly or partially with the finding (see right for explanation)	SAUSD is a TK-12 school district. The McKinney-Vento Enrollment Form is included in all registration packets for new and returning students. Participation is not based on the previous school district's records. It is based on the current living situation and can be re-submitted anytime during the year if the family situation changes.
F8	McKinney-Vento funds depend on school districts submitting grant proposals, but not all districts have employees trained in writing grant applications, resulting in missed funding opportunities.	Agree. The Respondent agrees with the finding	SAUSD has various employees that can analyze and review grant opportunities but does not have a full-time dedicated grant writer.
F9	School districts that do not apply for grants that fund programs benefiting children experiencing homelessness miss	Agree. The Respondent agrees with the	It is the case that school districts that do not apply for grants miss grant opportunities. However, SAUSD's

	potential revenue opportunities.	finding	McKinney-Vento Program has applied and will be receiving for the 2023-2024 school year: Homeless Children and Youth Federal Grant (EHCY) funds, American Rescue Plan (ARP) 1, and American Rescue Plan (ARP) 2 funding.
F10	McKinney-Vento is an unfunded federally mandated program; however, school districts that qualify and apply for Title I, Part A funds may obtain revenues that can be used for children experiencing homelessness. These funds are insufficient to meet the needs of the school districts supporting children experiencing homelessness.	Agree. The Respondent agrees with the finding	In Addition to Title, I set aside monies; Santa Ana Unified will receive the following for the 2023-2024 school year: Homeless Children and Youth Federal Grant (EHCY), American Rescue Plan 1, and American Rescue Plan 2. It, however, is not enough funding to adequately support our McKinney Vento population.
F11	A lack of reliable transportation for children experiencing homelessness often results in chronic tardiness and absenteeism.	Agree. The Respondent agrees with the finding	Santa Ana Unified does not operate a district-wide school bus service. SAUSD offers OCTA bus passes for McKinney Vento students who need them to get to and from school. For younger students, we offer bus passes to the parents so that they can accompany their children. Special Education students who are also McKinney-Vento are bussed by district transportation or private ride services if transportation needs are identified and offered in their IEP. Chronic tardiness is often a problem for MV students who rely on their parents to transport them. Oftentimes, their transportation is unreliable, and students are late or absent from school.
F12	Chronic Absenteeism Rates of Homeless Students are disproportionately high in comparison with the Chronic Absenteeism Rates of All Students and Socio-Disadvantaged Students.	Agree. The Respondent agrees with the finding	During the 22-23 school year, the chronic absenteeism rate in SAUSD for students identified as McKinney-Vento was 28.8% (1,802), whereas students identified as socio-disadvantaged was 23.2% (8,051), and the overall district was 22.6% (9,674).
F13	Children experiencing homelessness in Orange County perform at a lower level	Agree. The Respondent	Performance on the 2021-2022 English Language Arts assessment

	<p>on standardized tests and have a lower graduation rate than All Students and Socioeconomically Disadvantaged Students.</p>	<p>agrees with the finding</p>	<p>as measured either by the Smarter Balanced Summative Assessment or the California Alternate Assessment, taken annually by students in grades 3–8 and 11. For ELA, All SAUSD students tested 50.4 points below standard, Socioeconomically Disadvantaged students tested 55.6 points below standard, and homeless students tested 68.6 points below standard. Performance on the 2021-2022 Mathematics assessment as measured either by the Smarter Balanced Summative Assessment or the California Alternate Assessment, taken annually by students in grades 3–8 and 11. For math, All SAUSD students tested 88.2 points below standard, Socioeconomically Disadvantaged students tested 92.5 points below standard, and homeless students tested 106.7 points below standard. According to the California Dashboard graduation data, in 2022, all SAUSD students graduated at 89.3% for 4-year graduate cohorts. Socioeconomically Disadvantaged Students graduated at the rate of 89%. Homeless students graduated at the rate of 81.8%.</p>
<p>F14</p>	<p>The percentage of Homeless Students graduating who failed to meet state standards on English Language Arts and Math tests is significantly higher than it is for All Students and Socioeconomically Disadvantaged Students.</p>	<p>Agree. The Respondent agrees with the finding</p>	<p>Using SAUSD 2021-2022 data for 11th-grade SBAC Math, Homeless Students performed at Standard Not Met at 75% compared to All Students at 63% and socioeconomically disadvantaged students at 66%. For 11th-grade SBAC English Language Arts, Homeless Students performed at Standard Not Met at 44% compared to All Students Standard Not Met at 32% and compared to socioeconomically disadvantaged students at 34% percent standard not met.</p>
<p>F15</p>	<p>There is a tendency by school districts to operate in isolation, which prevents productive collaboration on addressing the issue of children experiencing</p>	<p>Disagree. The Respondent disagrees wholly or</p>	<p>SAUSD's District Liaison/Program Specialist attends all OCDE network meetings with other district liaisons in Orange County. She routinely calls</p>

	homelessness and the challenges of their education.	partially with the finding (see right for explanation)	and contacts other district liaisons to do “warm handoffs” for unhoused children from SAUSD to their new district. The Program Specialist provides educational information, California Statewide Student Identifying ID numbers (SSIDs), and contact information to ensure school continuity. In addition, SAUSD routinely collaborates with OCDE to ensure the rights of homeless children are observed and honored, from reduced credit graduation exemptions to other factors. If there are questions, SAUSD’s District Liaison/Program Specialist can collaborate and consult with various colleagues across districts to obtain an answer on behalf of a student.
F16	A significant lack of affordable permanent housing contributes to many families being caught in the cycle of homelessness.	Agree. The Respondent agrees with the finding	Orange County is going through a housing crisis where rental occupancy, affordability, and many factors have affected working-class and immigrant families from being able to afford or remain housed at market-priced housing. Cities and counties need to step in and provide more comprehensive rental and housing information for families in accessible ways, such as clinics and workshops across the spectrum, from credit recovery to eviction prevention to landlord dispute resolution. The housing crisis is a city, county, and state responsibility; however, the district can provide some resources. Not counting the McKinney-Vento definition of homelessness in funding housing opportunities is a massive factor in how the solution to the housing crisis needs to be addressed. These resources are vastly limited in our community and not very accessible and comprehensive for the average family.

Please see below for the responses to each required Recommendation as requested in the Orange County Grand Jury report and attached cover letter dated May 19, 2023.

R #	Recommendation	Implementation	Response And Explanation (if Required)
R1	All Orange County school districts should develop a "Back to School" plan which includes mandatory McKinney-Vento Act training for all district and school administrators, teachers, office staff, and counselors by December 31, 2023, and annually thereafter.	Recommendation has not yet been implemented but will be in the future (see right for timeline)	It will be implemented. Currently, we train all site liaisons, all school counselors, and school social workers. We are working on a plan to create a video training to be completed by school site office staff, counselors, and teachers by 12/31/2023. The training will be uploaded to our professional development platform as training videos, always making them accessible.
R2	Participation in Orange County Department of Education (OCDE) McKinney-Vento Act training programs for all Local Education Agencies (LEA) McKinney-Vento Liaisons should be mandated by October 1, 2023, and annually thereafter.	Recommendation has not yet been implemented but will be in the future (see right for timeline)	It will be implemented. Although attendance at OCDE Hopes training was not mandatory for the SAUSD liaison, no training was missed in the 2022-2023 school year as it is a vital asset to the position. OCDE McKinney-Vento meeting attendance will continue to be an expectation of the role.
R3	Given that most LEA McKinney-Vento Liaisons are responsible for a number of other duties, and do not have sufficient time to do their McKinney-Vento required work, school districts should identify ways to increase support and/or staff to address the numerous tasks of the Liaisons by October 1, 2023.	Recommendation has been implemented	Implemented. McKinney-Vento support in SAUSD is structured by the District Liaison and the Support Service Specialist, 12-month employees dedicated to full-time McKinney-Vento work. They train and supply over 43 site liaisons with the resources and information to help families directly at their school sites.
R4	By January 1, 2024, for children experiencing homelessness to receive uninterrupted McKinney-Vento benefits, Orange County school districts should add a section to their mandatory enrollment school form enabling parents/guardians to	Recommendation has not yet been implemented but will be in the future (see right for timeline)	It will be implemented. SAUSD will add this information to our McKinney-Vento Act Housing Questionnaire for the 2024-2025 school year, giving

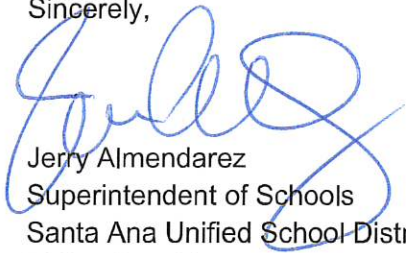
	<p>give permission for their school to share information regarding their child's McKinney-Vento status with other districts that their child may be attending.</p>		<p>parents/guardians permission for us to share information regarding their child's McKinney-Vento status with other districts that their child may be attending. Currently, part of the enrollment process is completing the Housing Questionnaire, which allows us to identify families and deem them immediately eligible for McKinney-Vento benefits, preventing them from having interrupted benefits. This is repeated in the Spring semester and at the end of the summer during re-enrollment, "Program Verification."</p>
R5	<p>By October 1, 2023, each Orange County school district should develop and maintain a centralized list of district employees with grant application writing capability so that they are prepared to apply for available grants to assist in educating children experiencing homelessness.</p>	<p>Recommendation has not yet been implemented but will be in the future (see right for timeline)</p>	<p>It will be implemented. SAUSD has various employees that can analyze and review grant opportunities but does not have a full-time dedicated grant writer. The list of employees with grant writing capabilities will be completed by October 1, 2023.</p>
R6	<p>By October 1, 2023, a joint task force should be formed by the OCDE comprised of a district-level administrator from each Orange County school district and leadership from non-profit organizations that serve homeless families, to address absenteeism, low test scores, and low graduation rates of children experiencing homelessness.</p>	<p>Recommendation has not yet been implemented but will be in the future (see right for timeline)</p>	<p>It will be implemented. SAUSD will commit to participating in OCDE's joint task force.</p>
R7	<p>To address one of the primary barriers to the education of minors experiencing homelessness, the County of Orange should develop a plan to increase the number of family shelters, permanent supportive housing, and low-cost/long-term housing for families by January 1, 2024.</p>	<p>NA</p>	<p>NA</p>

<p>R8</p>	<p>By May 1, 2024, each Orange County school district administration should develop, and present to the District Board of Education, a plan to lower the Absenteeism Rates of homeless students.</p>	<p>Recommendation has not yet been implemented but will be in the future (see right for timeline)</p>	<p>It will be implemented. The SAUSD Board of Education receives an update annually on attendance rates of all at-promise student groups through the Local Control Accountability Plan. Specifically, we provide attendance data to every school site on who are our McKinney-Vento students via an in-house tracking system and ask that they follow up with appropriate support strategies. The attendance and McKinney-Vento teams work in tandem to identify and provide needed support to aid in improved attendance. A formalized, comprehensive plan will be provided to the Board</p>
<p>R9</p>	<p>By May 1, 2024, each Orange County school district administration should develop, and present to the District Board of Education, a plan to improve the performance of homeless students in English Language Arts and Math.</p>	<p>Recommendation has not yet been implemented but will be in the future (see right for timeline)</p>	<p>It will be implemented. The SAUSD Board of Education receives an update annually on academic performance scores of all at-promise student groups through the Local Control Accountability Plan. The teaching and learning team will prepare a plan to address English Language Arts and Math performance for our homeless students.</p>
<p>R10</p>	<p>The Orange County Superintendent of Schools should provide information from the School Accountability Report (SARC) to the Board of Supervisors identifying the number and describing the performance of children experiencing homelessness in Orange County public schools. This data should include the aggregate of students in each district experiencing homelessness, their chronic absenteeism rates, the high school graduation rate, and</p>	<p>NA</p>	<p>NA</p>

	the percent who meet or exceed state standards in English and Math, starting October 31, 2023, and yearly thereafter.		
R11	By July 1, 2024, the County Board of Supervisors should identify and pursue sustainable financial funding to support all Orange County school districts with enrolled children experiencing homelessness in their effort to successfully meet the unfunded Federal mandate to educate these children equitably.	NA	NA

Please do not hesitate to contact us with any questions or concerns.

Sincerely,



Jerry Almendarez
 Superintendent of Schools
 Santa Ana Unified School District
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