06/11/2024

The Honorable Maria D. Hernandez
Presiding Judge
Orange County Superior Court
700 Civic Center Drive West
Santa Ana, CA 92701

Subject: Comprehensive Report of the Orange County Grand Jury Task Force on the Educational Status of Homeless Students

To the Honorable Maria D. Hernandez,

This report, compiled by the Integrated Student Services Unit in the Educational Services Division of the Orange County Department of Education (OCDE), presents the findings and recommendations from the Orange County Grand Jury Task Force on the educational status of students experiencing homelessness. The task force's investigation focused on the significant disparities in academic outcomes for students experiencing homelessness under the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act.

The 2022-2023 Grand Jury's investigation revealed notable disparities in absenteeism rates, academic achievement in English language arts and mathematics, and graduation rates for students experiencing homelessness. These disparities stem from systemic challenges, including but not limited to:

- Funding Inadequacies: Limited resources hinder the ability to provide necessary support and services to students experiencing homelessness.
- Staffing Limitations: Insufficient staffing levels affect the capacity to offer individualized attention and support.
- Differing Definitions of Homelessness: Conflicting definitions between Housing and Urban Development and the McKinney-Vento Act create confusion and inconsistencies in service provision.
- Familial Challenges: Social stigma, fear of child protective services involvement, and transportation issues exacerbate the difficulties faced by students experiencing homelessness and their families.

In response to these findings, the Grand Jury recommended the County Office of Education establish a joint task force to address these issues. The task force was formed in September 2023 including district-level administrators, non-profit leaders, and various community stakeholders. It operates under the Homeless Outreach Promoting Educational Success (HOPES) Collaborative.

The task force has been actively engaged in discussions and planning through various meetings:

- Steering Committee Meetings during HOPES Collaborative Quarterly Meetings: September 8, 2023, February 2, 2024, and May 3, 2024
- Attendance Subcommittee Meeting: November 2, 2023, November 28, 2023, and January 26, 2024
- Achievement and Graduation Subcommittee Meetings: October 11, 2023 and November 1, 2023

These subcommittees engaged in data analysis, discussions, and decision-making processes, to identify effective strategies and tools for improving educational outcomes for students experiencing homelessness.

The Attendance Subcommittee focused on the development of practical tools and resources, such as attendance policy checklists and tiered intervention strategies, to assist schools in reducing absenteeism among students experiencing homelessness.

The Student Achievement and High School Graduation subcommittee focused on providing recommendations for implementing tailored academic support programs, social-emotional learning initiatives, and enhanced family and community engagement efforts.

To ensure the recommendations' successful implementation and provide more clarity, the subcommittees will continue to meet monthly during the next academic year. This continued effort will allow for a more thorough development and refinement of strategies to address the educational challenges faced by students experiencing homelessness.

We are confident that all recommendations made by the Grand Jury report will be carried out as recommended. The findings emphasize the necessity of a holistic collaborative approach to address the educational challenges faced by students experiencing homelessness. OCDE and the HOPES Collaborative are committed to fostering an inclusive educational environment that supports the well-being and academic success of all students experiencing homelessness.

Thank you for considering this report. We look forward to your feedback and support in implementing these critical recommendations.

Sincerely,

Dr. Daniel Ochoa, EdD
Director Integrated Student Services
Educational Services Division
Orange County Department of Education

Attachments (x)
cc: Dr. Ramon Miramontes, Deputy Superintendent
    Dr. Sonia Llamas, Associate Superintendent
    Jeffrey J. Riel, General Counsel

Orange County Grand Jury
Task Force Report
April 2024

Prepared by OCDE,
Educational Services Division

Orange County Grand Jury Task Force
Report
April 2024

TABLE OF CONTENTS

I. Introduction

The 2022-23 Orange County Grand Jury (OCGJ) conducted a comprehensive investigation into the educational status of students classified as homeless under the McKinney Vento Homeless Assistance Act within Orange County schools. This inquiry involved meticulous study of all available sources of information including: school site visits, McKinney Vento Liaison surveys, extensive interviews with key personnel from school districts, and a thorough analysis of School Accountability Report Cards. The findings of the investigation unveiled multiple instances of disparate educational outcomes for students experiencing homelessness. Notably, three priority areas of concern emerged: absenteeism rates, academic achievement in meeting or exceeding state standards in English language arts and mathematics, and graduation rates.
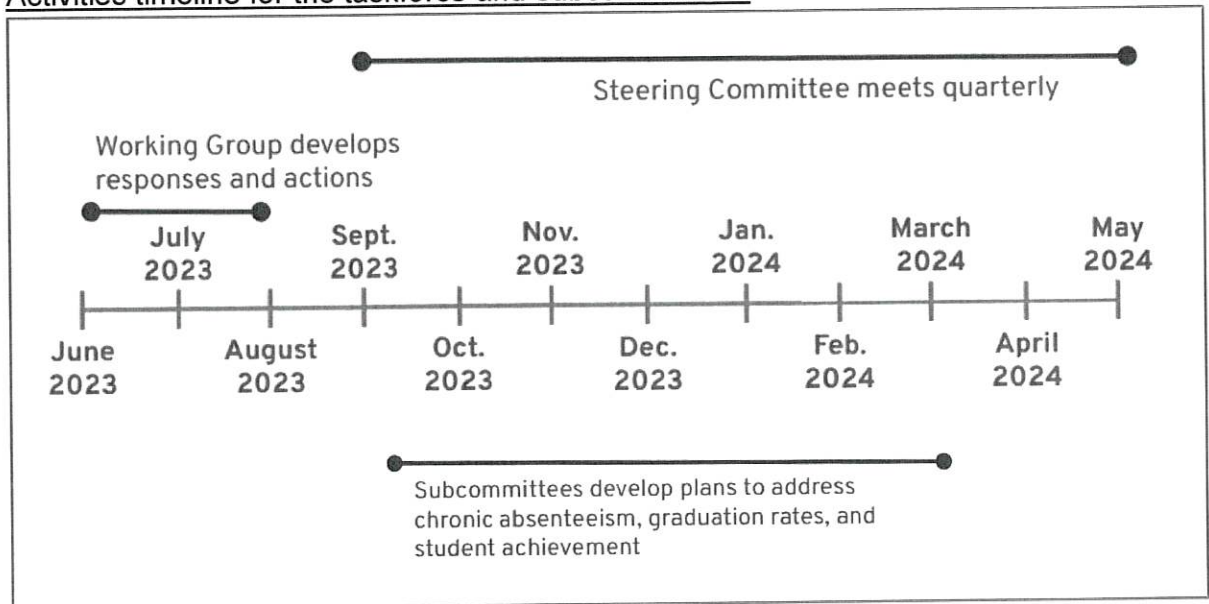
The investigation highlighted various systemic challenges within the schools, including issues related to funding inadequacies, staffing limitations, and the complexities associated with collaborating with external agencies due to the difference in the definition of homelessness between the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and the McKinney Vento Act. Additionally, familial challenges such as social stigma, concerns about potential involvement with child protective services, lack of transportation, and other factors related to constant moves were identified as underlying causes contributing to the disproportionate educational outcomes observed for homeless students.

In light of these findings, the 2022-23 Orange County Grand Jury (OCGJ) issued eleven recommendations directed towards school districts and the Orange County Department of Education (OCDE). Specifically, recommendation Six (R6) from the OCGJ advocates for the establishment of a joint task force by OCDE, composed of a district-level administrator from each Orange County school district and leadership representatives from non-profit organizations dedicated to serving homeless families. This task force is mandated to address the challenges associated with absenteeism, low test scores, and low graduation rates among children experiencing homelessness by October 1st, 2023.

In response to this recommendation, in September of 2023, OCDE convened a joint-task force, comprising all stakeholders involved in the Homeless Outreach Promoting Educational Success (HOPES) collaborative. The HOPES Collaborative, a strategic partnership between the Orange County Department of Education, County of Orange Homeless Prevention, Orange County school districts, community-based organizations, faith-based communities, law

1

enforcement, and shelter and housing service providers, was leveraged to form a cohesive and comprehensive approach. Furthermore, two subcommittees were created to examine the areas of concern and develop recommendations for Orange County school districts to enhance focus and effectiveness. The subcommittees focused on two topics: (1) chronic absenteeism and (2) student achievement and graduation. These committees met regularly over several months to investigate the topics and provide recommendations to the HOPES collaborative (steering committee).

Activities timeline for the taskforce and subcommittees:

Steering Committee meets quarterly

Working Group develops responses and actions

| June 2023 | July 2023 | August 2023 | Sept. 2023 | Oct. 2023 | Nov. 2023 | Dec. 2023 | Jan. 2024 | Feb. 2024 | March 2024 | April 2024 | May 2024 |

Subcommittees develop plans to address chronic absenteeism, graduation rates, and student achievement

II. Problem Statement

As mentioned earlier in this report, the OCGJ report indicates that students experiencing homelessness in Orange County face many challenges leading to low school engagement and low academic outcomes, including test scores and graduation rates. Beyond revealing unequal outcomes for absenteeism rates, test scores, and graduation rates among students experiencing homelessness, the OCGJ also observed the following trends:

- <u>More pronounced disparities in comparison to other student groups</u>: Homeless students were found to be disadvantaged even compared to their socioeconomically challenged peers who were not experiencing homelessness.
- <u>Population-dependent outcomes</u>: Homeless students demonstrated varied outcomes based on the size of the homeless student population in their respective districts. In districts with larger homeless student populations, these students were more likely to achieve favorable outcomes, such as lower absenteeism rates and higher graduation rates, as opposed to districts with smaller homeless student populations.
- <u>Higher chronic absenteeism rates among high school students</u>: High school students experiencing homelessness were notably more likely to exhibit the highest rates of chronic absenteeism, further underscoring the challenges faced by this specific demographic within the educational system.

The OCGJ report also suggests that despite the barriers, at least a few school districts and schools within Orange county are managing to provide exceptional services that have led to significantly lower chronic absenteeism rates and higher levels of support for McKinney Vento students leading to higher academic outcomes. These observations suggest that the taskforce should further investigate these best/promising practices within Orange county schools to include in their recommendations for addressing the low engagement and academic outcomes among students experiencing homelessness.

III. Subcommittee Tasks and Recommendations

A. Subcommittee on Chronic Absenteeism

1. <u>Description of the subcommittee meetings and process utilized:</u>

The subcommittee for the reduction of chronic absenteeism for students experiencing various conditions of homelessness, a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence, was convened at the outset of the project. The subcommittee was composed of McKinney Vento Liaisons/CWA(Child Welfare and Attendance) District Administrators from four Local Educational Agencies (LEAs) and Student Services Administrator and managers from the Orange County Department of Education (please see the full list of participants under the Acknowledgements section of this report). The subcommittee met five times via Zoom platform over the course of four months. They began by defining clear objectives and scope for the guidelines and setting up collaborative work norms. The subcommittee took into account promising practices occurring within LEAs in Orange County (OC). In addition, existing research and best practices were analyzed and discussed for promising results. Weight was given to strategies that have been shown to be successful within OC school districts. The following are the steps taken by the subcommittee:

1. **Data Analysis:** The subcommittee reviewed comprehensive data sets, DataQuest, DashBoard, and SIS (Student Information Systems), related to chronic absenteeism of students experiencing homelessness. The analysis revealed important trends and insights from the LEAs LCAPs and OCGJ Homeless Reports, including absent rates, student demographics, strategies/plans to reduce chronic absenteeism, and a clarification of how to identify students experiencing homelessness. These findings informed the subcommittee's discussions and decisions throughout the meetings.

2. **In-Depth Discussions:** The subcommittee engaged in in-depth discussions on various aspects of chronic absenteeism of students experiencing homelessness. Members shared diverse perspectives and raised pertinent questions, leading to a rich exchange of ideas and ways to identify constructive strategies (best practices) that have worked to mitigate chronic absenteeism.

3. **Decision-Making Process:** The subcommittee made significant progress in reaching decisions on key issues, including identifying key strategies currently in use to reduce chronic absenteeism, identifying patterns and trends of strategies used throughout Orange County, and articulating "lessons learned" in the practice of reducing chronic absenteeism. These findings were based on a thoughtful consideration of the available evidence and input from all LEAs.

4. **Action Items:** The subcommittee identified specific action items to be completed before the next meetings. These include a review of LEAs LCAPs, a review of the LEAs OCGJ Homeless reports, an analysis of the LEAs OCGJ Reports, research of evidence-based practices, and conducting outreach to district staff about their LEA practices and strategies, which helped to advance the subcommittee's objectives and ensure follow-through on discussed matters.

Moving forward, the subcommittee plans to continue its work by reporting its findings to the HOPES Liaisons Network and the CWA/SARB Network. This may involve further data analysis, stakeholder consultations, or additional research to inform upcoming discussions and decisions.

In conclusion, the subcommittee meetings were productive and insightful, with valuable contributions from all members. The findings and decisions made will guide future actions and contribute to the overall success of the subcommittee's objectives identified in the OCGJ Report.

2. Findings from subcommittee:

The subcommittee's findings highlight a comprehensive approach to supporting homeless students within Orange County. Drawing on extensive research on best practices to improve student attendance, existing knowledge and guidelines from organizations supporting homeless students, an informal gap analysis of local LEAs, and identification of local best practices, the subcommittee developed a range of tools and identified existing resources to meet the needs of McKinney Vento Liaisons. In addition, recognizing the lack of capacity among Orange County LEAs in supporting these students, the subcommittee ensured the tools and resources were succinct, easy to use products, that any busy liaison can easily utilize without extensive professional learning. Building on these insights, specific tools were created to support districts with reducing chronic

absenteeism among McKinney Vento, homeless students. The tools and resources were later shared with all Orange County LEA liaisons at the May 2024, Orange County HOPES Collaborative meeting. The list of tools and resources include the following:

    a. Attendance Policy Checklist Sample.pdf
    b. Tiers Checklist Chronic Absenteeism/Truancy Strategies
    c. CASCWA-Blank-tiered-pyramid-worksheet.pdf
    d. Example-of-Tiered-Pyramid-Worksheet-Filled-Out-9.23.20.pdf
    e. UCDavis-MTSS-Attendance-Support-System.pdf
    f. Copy of CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM Slide Presentation 9.12.2023
    g. mtss and absences intersection SLIDES.pdf
    h. For home visits:Student Services Door Hanger (2).png

B. The Subcommittee on Student Achievement and High School Graduation

1. Description of the subcommittee meetings and process utilized:

The subcommittee for student academic achievement and high school graduation was composed of subject matter experts from local educational and homeless services agencies including United Way Orange County, Rescue Mission of Orange County, and OCDE subject matter experts (please see the full list of participants under the Acknowledgements section of this report). The committee met both via Zoom platform and in person over the course of four months. They began by defining clear objectives and scope for the guidelines and setting working norms for the group. The group analyzed existing research on student academic success, particularly for homeless students, and identified effective strategies. The research process involved a combination of reviewing articles, state and federal guidance documents and gathering feedback from participants. The subcommittee reviewed the research articles included in the agendas, and then we facilitated discussions via Zoom, through the Orange County Literacy and Language Network and the Coach Community of Practice to gather insights and perspectives. Additionally, participants shared their working knowledge and insights, contributing to the identification of recommendations. While the research articles were a key data source, participant input based on their professional expertise also played a significant role in shaping the recommendations. Weight was given to strategies that have been shown to be

successful within OC school districts. Drafting of the recommendations was a collaborative effort, with iterative internal reviews to refine and enhance clarity and specificity.

2. Findings from subcommittee:

The following are the final recommendations of the Subcommittee for student academic achievement and high school graduation:

Implement Tailored Academic Support Programs:
- Utilize the MTSS Framework to provide targeted academic interventions for homeless students based on their individual needs and academic goals.
- Collaborate with teachers and instructional coaches to develop personalized learning plans for homeless students, incorporating evidence-based instructional strategies and ongoing progress monitoring.

Provide Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) Programs:
- Integrate SEL components from the MTSS Framework to address the social-emotional needs of homeless students, promoting skills such as self-regulation, resilience, and interpersonal communication.
- Train teachers and instructional coaches in trauma-informed practices and culturally responsive teaching strategies to create a supportive and inclusive learning environment for homeless students.

Enhance Family and Community Engagement:
- Engage families and community partners in the work as they are an important domain in the MTSS Framework and process to ensure that homeless students' unique needs and strengths are addressed collaboratively.
- Provide resources and support services to homeless families through partnerships with community organizations, including access to housing assistance, healthcare, and social services.

Implement Culturally Responsive Practices:
- Incorporate culturally responsive practices to acknowledge and honor the cultural backgrounds and experiences of homeless students, fostering a sense of belonging and cultural identity.
- Provide professional development opportunities for teachers and instructional coaches to enhance cultural competence and awareness of the challenges faced by homeless students and families.

Utilize Data-Driven Decision Making:
- Use data from to inform decision making and identify areas of need for homeless students, including academic progress, attendance, behavior, and social-emotional well-being.
- Collaborate with teachers and instructional coaches to analyze data and develop targeted interventions and supports for homeless students based on their specific needs and challenges.

Provide Professional Development for Teachers and Instructional Coaches:
- Offer ongoing professional development opportunities for teachers and instructional coaches to build their capacity to support homeless students academically, socially, and emotionally within the MTSS framework.
- Provide training on effective instructional strategies, trauma-informed practices, culturally responsive teaching, and collaboration with families and community partners.

Develop Mentoring and Peer Support Programs:
- Establish mentoring and peer support programs within the MTSS framework to provide additional academic and social-emotional support for homeless students, including peer tutoring, mentoring relationships, and social support groups.
- Train teachers, instructional coaches, and peer mentors in effective mentoring techniques and strategies for supporting homeless students in achieving academic success and graduation.

Create Transition Support Services:
- Develop transition support services to assist homeless students in transitioning between schools, grade levels, or educational settings, ensuring continuity of support and academic progress.

- Collaborate with teachers, instructional coaches, and school counselors to provide individualized transition plans and supports for homeless students, addressing academic, social-emotional, and logistical needs during transitions.

IV. Conclusions

In conclusion, challenges and barriers associated with chronic absenteeism and student academic success for McKinney Vento homeless students are inherently interconnected and highly complex, requiring a holistic and systemic approach to solutions.

Our findings emphasize that school liaisons cannot operate in isolation. Instead, they must collaborate closely with various stakeholders within the school district to develop tailored and comprehensive support for homeless students. This collaborative effort extends beyond individual initiatives to establishing integrated systems that prioritize the well-being and success of every student. This includes enhancing inter-departmental collaboration within school districts, fostering partnerships with community organizations, and leveraging resources to ensure equitable access to education and support services.

By championing a collective approach and nurturing a culture of collaboration, we can cultivate an educational environment that empowers our homeless students to thrive and succeed. The OCDE subject matter experts and the Orange County HOPES Collaborative remain committed to advocating for these principles and working collaboratively towards a more inclusive and effective educational experience for homeless students.

Resources and Attachments

The following is a detailed list of tools created by the subcommittees and other resources available for orange county school districts:

<u>Tools developed by the subcommittees:</u>
- Home Visit Tools (door hanger)
- Booklet: Missing School Matters - Parent guide to Student Attendance
- Booklet: Parent Guide to Student Success
- Attendance Tipsheet
- Student Success Checklist

<u>Other Resources:</u>
- The School House Connections - <u>Supporting the Attendance of Students Experiencing Homelessness</u>
- Attendance Works Website <u>http://www.attendanceworks.org/</u>
- Homeless Education Technical Education Center (HETAC)
  - Recommendations for Addressing Chronic Absenteeism
  - Expanded Graduation Options for Students experiencing homelessness (webinar, Jan 25, 2024)
    View the <u>webinar recording</u>
    Download the <u>webinar slide deck</u>
- OCDE website- CA MTSS Framework
  <u>https://ocde.us/MTSS/Pages/CA-MTSS.aspx</u>
- Annual Conditions of Children in Orange County Report
  <u>https://ssa.ocgov.com/about-us/news-publications/COCR</u>

Acknowledgements

Steering Committee: HOPES Collaborative Members

District	Liaison
ACCESS/OCDE	Wendy Rogan
ACCESS/OCDE -Skyview School Site	Mickey Dela Cruz
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Anaheim UHSD	Adela Cruz
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Buena Park SD	Madeline Morrison
Capistrano USD	Margarita Vivas

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