

# Education Reform for Homeless Students

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## What you need to know

Children represent the fastest growing homeless demographic in the United States. Homeless children are more likely to do poorly in school than children who are housed.

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## What is this research about?

This research explains why school can be difficult for homeless children and youth. The authors describe educational policies that have historically made it challenging for homeless students to do well in school. They also explore current educational reforms that aim to improve the educational success of homeless children and youth.



## What did the researchers do?

The researchers explored current educational reforms, targeting the needs of homeless students. They describe the modified

comprehensive school approach in greater detail using the J. Pappas School in Maricopa County, Arizona (U.S.) as a case-study.



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### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Lynnette Mawhinney, Ph.D.** is Assistant Professor of Urban Education at The College of New Jersey. Some of Dr. Mawhinney's main research areas focus on the professional lives of urban teachers, educational life histories of urban youth and former dropouts, and autoethnography.

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### VISIT

[www.homelesshub.ca](http://www.homelesshub.ca)  
for more information

### KEYWORDS

*homeless students, school reform, education barriers, income, employment & education, youth*

### ARTICLE SOURCE

Mawhinney-Rhoads, L., & Stahler, G. (2006). Educational Policy and Reform for Homeless Students: An Overview. *Education and Urban Society*, 38(3), pp. 288-306.

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## HOW CAN YOU USE THIS RESEARCH?

This research will be useful to people who are interested in understanding how school failure is systemically produced. It will also be interesting to those who are exploring educational reform possibilities with the aim of better meeting the needs of homeless children and youth.

## What did the researchers find?

### U.S. School Policies Do Not Work Well for Homeless Children and Youth

School districts **require families to show proof of residency** (e.g. utility bill or lease) in order for children to attend school. It is hard for families who are homeless or housing unstable to demonstrate that they live within a school district.

Most school districts **deny access to children who do not have a legal guardian**. Many homeless youth are living on their own or are in the care of friends or family who are not their legal guardian. They will be not be eligible for admission in most U.S. schools.

Many schools require **access to an up-to-date vaccination record** before a child is allowed to enrol. When medical records have been lost (due to evictions and/or frequent moves); when a parent or guardian has lost access to the records (as might be the case if a person is fleeing a violent partner); or where the children have not been regularly vaccinated, children are not able to enrol in school.

**Transportation to school can also be a problem**, particularly when families are using the shelter

system. If a family is using a shelter outside the children’s school district, children will need to find their own transportation to school.

The experience of being homeless, itself, can be socially and emotionally disruptive for children.

### Recent Reforms to Address Educational Barriers for Homeless Youth

In 2002, the Stewart B. McKinney Education of Homeless Children and Youth Act was placed under the larger No Child Left Behind Act. The authors describe four approaches to educational reform, which have resulted from this policy shift:

**1** *Mainstream schools:* all children and youth are enrolled in mainstream schools, regardless of their housing status;

**2** *Supplementary services (e.g. tutoring, counselling, and/or school supplies):* additional supports are offered to homeless students who attend mainstream schools;

**3** *Transitional school sites:* homeless students of all ages and abilities attend school together in a single classroom, which is located in or near a homeless shelter; and/or

**4** *Modified comprehensive schools:* these schools (which target homeless students) are not attached to

homeless shelters. They have multiple classrooms, with one grade/room. They offer supplementary services (such as transportation and medical supports). Once students have found stable housing, they return to mainstream schooling.

