

**PICKING UP THE PIECES: STRENGTHENING
CONNECTIONS WITH STUDENTS EXPERIENCING
HOMELESSNESS AND CHILDREN IN FOSTER CARE**

HEARING

BEFORE THE

SUBCOMMITTEE ON
EARLY CHILDHOOD, ELEMENTARY,
AND SECONDARY EDUCATION

OF THE

COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION AND LABOR
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

ONE HUNDRED SEVENTEENTH CONGRESS

FIRST SESSION

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**PICKING UP THE PIECES: STRENGTHENING
CONNECTIONS WITH STUDENTS
EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS AND
CHILDREN IN FOSTER CARE**

Wednesday, May 19, 2021

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES,
SUBCOMMITTEE ON EARLY CHILDHOOD,
ELEMENTARY, AND SECONDARY EDUCATION,
COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION AND LABOR,
Washington, DC.

The Subcommittee met, pursuant to notice, at 10:19 a.m. via Zoom, Hon. Gregorio Kilili Camacho Sablan (Chairman of the Subcommittee) presiding.

Present: Representatives Sablan, Hayes, Grijalva, Yarmuth, Wilson, DeSaulnier, McBath, Levin, Manning, Bowman, Scott (*ex officio*), Owens, Grothman, Allen, Keller, Miller, Cawthorn, Steel, Letlow, and Foxx (*ex officio*).

Staff present: Melissa Bellin, Professional Staff; Paula Daneri, Professional Staff; Rashage Green, Director of Education Policy and Counsel; Christian Haines, General Counsel; Sheila Havenner, Director of Information Technology; Joe Herrbach, Professional Staff; Ariel Jona, Policy Associate; Andre Lindsay, Policy Associate; Max Moore, Staff Assistant; Mariah Mowbray, Clerk/Special Assistant to the Staff Director; Kayla Pennebecker, Staff Assistant; Véronique Pluiose, Staff Director; Lakeisha Steele, Senior Education Policy Advisor; Banyon Vassar, Deputy Director of Information Technology; Joshua Weisz; Cyrus Artz, Minority Staff Director; Amy Raaf Jones, Minority Director of Education and Human Resources Policy; Dean Johnson, Minority Legislative Assistant; Hannah Matesic, Minority Director of Operations; Mandy Schaumburg, Minority Chief Counsel and Deputy Director of Education Policy; and Brad Thomas, Minority Senior Education Policy Advisor.

Chairman SABLAN. The Subcommittee on Early Childhood Elementary and Secondary Education will come to order. Welcome and good morning everyone. I know that a quorum is present. The Subcommittee is meeting today to hear testimony on “Picking Up the Pieces: Strengthening Connections with Students Experiencing Homelessness, and Children in Foster Care.”

This is an entirely remote hearing. All microphones will be kept muted as a general rule to avoid unnecessary background noise.

Members and witnesses will be responsible for unmuting themselves while they are recognized to speak, or when they wish to seek recognition. I also ask that Members please identify them-

selves before they speak. Members should keep their cameras on while in the proceeding.

Members shall be considered present in the proceedings when they are visible on camera and they shall be considered not present when they are not visible on camera. The only exception to this is if they are experiencing technical difficulty and inform Committee staff of such difficulty.

So if any Member experiences technical difficulties during the hearing you should stay connected on the platform, make sure you're muted, and use your phone to immediately call the Committee's IT director whose number was provided in advance. Should the Chair experience technical difficulty, or need to step away, Mr. Yarmuth, or another majority Member is hereby authorized to assume the gavel in the Chair's absence.

This is an entirely remote hearing, and as such the Committee's hearing room is officially closed. Members who choose to sit with their individual devices in the hearing room must wear headphones to avoid feedback, echoes, and distortion resulting from more than one person on the software platform sitting in the same room.

Members are also expected to adhere to social distancing. I understand that there's some feedback. OK.

Mr. VASSAR. Mr. Chairman your audio is going to be just fine online.

Chairman SABLAN. Look if the livestream goes down at any point we must pause immediately. Committee staff will let you know if that happens and continue on for advice about what to do. Upon first hearing the livestream is down I will, or the Chair should interrupt whatever is happening and I shall read the following, and I will say something at that time.

Mr. VASSAR. Chairman Sablan I believe we are good to go to restart the hearing sir.

Chairman SABLAN. Right. So this is again an entirely remote hearing and as such the Committee hearing room is officially closed. Members who choose to sit with their individual devices in the hearing room must wear headphones to avoid feedback, echoes and distortion resulting from more than one person on the software platform sitting in the same room.

Members are also expected to adhere to social distancing and safe healthcare guidelines, including the use of masks, hand sanitizer and wiping down their areas both before and after their presence in the hearing room.

In order to ensure that the Committee's five-minute rule is adhered to, staff will be keeping track of time using the Committee's field timer. The field timer will appear in its own thumbnail picture and will be named 001 timer. There will be no one minute remaining warning. The field timer will show a blinking light when time is up. Members and witnesses are asked to wrap up promptly when their time has expired.

While a roll call is not necessary to establish a quorum in official proceedings conducted remotely or with remote participation, the Committee has made it a practice whenever there is an official proceeding with remote participation for the Clerk to call the roll to help make clear who is present at the start of the proceeding.

Members should say their name before announcing they are present. This helps the Clerk and also helps those watching the platform and the livestream who may experience a few seconds delay. So at this time I ask the Clerk to please call the roll.

The CLERK. Chairman Sablan?

Chairman SABLAN. Present. Sablan present.

The CLERK. Mrs. Hayes?

Mrs. HAYES. Present.

The CLERK. Mr. Grijalva?

Mr. GRIJALVA. Grijalva present.

The CLERK. Mr. Yarmuth?

[No response]

The CLERK. Ms. Wilson?

Ms. WILSON. Ms. Wilson present.

The CLERK. Mr. DeSaulnier?

[No response]

The CLERK. Mr. Morelle?

[No response]

The CLERK. Mrs. McBath?

Mrs. MCBATH. Present.

The CLERK. Mr. Levin?

[No response]

The CLERK. Ms. Manning?

[No response]

The CLERK. Mr. Bowman?

Mr. BOWMAN. Mr. Bowman is present.

The CLERK. Chairman Scott?

Mr. SCOTT. Chairman Scott is present.

The CLERK. Ranking Member Owens?

Mr. OWENS. Owens present.

The CLERK. Mr. Grothman? Mr. Grothman, I think you're on mute.

Mr. GROTHMAN. Sorry present.

The CLERK. Thank you. Mr. Allen?

Mr. ALLEN. Allen's present.

The CLERK. Mr. Keller?

Mr. KELLER. Keller's present.

The CLERK. Mrs. Miller?

Mrs. MILLER. Miller present.

The CLERK. Mr. Cawthorn?

[No response]

The CLERK. Mrs. Steel?

Mrs. STEEL. Steel present.

The CLERK. Ms. Letlow?

Ms. LETLOW. Letlow present.

The CLERK. Ranking Member Foxx?

[No response]

The CLERK. Chairman Sablan that concludes the roll call.

Mr. VASSAR. Mr. Chairman you're on mute sir.

Chairman SABLAN. Thank you. Pursuant to Committee Rule 8(c) opening statements are limited to the Chair and the Ranking Member. This allows for us to hear from our witnesses sooner and provides all Members with adequate time to ask questions. I now recognize myself for the purpose of making an opening statement.

Today's hearing is focused on our responsibility to support the education of children who are homeless or in foster care. Children without stable homes start at a disadvantage that can follow them for the rest of their lives, denying them the opportunity to achieve their full potential as human beings and Members of society.

That is a tragedy for them and a loss for us all. This is not an insignificant problem. Prior to the pandemic the Department of Health and Human Services estimated that 430,000 children were in foster care. More than 1.3 million school children lack the stable and adequate place to sleep during the 2018–2019 school year according to the United States Department of Education.

More than 1.4 million children under the age of six experience homelessness. Recent research in Michigan suggests almost one in 10 public school students will be homeless at some point before graduation from high school. One in 10.

And of course, youth homelessness reflects other persistent inequities in education and across our society. Black children, Native American children and students with disabilities, English language learners, and LGBTQ children are all more likely to experience homelessness and foster care than their peers. And the outcomes are clear. In 2018 the graduation rate for homeless students was 68 percent nationwide, 86 percent for those with stable homes, and the pandemic has only made the problem worse. We all know how hard it has been for our constituents to keep their children on track with their education during the pandemic. Even children with stable homes have faced difficulty.

For children who are homeless or in foster care, moving from place to place is difficult to some, even more severe. Research indicates from 1 to 3 million children have not attended school since the pandemic began, and principal among them are students experiencing homelessness or in foster care.

This does not simply mean lost classroom time. The pandemic has jeopardized access to clothing, to adequate nutritious food, to healthcare and other critical aid schools provide. The consequences of this gap in the care of homeless children will be felt by all of us long after the pandemic is behind us.

And this is the not to say Congress has been idle. The American Rescue Plan, which we passed in March, provides a combined 2 billion dollars to strengthen Head Start programs, which holistically help young children deal with the many challenges of experiencing homelessness and foster care.

This funding is designed not only to cover the increased costs of providing education during the pandemic, but also where possible to help children catch up on lost instruction time. Our American Rescue Plan includes 52.5 billion dollars for the Child Care and Development Block Grant with new flexibilities so families experiencing homelessness can access childcare.

The American Rescue Plan brought 130 billion dollars to communities nationwide for K to 12 education and includes 800 million specifically to help homeless children and secure the staff and resources for homeless children to remain connected to school.

What challenges are school districts facing in identifying and serving students experiencing homelessness and children in foster care? How are school districts using COVID relief funds to ensure

this unique population of students are connected to the services they need to be successful? What more can we do?

And even what more should we do?

Our witnesses today will help answer those questions and provide feedback on how the investment we make in the American Rescue Plan and other relief legislation are helping vulnerable students make it through the COVID-19 pandemic, and how those investments will help protect these children in the future from the trauma of experiencing homelessness, and in the foster care system.

[The prepared statement of Chairman Sablan follows:]

STATEMENT OF HON. GREGORIO KILLI CAMACHO SABLAN, CHAIRMAN, SUBCOMMITTEE ON EARLY CHILDHOOD, ELEMENTARY, AND SECONDARY EDUCATION

Today's hearing is focused on our responsibility to support the education of children who are homeless or in foster care.

Children without stable homes start at a disadvantage that can follow them for the rest of their lives, denying them the opportunity to achieve their full potential as human beings and Members of society.

That is a tragedy for them and a loss for us all.

This is not an insignificant problem.

More than 1.3 million school-aged children lacked a stable and adequate place to sleep during the 2018-2019 school year, according to the U.S. Department of Education.

More than 1.4 million children under the age of six experience homelessness.

Recent research in Michigan suggests almost one in ten public school students will be homeless at some point before graduation from high school. One in ten.

Prior to the pandemic, the Department of Health and Human Services estimated that 430,000 children were in foster care.

And, of course, youth homelessness reflects other persistent inequities in education and across our society.

Black children, Native American children, students with disabilities, English language learners, and LGBTQ children are all more likely to experience homelessness and foster care than their peers.

The outcomes are clear: In 2018, the graduation rate for homeless students was 68 percent nationwide and 86 percent for those with stable homes.

And the pandemic has only made the problem worse.

We all know how hard it has been for our constituents to keep their children on track with their education during the pandemic. Even children with stable homes have faced difficulty.

For children who are homeless or in foster care, moving from place to place, those difficulties have been even more severe. Research indicates from 1 to 3 million children have not attended school, since the pandemic began, and principal among them are students experiencing homelessness or in foster care.

This does not simply mean lost classroom time. The pandemic has jeopardized access to clothing; to adequate, nutritious food; to health care and other critical aid schools provide.

The consequences of this gap in the services that homeless children have been able to access will be felt by all of us long after the pandemic is behind us.

This is not to say Congress has been idle.

The American Rescue Plan, which we passed in March, provides \$1 billion to strengthen Head Start programs, which holistically help young children deal with the many challenges of experiencing homelessness and foster care.

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What challenges are school districts facing in identifying and serving students experiencing homelessness and children in foster care? How are school districts using COVID relief funds to ensure these unique populations of students are connected with the services they need to be successful?

Our witnesses today will help answer those questions and provide feedback on how the investments we made in the American Rescue Plan and other relief legislation are helping vulnerable students make it through the COVID-19 pandemic and how those investments will help protect these children in the future from the trauma of experiencing homelessness and in the foster care system.

I now turn to the Ranking Member, Mr. Owens, for the purpose of making an opening statement.

Chairman SABLAN. I will now turn to the Ranking Member Mr. Owens for the purpose of making an opening statement. Mr. Owens you're recognized.

Mr. OWENS. OK how's that?

Chairman SABLAN. There you are sir.

Mr. OWENS. OK one second, hold tight.

Chairman SABLAN. No problem.

Mr. OWENS. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. For over a year students across our country have been negatively impacted by school closures. This has been an even greater impact on the foster, homeless and housing insecure youth. For these children school is so much more than a place to learn.

It's a place that provides meals, structure, and safety they don't necessarily receive anywhere else. The most frustrating part of this situation is that the research demonstrates, and has demonstrated for months, that school age children are less likely to transmit the virus to others, including adults.

Further reducing these risks, nearly 80 percent of teachers have received at least one dose of the vaccine by the beginning of April. There is absolutely no reason for schools to remain closed, and yet half of the school districts across this country are still not receiving full-time in-person instructions.

To the children who have gone hungry, whose abuse have gone unnoticed, or who have had no recourse from the streets, I would like to explain what has kept our schools closed for so long, and it's not the science. The Biden administration has lagged too much on the desire of teachers unions causing unnecessary prolonged closures, that continue to inflict real harm on children lacking a home or a stable family life.

We finally heard last week from the President of the American Federation of Teachers, the same union that lobbied the CDC to keep our schools closed, that schools should reopen in-person learning 5 days a week in the fall. I'm ecstatic that we're finally in agreement on this issue, but that's not good enough.

Schools should have reopened full-time months ago. This wasted time has caused irreparable damage to millions of children and students nationwide. In fact we'll hear from one foster parent about how these closures left their children without the attention and instruction they needed to be successful in the classroom, and how countless other children facing abuse and neglect were denied the lifeline offered by in-person instructions.

My democratic colleagues love to argue that throwing more money at this problem is a solution. We will spend this hearing today highlighting President Biden's America Rescue Plan release

scheme, in which 20 percent of the funding of elementary and secondary school emergency relief fund must go toward addressing learning loss.

They talk about money for homeless education. This is the third hearing on the impact of the pandemic, and each time they have highlighted their desire for more money, instead of our children's need to get back to classroom. The fact is no amount of money will fix the harm that's been done and continues to be done to these children and their families.

What our children need is to get back to school in-person full-time. None of these so-called relief funding will go toward the reopening of schools this spring. What are the children who are homeless, housing insecure, or in foster care supposed to do until then? Democrats have no answers.

Sadly, my friends across the aisle are willing to ignore the needs of vulnerable children pretending that the dollar signs and hearings are a significant response while our youth are falling further and further behind. They do not know where the next meal will come from, and they're desperate for structure and normality during a once in a century pandemic.

House Republicans will not stop fighting to reopen schools across this country until every one of them has unlocked their doors. We know this is the best way to help our Nation's children. Thank you and I yield back.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Owens follows:]

STATEMENT OF HON. BURGESS OWENS, RANKING MEMBER, SUBCOMMITTEE ON EARLY CHILDHOOD, ELEMENTARY, AND SECONDARY EDUCATION

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

For over a year, students across our country have been negatively impacted by school closures. This has had an even greater impact on foster, homeless, and housing insecure youth. For these children, school is so much more than a place to learn; it's a place that provides the meals, structure, and safety they don't necessarily receive anywhere else.

The most frustrating part of this situation is that the research demonstrates—and has demonstrated for months now—that school-aged children are less likely to transmit the virus to others, including adults.

Further reducing this risk . . . nearly 80 percent of teachers had received at least one dose of the vaccine by the beginning of April. There is absolutely no reason for our schools to remain closed and yet, half of school districts across the country are still not offering full-time in-person instruction.

To the students who have gone hungry, whose abuse has gone unnoticed, or who have had no recourse from the streets—I would like to explain what has kept our schools closed for so long. It's not the science.

The Biden administration has relied too much on the desire of the teachers unions, causing unnecessary, prolonged closures that continue to inflict real harm on children lacking a home or stable family life.

We finally heard last week from the President of the American Federation of Teachers—the same union that lobbied the CDC to keep our schools closed—that schools should reopen for in-person learning 5 days a week in the fall . . . I'm ecstatic that we are finally all in agreement on that issue, but it is not good enough. Schools should have reopened full time months ago. This wasted time is causing irreparable damage to millions of students nationwide.

In fact, we'll hear from one foster parent about how these closures left her children without the attention and instruction they needed to be successful in the classroom. And how countless other children facing abuse and neglect were denied the life line offered by in-person instruction.

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President Biden's American Rescue Plan "relief" scheme, in which 20 percent of the funding for the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief fund must

go toward addressing learning loss. They'll talk about money for homeless education. This is the third hearing on the impact of the pandemic and each time they have highlighted their desire for more money, instead our children's need to get back in the classroom.

The fact is that no amount of money will fix the harm that has been done and continues to be done to these children and their families.

What our children need is to get back into school . . . In-person. Full-time. None of the so called "relief" funding will go toward reopening schools this spring. What are the children who are homeless, housing insecure, or in foster care supposed to do until then? Democrats have no good answer.

Sadly, my friends across the aisle are willing to ignore the needs of vulnerable children, pretending that dollar signs and hearings are a sufficient response for our youth who are falling further and further behind. They do not know where their next meal will come from, and are desperate for structure and normalcy during a once-in-a-century pandemic.

House Republicans will not stop fighting to reopen schools across this country until every one of them has unlocked their doors. We know that this is the best way to help the Nation's children.

Thank you, I yield back.

Chairman SABLAN. Yes, thank you very much Mr. Owens, Ranking Member Owens. Now without objection, all other Members who wish to insert written statements into the record may do so by submitting them to the Committee Clerk electronically in Microsoft Word format by 5 p.m. on June 2, 2021.

I will now introduce our witnesses. Ms. Jennifer Erb-Downward is a Senior Research Associate at Poverty Solutions at the University of Michigan where she oversees research projects and assists with the analysis and translation of research findings regarding family homelessness to inform local, State, and Federal policy.

Ms. Erb-Downward has extensive experience in policy analysis, program implementation and best practice research around family homelessness, behavioral health, chronic illness, and the reduction of health disparities. She is passionate about addressing child homelessness in Michigan where she grew up.

If I'm misstating your name, please forgive me. Ms. Erb-Downward holds a master's degree in public health from New York University.

Mrs. Michelle Linder-Coates serves as an Executive Director for the School District of Philadelphia's Office of Early Childhood, and is responsible for the implementation and oversight of Federal, State, and locally funded pre-kindergarten and Head Start programs serving 8,000 children in more than 100 community-based early learning centers in Philadelphia.

She's also a Member of Pennsylvania Early Learning Council which works to expand and improve early learning and development services for young children and their families across the State. Ms. Linder-Coates has been an educator for more than 25 years, and was a Head Start parent and student herself.

She holds a master's degree in education and administration and serves on a number of advisory committees that are instrumental in shaping and elevating the importance of early childhood education in Pennsylvania.

Ms. Gretchen Davis is a mother to three children, two of whom are biological, and one adopted through foster care. As a foster family in Arlington County for over 8 years, Ms. Davis often speaks in community forums for the Arlington County Department of Human Services, encouraging others to consider fostering.

Prior to fostering Ms. Davis served as an elementary and middle school teacher for 15 years in both Tennessee and Washington, and as an assistant to the Deputy Undersecretary of Education during the Bush administration. In light of COVID related school closures, Ms. Davis began her involvement in Arlington Parents for Education, a local group advocating for the immediate return to an in-person education for all students.

Ms. Davis holds an undergraduate degree and a master's in education from Vanderbilt University.

Dr. James F. Lane, Doctor of Education, serves as an Executive Officer of the Virginia Department of Education which is the administrative agency for the Commonwealth public schools. In this role he oversees 132 divisions for the Commonwealth public schools, and also serves as the Secretary of the State Board of Education.

Dr. Lane holds a Doctorate in education from the University of Virginia, a master's degree in social administration from North Carolina State University, and a master's and bachelor's degree in teaching from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

We appreciate the witnesses for participating today and look forward to your testimony. Let me remind the witnesses that we have read your written statements and they will appear in full in the hearing record.

Pursuant to Committee Rule 8(d) and Committee practice, each of you is asked to limit your oral presentation to a five minute summary of your written statement. Before you begin your testimony please remember to unmute your microphone. During your testimony staff will be keeping track of time and a light will blink when time is up.

Please be attentive to the time. Wrap up when your time is over and remute your microphone. If any of you experience technical difficulties during your testimony or later in the hearing, please stay on the platform, make sure you are muted, and use your phone to immediately call the Committee's IT director whose number was provided to you in advance.

We will let all the witnesses make their presentations before we move to Member questions. When answering a question please remember to unmute your microphone. The witnesses are aware of the responsibility to provide accurate information to the Subcommittee, and therefore we will proceed with their testimony.

I will first recognize, I hope I'm getting your name right. Ms. Erb-Downward.

STATEMENT OF JENNIFER ERB-DOWNWARD, MPH, SENIOR RESEARCH ASSOCIATE, POVERTY SOLUTIONS AT THE UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN

Ms. ERB-DOWNWARD. You're getting my name perfectly right thank you.

Chairman SABLAN. OK.

Ms. ERB-DOWNWARD. Chairman Sablan, Ranking Member Owens, and distinguished Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify at this important hearing. I come before you today to share my research and what we know about the

educational implications of homelessness, housing instability and foster care among children in the United States.

Data from my work in Michigan, New York City and nationally corroborates a growing body of evidence that shows housing instability to have negative educational, developmental, and health consequences for children. I'm also here today to share with you information on the impact the pandemic has had on homeless children and youth, and to talk about opportunities that funding through the American Rescue Plan brings to address these challenges.

Before I begin, I want to be clear though, that when I talk about homelessness, I am referring to children who are homeless as defined by Federal education law under the McKinney-Vento Act. Pre-pandemic roughly 1 in 16 children under the age of 6 years were estimated to be homeless.

An additional 1.4 million homeless children were identified in K through 12 schools. The vast majority, 77 percent of these children, were staying doubled up in another person's house, and therefore were not eligible for HUD housing or shelter supports.

Among children in foster care roughly 440,000 were in placements of most recent point in time count. These numbers are of concern to this Committee because homeless children face significantly worse educational outcomes than their peers, and these challenges persist even after stable housing is found.

My analysis of both Michigan and New York City educational data shows this to be true across educational indicators. Third through eighth grade students who were formerly homeless had almost the same grade level proficiency rates in English and math as their currently homeless peers.

And like their peers who experience homelessness during high school, one-quarter of students who experience homelessness in middle school dropped out. While housing is critical, housing alone does not close the educational gaps faced by students who've experienced homelessness.

No national estimate for the number of children who experienced homelessness at any point during their K through 12 education exists. But for perspective in Michigan 1 in every 10 students will experience homelessness by the time they graduate or leave high school. This is roughly five times the annual rate.

The risk is even greater for black and Hispanic students with roughly 1 in 7 experiencing homelessness at some point during their K through 12 education. While children in foster care face different structural challenges than their homeless peers, entering foster care is a form of instability, and children in foster care face educational set-backs similar to those of their homeless peers.

Further, a strong intersection exists between homelessness and the risk of entering foster care. Children who were homeless the prior year had 14 times the risk of entering foster care compared to their peers who were not homeless during the same year.

I want to be clear that we're not just talking about numbers today, we're talking about children. Brittney is a student from Michigan who was homeless when she was 10 years old. She was a straight A student, somehow managing her schoolwork while living in her family's car with her mother. Like so many other chil-

dren who are unstably housed, just getting to school was a challenge.

She was frequently late and missed more days than school attendance policy allowed. As a result, she was suspended for 150 days. At that time there was no one to advocate for her. No one to help connect her to the school transportation supports she had a right to under McKinney-Vento law, and no one to work with her school to remove the suspension.

This did not have to be the case for Brittney. She was not identified by her school as homeless, and therefore she did not receive the educational supports that she needed. The COVID pandemic has increased the number of homeless children facing challenges like those described by Brittney.

Survey responses from school homelessness liaisons suggests that there has been a 28 percent decrease in the number of homeless students identified by schools prior to the pandemic. This equates for 420,000 fewer students who are homeless being identified and supported by their schools.

The good news is that the American Rescue Plan recognized this problem and has provided 800 million dollars in targeted funds to meet the educational needs of homeless children. The pandemic has caused hundreds of thousands of children who are homeless to slip through the cracks. We now have the opportunity to find and support those children.

Among the many other things these dollars can be used to support transportation solutions to help homeless children get to school, provide service and housing navigators to support early education and college transitions, and to increase homeless liaison capacity, particularly in 75 percent of local education agencies that currently do not hold a McKinney-Vento sub-grant.

Thank you again for giving me the time to speak at this hearing, and I look forward to your questions.

[The prepared statement of Ms. Erb-Downward follows:]

PREPARED STATEMENT OF JENNIFER ERB-DOWNWARD

"Picking up the Pieces: Strengthening Connections with Students Experiencing Homelessness and Children in Foster Care"
U.S. House Subcommittee on Early Childhood, Elementary, and Secondary Education
May 19, 2021

Written Testimony of Jennifer Erb-Downward
Senior Research Associate
Poverty Solutions at the University of Michigan

Chairman Sablan, Ranking Member Owens, and distinguished members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify at this important hearing. It is truly an honor to be here and I commend you all for your focus on this critical educational issue.

I come before you today to share my research and what we know about the educational implications of homelessness, housing instability, and foster care among children in the United States. Data from my work in Michigan, New York City, and nationally corroborates a growing body of evidence that shows housing instability to have negative educational, developmental, and health consequences for children.^{1,2,3,4,5,6} Without needed supports provided through schools and in partnership with community based organizations, these impacts can be long-lasting with repercussions that continue into adulthood.⁷ I am also here today to share with you information on the impact the pandemic has had on homeless children and to talk about opportunities that funding through the American Rescue Plan brings to address these challenges.

Before I begin to discuss the data, I want to be clear that when I talk about homelessness, I am referring to children who are homeless as defined by Federal Education Law under the McKinney-Vento Act. Under this definition all children and youths who "lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence" are homeless. This includes children and youth who, due to loss of housing or economic hardship are living doubled-up in another person's house, in hotels, motels, trailer parks, camping grounds, emergency or transitional shelters or any place not meant for human habitation (such as cars, public spaces, or abandoned buildings).⁸ This definition of homelessness is broader than the definition used by the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), which governs access to shelter and housing programs. While I am not here today to debate definitions, I want to be clear about the definition that is being used so that the implications of the data that I share in my testimony today are fully understood. While children who are homeless and children in foster care face many similar challenges such as housing instability, experiences of trauma, and educational setbacks, it is important

to note that these two groups are fundamentally different and are impacted by separate laws, systems, and resources.

Background: Young Children Face the Greatest Risk of Homelessness and Housing Instability

Homelessness is an issue impacting rural, suburban, and urban communities in every state.⁹ Young children face the greatest risk, with infants being the most likely to age group to stay in an emergency shelter.¹⁰ Roughly 1 in 16 – or 1.4 million - children under the age of 6 years were estimated to be homeless in SY 2017-18. Only 9% of these children, were enrolled in Head Start, Early Head Start, or programs funded with McKinney-Vento sub-grants.¹¹

In K-12 schools an additional 1.4 million homeless children were identified. This is the equivalent of 3% of the total K-12 student population. The vast majority (77%) of these children were living doubled up in another person’s house. Nineteen percent (19%) of homeless students had a disability, and 16% were English language learners.¹² While information on the race and ethnicity of homeless students is not yet universally available in the data reported to the Department of Education,* findings from the Youth Behavioral Risk Factor Survey show that Black, Hispanic, and Native American students face a disproportionate risk of homelessness.¹³

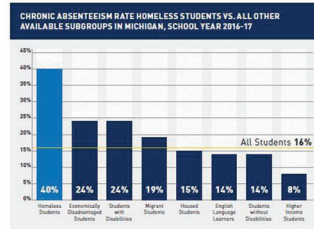
In regards to children in foster care as of September, 2018 there were an estimated 437,283 children in foster care. These children were in different types of placements with 46% in nonrelative foster family homes, 32% in relative foster family homes, 6% in institutions, 5% on trial home visits, 4% in group homes, 4% in pre-adoptive homes, 2% in supervised independent living. One percent had run away from the foster care system.¹⁴ Younger children faced greater risk of entering foster care with the median age of children in 2018 being 6.1 years. Like children who experienced homelessness, a disproportionate burden of foster care fell on communities of color and families with low-incomes.

Why Homelessness and Housing Instability Are Issues of Educational Concern

Homelessness and housing instability are associated with significant educational challenges across age groups.

In early childhood, children who experience homelessness are more likely to display social emotional delays. This impact has been shown to persist into elementary school with early child homelessness associated with lower rates of academic achievement.

Similar to their younger peers, children who experience homelessness during their K-12 education experience significantly worse educational outcomes than their housed peers regardless of income. In Michigan, and New York City where I have conducted much of my research, we found homeless students to be chronically absent at rates more than two times higher their housed peers.^{15,16}



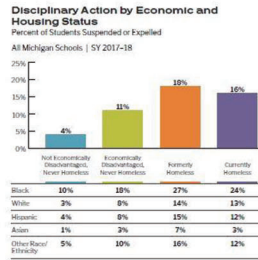
* Beginning in SY 2020-21 the Department of Education will require all school districts to submit data on the racial and ethnic background of students identified as homeless.

We found these same disparities to exist in grade level proficiency rates, disciplinary action risk, and graduation and dropout rates, with homeless students struggling more than their housed peers.^{17,18} While children in foster care face different structural challenges than their homeless peers, entering foster care is a form of housing instability, and K-12 children in foster care face educational setbacks similar to those of their homeless peers. Further, a strong intersection exists between homelessness and the risk of entering foster care. Children who were homeless the year prior had 14 times the risk of entering foster care compared to their peers who were not homeless during that same year.

Homelessness and poverty alone are not reasons that a child should be removed from their family. More information on why homeless children have a greater risk of entering foster care and whether economic and housing supports could prevent removal from their families is needed.

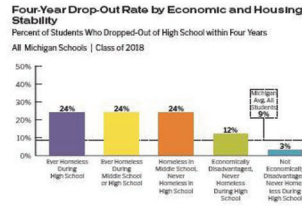
Of even greater educational concern for this committee is that the educational setbacks homeless students experience persist even after stable housing is found. My analysis of both Michigan and New York City educational data shows this to be true across educational indicators. Third through eighth grade students who were formerly homeless had almost the same grade level proficiency rates in English and math as their currently homeless peers. Formerly homeless students faced disciplinary action at rates slightly higher than their currently homeless peers and like their peers who experienced homelessness during high school, one quarter (24%) of students who experienced homelessness in middle school dropped out. Not only did 1 in 4 students who had experienced homelessness at any point during middle or high school drop out of school, these students accounted for 20% of all students who dropped out of high school in the state.

While housing is critical, housing alone does not close the educational gap faced by students who have experienced homelessness. Without the needed school supports, homelessness and housing instability have lasting educational impacts on children. No national estimate for the number of children who have experienced homelessness at any point during their K-12 education exists, but for perspective, I can share with you data on this from Michigan. In school year 2017-18, roughly 2% of all students were identified as experiencing homelessness during the school calendar year. An analysis conducted by Poverty Solutions found that roughly 1 in 10 students experienced homelessness by the time they graduated or left high school – this was five times the annual rate. This risk was even greater for Black and Hispanic students, with 15.7% and 13.6%, respectively, experiencing homelessness at some point during their K-12 years. It



Source: Michigan Department of Education unredacted data tabulated by Poverty Solutions at the University of Michigan, School Year 2017-18.

Note: Percentages represent children enrolled in any Michigan public or charter schools in SY 2017-18. Currently homeless students are those who have been identified as homeless in SY 2017-18. Formerly homeless students are those who are not currently identified as homeless, but who have been identified as homeless at any point between SY 2010-11 and SY 2016-17. Always Homeless, Economically Disadvantaged: For those districts who are identified as economically disadvantaged in SY 2017-18 who have never been identified as homeless between SY 2010-11 and SY 2017-18. Always Homeless, Not Economically Disadvantaged: For those districts who are not identified as economically disadvantaged in SY 2017-18 who have never been identified as homeless between SY 2010-11 and SY 2017-18.



On average, close to 1 in 10 (9%) of Michigan students in the class of 2018 dropped out of school.

Students who experienced homelessness had dropout rates that were eight times those of their always housed, not economically disadvantaged peers (24% vs. 3%). This was true for both students who experienced homelessness during high school and students who were not homeless in high school but had experienced homelessness during middle school.

Students who had experienced homelessness at some point during middle or high school accounted for 1 out of every 5 (20%) students who dropped out of the class of 2018. By comparison they only made up 2% of all students in the class of 2018.

is reasonable to assume that this pattern is not isolated to the state of Michigan and that experiencing homelessness as a child is a much more common than any of us here today would like to believe. The immediate and lasting educational repercussions faced by homeless students means that meeting the needs of these students must be a part of our larger educational plan if we are going to see all students in our country's education system succeed.

I want to be clear that we are not just talking about numbers – we are talking about children. Brittney was homeless when she was 10 years old. She was a straight A student, somehow managing her school work while living in her family's car with her mother. Like so many other children who are unstably housed, just getting to school was a challenge. She was frequently late and missed more days than the school attendance policy allowed. As a result, she was suspended from school for 150 days. At that time, there was no one to advocate for her, no one to help connect her to the school transportation supports she had a right to under McKinney-Vento law, and no one to work with her school to remove the suspension.

This did not have to be the case for Brittney, but she was not identified as homeless by her school and as a result not only did she not receive the educational supports she needed, she was denied her educational rights under McKinney-Vento law.

The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic

Brittney's story highlights one of the greatest challenges that the COVID-19 pandemic has created for homeless students. When children are not identified by their schools as homeless, they are denied their legal rights to immediate enrollment in school, transportation support to and from school, and accommodations that remove barriers at school which prevent them from fully participating in all school activities. As schools had to close in order to prevent the spread of the coronavirus, the number of students identified as homeless dramatically declined.

In the fall of 2020, I partnered with School House Connection to analyze responses to a survey sent out to their national network of school homelessness liaisons. The purpose of this survey was to better understand the impact that COVID-19 was having on students experiencing homelessness. The most striking finding was that at the same point in time that liaisons were reporting greater need in their communities the number of homeless students identified decreased by 28% in comparison to the prior year. This equates to 420,000 fewer students who were homeless being identified by their schools. Lack of identification places all of these students at greater risk for experiences like the one described by Brittney.

Another key finding of the survey was that although school districts were allowed to use COVID relief funds provided by the CARES Act to support homeless student outreach and support, only 18% of liaisons reported that this was happening. This highlights the critical importance of targeted educational funding for homeless students – particularly during times of crisis. The good news is that the American Rescue Plan recognized this problem and has provided \$800 million dollars in targeted funds to meet the educational needs of homeless children. Additionally, while the one billion dollars allocated for Head Start in the American Rescue Plan is not specifically targeted towards homeless children, opportunity exists to leverage these funds.

What Now?

The longer a student who is homeless goes unidentified by their school the more challenges that child faces and the more likely it becomes for them to struggle academically and socially at school. As we move forward it is critical that the money in the American Rescue Plan set aside for homeless students be used to support robust identification practices at schools. The pandemic has led thousands of children who are homeless to slip through the cracks. We must find and support them.

A complete list of ways that the \$800 million set aside for homeless students can be used in each of your states to improve identification and support for homeless students can be found on the School House Connection website.¹⁹ A few of these that I would like to highlight include:

- Increasing homelessness liaison capacity—particularly in the 75% of Local Education Agencies (LEAs) that currently do not have a McKinney-Vento sub-grants;
- Supporting transportation solutions to help homeless children get to school;
- Providing service and housing navigators to help families connect all of the strands of the American Rescue Plan;
- Supporting early education and college transitions;
- Ensuring access to summer supplemental programs; and
- Bridging structural gaps that would otherwise prevent families from accessing the supports they need. An example of this type of allowable use under the supplemental funding stream would be liaisons paying for a family to stay a few nights at a hotel in order to enable that family to meet the HUD homelessness definition and access other American Rescue Plan supports.

In conclusion, as we plan now for how we improve school identification and supports for children who are homeless, it is also critical that we look towards the future, beyond COVID. Under-identification of homelessness among children, while less extreme, existed prior to the pandemic and children will continue to need the supports that schools can provide in order to prevent both the immediate and long-term negative educational impacts highlighted in my testimony. For this reason, robust funding for the McKinney-Vento program is needed as an ongoing part of our nation's educational strategy.

Thank you again for inviting me to this hearing and I look forward to answering your questions.

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² Haskett, M. E., Armstrong, J., & Tisdale, J. (2015). Developmental status and social—emotional functioning of young children experiencing homelessness. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 44: 119–125

³ Brumley, B., Fantuzzo, J., Perlman, S., & Zager, M. L. (2015). The unique relations between early homelessness and educational well-being: An empirical test of the continuum of risk hypothesis. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 48: 31–37.

⁴ School House Connection. (2021). Student Homelessness: Lessons from the Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS). Available at: <https://schoolhouseconnection.org/student-homelessness-lessons-from-the-youth-risk-behavior-survey-yrbs/>

⁵ Joshua Cowen. "Who Are the Homeless? Student Mobility and Achievement in Michigan 2010–2013," *Education Researcher*. (2017): 33–43.

⁶ Equity & Opportunity for New York State's Students. "Improving Opportunity & Achievement for Students Experiencing Homelessness: Recommendations for New York's Implementation of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA),"

<https://equityinedny.org/> (accessed April 3, 2018).

⁷ School House Connection. (2021). Student Homelessness: Lessons from the Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS). Available at: <https://schoolhouseconnection.org/student-homelessness-lessons-from-the-youth-risk-behavior-survey-yrbs/>

⁸ Center for Homeless Education. "The McKinney-Vento Definition of Homeless," <https://nche.ed.gov/legis/mvdef.php> (accessed January 29, 2018).

⁹ National Center for Homeless Education. State Level Data and Contact: Interactive Map. Available at: <https://nche.ed.gov/data/>
¹⁰ Scott R. Brown, Marybeth Shinn, and Jill Khadduri. (2017). Well-being of Young Children after Experiencing Homelessness. Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation (OPRE), Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Available at: <https://aspe.hhs.gov/system/files/pdf/255741/homefambrief.pdf>

¹¹ Amy Yamashiro & John McLaughlin. (2020). U.S. Department of Education, Office of Planning, Evaluation and Policy Development, Early Childhood Homelessness State Profiles 2020: Data Collected in 2017-2018, Washington, DC, 2020. Available at: <https://www2.ed.gov/rschstat/eval/disadv/homeless/early-childhood-homelessness-state-profiles-2020.pdf>

¹² School House Connection. (2021). Six Findings from Pre-Pandemic School Homelessness Data That Should Inform Reopening and Recovery. Available at: <https://schoolhouseconnection.org/six-findings-from-pre-pandemic-school-homelessness-data-that-should-inform-reopening-and-recovery/>

¹³ School House Connection. (2021). Student Homelessness: Lessons from the Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS). Available at: <https://schoolhouseconnection.org/student-homelessness-lessons-from-the-youth-risk-behavior-survey-yrbs/>

¹⁴ <https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubPDFs/foster.pdf>

¹⁵ The Center for Education Performance and Information (CEPI). "Michigan Department of Education 2016-17 Student Counts: Attendance". <https://www.mischooldata.org/DistrictSchoolProfiles2/StudentInformation/StudentCounts/Attendance2.aspx>

¹⁶ Institute for Children Poverty and Homelessness. "The Atlas of Student Homelessness in New York City 2016,"

(2016): 1-155. http://www.icphusa.org/new_york_city/on-the-map-the-atlas-of-student-homelessness-in-new-yorkcity-2016/

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(2016): 1-155. http://www.icphusa.org/new_york_city/on-the-map-the-atlas-of-student-homelessness-in-new-yorkcity-2016/ (accessed January 30, 2018).

¹⁸ Erb-Downward, J., Blakeslee, M. (2021). Recognizing Trauma: Why School Discipline Reform Needs to Consider Student Homelessness. Available at: <https://poverty.umich.edu/research-funding-opportunities/publications/policy-briefs/>

¹⁹ <https://schoolhouseconnection.org/how-to-use-arp-funds/>

Chairman SABLAN: Well, thank you Ms. Erb-Downward. And perfect timing I must say. Thank you. We will now hear from Mrs. Linder-Coates. Ms. Coates please unmute your microphone and you have five minutes.

**STATEMENT OF MICHELLE LINDER-COATES, M.Ed.,
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, SCHOOL DISTRICT OF PHILADELPHIA**

Ms. LINDER-COATES. Thank you. Greetings Chair Sablan, Ranking Member Owens, and other honorable Members of the Committee. Thank you for this opportunity for me to testify at the hearing today. My name is Michelle Linder-Coates, and I am the Executive Director of Pre-K Partnerships for the School District of Philadelphia, which provides Head Start programming to over 6,500 three and 4-year old's across the city of Philadelphia.

As you know many of our students and their caregivers face great adversity. Our office works to combat this adversity and impact of poverty through a comprehensive support model that addresses the various conditions students and families face outside of the security of the Head Start classroom, particularly families experiencing housing challenges and children who receive foster care.

I am honored to speak with you today about the work we have done these past 14 months to support Philadelphia's families in need. In our program servicing families protected under the McKinney-Vento Homeless Education Act starts with identification and recruitment. Our recruitment and identification efforts have been successful through the establishment of strong partnerships with many of Philadelphia's social services agencies, including forming relationships directly with city shelters.

Monthly we participate in early childhood workshops that focus on overseeing relationships and fostering relationships with city shelter staff and early childhood staff together, which enhances our collective ability to service our families.

We also attend and host pre-K enrollment fairs at shelters which also allows our staff to inform parents about Head Start and inform them of all of the services that we offer, and also at the same time enroll their children.

Through this close relationship with shelter staff we've also been able to co-complete a self-assessment tool to improve services. We like to hear from our families how we are doing and how we can better service them. Based on the results of the assessment we've changed our Head Start application, all of our marketing material, to be more inclusive and eliminating the word "homeless" as most McKinney-Vento eligible families do not identify as such.

We know that utilizing more common phrases used by families such as temporarily living in housing with relatives or friends, or are new to the country and looking for housing is a softer indicator that families may be McKinney-Vento eligible, and it sits better with our families. Once identified, families are given top priority as we support families through an expedited transition process to school, and addressing immediate needs such as clothing, school supplies, temporary transportation, and those things that families identify as their immediate needs.

During the pandemic, many families did not feel safe participating in face to face options that the district offered, and we were unable to participate in many cases in helping families understand why it is important for their children to attend school.

So we partnered with our Department of Health, and we offered some town hall meetings to help educate families, specifically our families who were experiencing homelessness and who were in foster care, understand why it is important to come back to school, return to school, and understand all of the safety protocols that we've put in place in order to support them in face to face learning.

To support our virtual learning, because many of our families chose to do digital learning, we ensured that we kept students connected by purchasing necessary technology and digital curriculums for the teachers, consumables, and non-consumable learning materials for families to use at home, also using funds to train teachers on the use of technology, and helping them understand how to best support our youngest learners, and our most vulnerable learners in the virtual environment.

For our foster families specifically, we expedite services, and also make sure that our social services team establish working relationships with and provide contact information for the family assigned case manager. Our social services team work with the case managers to make sure that they're making progress toward the set goals established by the foster agencies.

We also partner with community agencies to provide resources to our children in foster care and in families experiencing homelessness with healthcare, food, clothing, and the like. We saw the impact of the pandemic, as families in our program, the homeless families were decreased. I'm sorry.

I know that was my timer as well. Thank you. I was concluding and wrapping up with the idea that we are working diligently each day to make a positive impact to assure our neediest families have the opportunity for life-long success.

[The prepared statement of Ms. Linder-Coates follows:]

PREPARED STATEMENT OF MICHELLE LINDER-COATES

**Testimony of Michelle Linder-Coates, Executive Director of PreK Partnerships, School District of Philadelphia
Before the U.S. House of Representatives Subcommittee on Early Childhood,
Elementary, and Secondary Education
May 19, 2021**

Greetings Chair Sablan, Ranking Member Owens and other honorable Members of the Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to testify. My name is Michelle Linder-Coates and I am the Executive Director of Pre-K Partnerships for the School District of Philadelphia, which provides Head Start programming to over 6,500 three and four-year olds each year across the city of Philadelphia. Our office is committed to ensuring each and every one of our children receive the best possible education and opportunity for life success. Unfortunately, many of our students and their caregivers face great adversity, feeling the effects of poverty and inequities in their daily lives. Our office works to combat the adverse impacts of poverty through a comprehensive support model that addresses the various conditions students and their families face outside of the security of the Head Start classroom. I am honored to speak with you today about the work we have done these past 18 months to reach Philadelphia's families in need, particularly those experiencing housing challenges and those who receive foster care.

I have a deep and extensive history with the Head Start program, as I started my Head Start journey as a young child. Later, I was a Head Start parent who served on Head Start's Policy Council and soon after became a Head Start classroom teacher. My many years of experience within the Head Start program means that I have a great deal of expertise in regards to early childhood education. As you can imagine, it also means that I have a deep passion and dedication to making sure the Head Start program is strong and impactful for our children and their caregivers.

The McKinney-Vento Homeless Education Assistance Act guarantees a free and appropriate public education for all children and youth experiencing homelessness and outlines procedures for deciding school placement, enrolling students, and determining responsibility. In our program, servicing families protected under this act starts with identification and recruitment. Because our families are often unaware of the services our office offers, our recruitment and identification efforts have been successful through the establishment of strong partnerships with many of Philadelphia's social service agencies. Our office has forged partnerships with refugee organizations, including the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society and Nationalities Services Center. Because of these relationships, we are able to reach immigrant populations eligible for services under the McKinney-Vento Act. Our office also provides translation and interpretation services to ensure that the family's primary language is never a barrier to enrolling in our program.

We have also had the privilege of forming relationships directly with city shelters through the facilitation of People Emergency Center and The Bell Project's monthly Early Childhood Workshops that focus on fostering relationships between city shelter staff and early childhood staff, enhancing our collective ability to service our families. We also

attend Shelter PreK Enrollment Fairs (virtually during COVID-19 pandemic) hosted by the BELL project that allows our staff to inform parents about Head Start and enroll their children.

Through this close relationship with shelter staff, we have been able to co-complete the *Self-Assessment Tool for Early Childhood Programs Serving Families Experiencing Homelessness*, created by the Department of Health and Human Services, ensuring continual quality improvement and service to our neediest families. For the past three years, we have completed this tool with the support of shelter staff, and we, in turn, have helped them complete the *Early Childhood Self-Assessment Tool for Family Shelters*. Through the use of this assessment tool, we have refined our practices to better serve our families.

Based on the results of the assessment, we changed our Head Start application and all marketing material to be more inclusive, eliminating the word 'homeless' as most McKinney-Vento eligible families do not identify as such. The stereotype of 'homeless' is pervasive not only in agencies that service our families, but also amongst our families as well. There is often shame and embarrassment around identifying as 'homeless,' and many of our families do not want to be labeled, and they should be granted this dignity. We now utilize more common phrases used by the majority of McKinney-Vento families, such as, "Temporarily living in the house of a relative or friend" or "New to the country and looking for housing." These general statements are soft indicators that the family may be McKinney-Vento eligible. During the intake interview, we follow up with additional questions to determine actual status. Many of our families do not know that the Department of Housing and Urban Development's definition of 'homeless,' and McKinney-Vento Law definition of 'homeless' are different. A family may not be eligible for emergency housing, but yet are still McKinney-Vento eligible.

We know that a majority of Philadelphia's children and youth identified under the McKinney-Vento Act are not in shelters. In fact, a review of the Pennsylvania Department of Education's report entitled "Education for Children and Youth Experiencing Homelessness Program 2018-19 Counts by Entity" shows that of the 39,221 children and youth experiencing homelessness and served by Pennsylvania's Education for Children and Youth Experiencing Homelessness program for Fiscal Year 2019, only 8,069 children and youth identified as being in shelter, or 20.6% of all homeless children and youth. Most students experiencing homelessness – or 79.4% – are either living doubled up with friends or relatives, living in places not fit for human habitation, or living on the street.

Our close partnership with the School District of Philadelphia's McKinney-Vento Liaison within the District's Office of Homeless Services has also been extremely beneficial in identifying McKinney-Vento families and recruiting their age-eligible children to our Head Start program. This relationship is reciprocal as the Office of Homeless Services recommends eligible families to us when they identify children experiencing homelessness in the upper grades, and we recommend families to them who come

through the PreK application process. Thirty-five Head Start children have been identified and recommended to our program this year through the Office of Homeless Services that might have otherwise not known about our program.

Our office provides ongoing training to staff to support them in recognizing possible McKinney-Vento situations as the first step in the interview process. We emphasize the importance of using respectful language around the living situation of all families. As stated previously, this typically means that when discussing a family's living situation, we use the words the family uses. This gentle approach allows us to build trust with our families, giving them the dignity and respect they deserve, all the while ensuring they get the full spectrum of services available to them including immediate enrollment, help with any necessary enrollment documents, help with acquiring basic school supplies and basic clothing needs.

As was recommended through our partnerships with shelter staff, we eliminated listing 'required documentation' on advertisements as it may discourage McKinney-Vento applicants from applying. McKinney-Vento Families who have recently experienced fires, domestic abuse, or natural disasters often do not have access to our required documentation, like proof of birth or immunization records. This knowledge also prompted us to change our website to mention exceptions to required documentation for our Foster, Refugee, Asylum Seekers, and Families experiencing temporary living situations.

Once enrolled, our McKinney-Vento families are given top priority as we support families in the program. For example, partnerships were developed with Stenton Family Manor and ACTS Recovery House Shelters to provide onsite registrations by our Family Service Field Representative and to build relationships with the families.

According to an analysis of the *Household Pulse Survey* (HPS) conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau, we know that More than 1 in 6 (17%) adults in renter or homeowner households with children reported that they were not "caught up" on rent or mortgage and 1 in 4 (24%) U.S. adults in households with children reported limited confidence that their household would be able to make their next rent or mortgage payment on time (these numbers are significantly higher for African American families). This data indicates a rise in housing insecurity most likely due to the pandemic. Through research conducted by Mary Haskett, Kate Norwalk & Sarah Neal at North Carolina State University, we know that a strong teacher-student relationship is a key factor in promoting resilience in children experiencing homelessness. Certainly this positive student-teacher relationship promotes resilience in our foster children as well. According to a study released by the Harvard Medical School (HMS), the University of Michigan and Casey Family Programs, foster children are almost twice as likely to suffer from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) as U.S. war veterans. Getting our children in a solid/stable caring relationship with their teachers and supporting foster parents in establishing caring relationships with their foster child can make all the difference. Supporting families through housing insecurity and through foster or kinship

arrangements is a unique and invaluable service of Head Start. However, despite the rise in housing insecurity and the benefits of Head Start, the COVID-19 pandemic has drastically impacted parents' willingness to participate in the program.

For the thousands of families experiencing homelessness in Philadelphia, the pressure to find a home, gain employment, feed their family, stay safe, maintain sound mental health, educate their child, access childcare and other community resources is overwhelming. Many families did not feel safe participating in face to face options and were unable to participate in the offered virtual options for a multitude of reasons. Our program used COVID-19 funds to support both virtual and in person programming during this pandemic. To support virtual learning, we ensured connectivity, purchased necessary technology and digital curriculum materials for children and teachers, consumable and non-consumable learning materials for use at home, and trained teachers on the use of technology and learning to support virtual learning, and purchased PPE to support face-to-face learning. We also allowed families to pick up meals to eat at home to ensure that children were not missing out on the non-educational supports that we provide.

We can see the impact of the pandemic represented in the differences between enrolled eligible McKinney-Vento children in school year 2019-20 versus program year 2020-21. For the school year 2019-2020, 6% of our total enrolled students were McKinney-Vento eligible. Due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, this school year has not only seen a drastic decrease in overall enrollment numbers, but also a drop in the percentage of children categorized as McKinney-Vento, as only 4% of our total enrollment are McKinney-Vento eligible. Similarly, total enrollment of children in foster care has decreased from 3% to 2%.

In an effort to address this decrease in numbers and to identify effective recruitment strategies for these vulnerable populations, we participated in the 'Roundtable Discussion' hosted by Congressperson Dwight Evans and People's Emergency Center (PEC). The panel offered recommendations that we have embraced:

1. Expand partnerships within the city of Philadelphia
2. The School District of Philadelphia Head Start, Building Early Links for Learning (BELL) project, and home visiting systems will strategize to increase and maintain enrollment of children experiencing homelessness
3. Support the transition to virtual learning for children experiencing homelessness, i.e., expand distribution of Chromebooks, increase internet connectivity, and more.
4. Continued education to parents on the value of Head Start and quality PreK. It is customary for elderly and extended family members to provide childcare for some families, so to maintain the connection and support, parents may elect not to disrupt the arrangements.

Additionally, we provide expedited services to our foster care families. Once a foster care family has been identified, our social service team establishes a working

relationship and provides contact information to the family's assigned case manager. The social service team works with the family to assist with family service plans and establishes a team to ensure that the family adheres to set goals, makes progress with goals and or complete goals that are mandated by foster care agencies. Our social service team acts as a mediator and provides advocacy for the families especially when they have issues or concerns with the agency contracted to provide care. During the pandemic the team made "safety and wellness" checks on a bi-weekly basis to ensure that our families were maintaining all agency and CDC guidelines and to monitor mental health.

We partner with community agencies to provide resources to our children in foster care and families experiencing homelessness to assist with healthcare, food, and clothing. We engage our families in formulating personal goals such as post secondary education, financial literacy, credit repair, improving parenting skills, learning new skills, job attainment, and resume building to name a few. We remain committed to serving as advocates for our families as they navigate the systems necessary to attain individual goals for success.

For many families in Philadelphia, the impacts of poverty and inequity are stifling. We will continue to work diligently each day to make a positive impact and to ensure our neediest families have the opportunity for long-term life success. Our program is now providing in-person services for any family that wishes to be in-person. Moreover, our program will use federal COVID-19 funds to provide summer programming to our students to ensure that children have the chance to catch-up for lost instruction time, especially those children entering kindergarten in the next school year and those children who were completely virtual during this past school year. I thank you for allowing me to testify and welcome the opportunity to work with any or all of you in seeking effective approaches to support our most vulnerable children and families.

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Chairman SABLAN. Thank you, Ms. Linder-Coates. That was the first time I've ever heard that tuba, thank you for your testimony. And next we will hear from Ms. Davis. Ms. Davis please unmute your microphone and you have five minutes.

STATEMENT OF MS. GRETCHEN DAVIS, FOSTER PARENT

Ms. DAVIS. Good afternoon Chairman Sablan, Ranking Member Owens, and Members of the Early Childhood, Elementary, Secondary Education Sub-Committee, Early Childhood. Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today as you address the impact of COVID-19 on students experiencing homelessness and children in foster care.

My husband and I have been foster parents for over 8 years in Arlington, Virginia. We have adopted one child through foster care who is now 7. We have had 22 other children ranging in age from 4 days to 14 years in our home. Being a foster family has been the most rewarding, and also the most difficult endeavor we have undertaken.

In March 2020, a week after quarantine began, two girls ages 4 and 5 joined our family. We welcomed these scared and sad little ones into our home, and over the following days began to figure out school for five kids, our own three and two foster children. We set up a makeshift classroom and began using activities and iPad programs provided by the schools.

The girls adjusted well in our home, but as often happens with kids who have experienced trauma, we saw they were very behind in school. Addressing the girls' educational needs was a top priority for me, and as I emailed with their teachers it was clear the schools were unable to provide the same supports these girls would have received if they were in person.

Instead they were provided a few daily activities totaling 30 minutes, and a Microsoft Teams call twice a week. From March to June the girls made some progress, but not without a lot of supplemental tutoring from me.

I remember last spring what would keep me awake at night was not actually my own children's struggles during the pandemic, but the damage being done to vulnerable children, students who were homeless, in foster care, English language learners, families in crisis whose children would not, or could not log on, or interact with school through a device.

Basic academic goals of reading, writing and problem solving for many came to a standstill. I had the resources and time to support the kids in my care, but what about those who did not. The girls returned home in November. Life is not easy, but their mother is resilient and has made great strides to keep her kids safe.

The girls are in hybrid education, and they go to school 2 days a week from 9 to 2:20. Their mother, who needs a job to keep her subsidized housing has had a difficult time finding work with this abbreviated school schedule, and no extended daycare provided. Currently I help her by picking the girls up from school, so she can work a full day. I'm glad to help her, but once again I lay awake at night thinking about those families who do not have that community support.

Another devastating effect of COVID-19 is the absence of mandatory reporting. As a foster parent I'm a mandatory reporter. When I notice child abuse or neglect, I'm required by law to report it, so that the concern can be investigated. Mandatory reporters are a critical safety net.

We have in the United States for vulnerable children teachers, administrators and staff are also mandatory reporters. When students are stuck at home and not allowed to be out in society, mandatory reporting cannot happen. How can a teacher see bruises on a student over a Microsoft Teams call?

How comfortable will a student feel confiding in a trusted adult about sexual abuse over a Zoom call? As a foster parent and former teacher, it concerns me that one of the consequences of staying shut down for so long is under-reported child abuse and neglect.

I would suggest to you as we look back on how we handle COVID-19, and how we handled it as a Nation, that best practices going forward ensure that just as grocery stores and hospitals need to be open, schools also offer critical lifelines for communities. All are staffed by essential employees.

Just like hospitals care for sick people, schools care for children who are among the most vulnerable populations we have. Teachers have always been on the frontlines for children. I was a teacher for 15 years and never questioned that for a minute. Why now all of a sudden are many teachers hidden away, and not able to do what they do best, which is to care for and educate children.

Many public-school systems have yanked stability and support from children and handed them iPads and free Wi-Fi. In my experience as a teacher, a mother, and a foster mother, I am convinced that a good education is a lifeline for all children. Schools have been closed way too long.

What began as an important step to flatten the curve and protect people from an unknown virus became over a year of excuses and panic to make everything just right, and 100 percent safe before re-opening.

Vulnerable children do not have the luxury of this time. Many local educational agencies, including my own, have not prioritized return to school for vulnerable children. The services they have provided during the past year have been insufficient. Our children deserve much better. Thank you.

[The prepared statement of Ms. Davis follows:]

PREPARED STATEMENT OF GRETCHEN DAVIS

**Testimony of Gretchen Davis, Foster Parent from Arlington, Virginia,
United States House of Representatives Early Childhood, Elementary, and
Secondary Education Subcommittee Hearing “Picking up the Pieces:
Strengthening Connections with Students Experiencing Homelessness and
Children in Foster Care” Wednesday, May 19, 2021**

Good afternoon, Chairman Sablan, Ranking Member Owens and Members of the Early Childhood, Elementary, and Secondary Education Subcommittee. Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today as you address the impact of COVID-19 on students experiencing homelessness and children in foster care.

My husband and I have been foster parents for over 8 years in Arlington, Virginia. We have adopted one child through foster care, who is now 7. We have had 22 other children ranging in age from 4 days to 14 years old in our home. Being a foster family has been the most rewarding and also the most difficult endeavor we have undertaken.

In March 2020, a week after quarantine began, 2 girls, ages 4 and 5, joined our family. We welcomed these scared and sad little ones into our home, and over the following days, began to figure out “school” for 5 kids - our own 3 and 2 foster children. We set up a makeshift classroom and began using activities and iPad programs provided by the schools. The girls adjusted well in our home, but as often happens with kids who have experienced trauma, we saw they were very behind in school. Addressing the girls’ educational needs was a priority for me, and as I emailed with their teachers, it was clear the schools were unable to provide the same supports these girls would have received if they were in-person. Instead they provided a few daily activities totaling 30 minutes, and a Microsoft Teams call twice a week.

From March to June, the girls made some progress, but not without a lot of supplemental tutoring from me. I remember last spring what would keep me awake at

night was not actually my own children's struggles during the pandemic, but the damage being done to vulnerable children- students who were homeless and in foster care, English language learners, and families in crisis whose children would not or could not log on or interact with school. Basic academic goals of reading, writing and problem solving for many came to a standstill. I had the resources and time to support the kids in my care, but what about those who did not?

The girls returned home in November and are doing okay. Life is not easy, but their mother is resilient and has made great strides to keep her kids safe. The girls are finally in hybrid education and they go to school 2 days a week from 9 AM to 2:20 PM. They go to school on different days. This young mother, who needs a job to keep her subsidized housing, has had a difficult time finding work with this abbreviated school schedule and no extended day-care provided. Currently I help her by picking the girls up from school so that she can work a full day. I am glad to help her, but once again, I lay awake at night thinking about those families who do not have community support.

Another devastating effect of COVID-19 is the absence of mandatory reporters. As a foster parent, I am a mandatory reporter. When I notice child abuse or neglect, I am required by law to report it so that the concern can be investigated. Mandatory reporters are a critical safety net we have in the United States for vulnerable children. Teachers, school administrators and staff are also mandatory reporters. When students are stuck at home and not allowed to be out in society, mandatory reporting cannot happen. How well can a teacher see bruises on a student over a Microsoft Teams call? How comfortable will a student feel confiding in a trusted adult about sexual abuse over a Zoom call? As a foster parent and a former teacher, it concerns me that one of the consequences of staying shut down for so long is underreported child abuse and neglect.

I would suggest to you, as we look back on how we handled COVID-19 as a nation, that best practices going forward ensure that just as grocery stores and hospitals need to be open, schools also offer critical lifelines for communities. All are staffed by essential employees. Just like hospitals care for sick people, schools care for children,

who are among the most vulnerable populations we have. Teachers have always been on the frontlines for children. I was a teacher for 15 years and never questioned that for a minute. Why now, all of the sudden, are many teachers hidden away and not able to do what they do best, which is to care for and educate children?

Many public school systems have yanked stability and support from children and instead handed them iPads and free WiFi. In my experience as a teacher, a mother and a foster mother, I am convinced that a good education is a life line for all children. Schools have been closed for way too long. What began as an important step to “flatten the curve” and protect people from an unknown virus, became over a year of excuses and panic to make everything “just right” and 100% safe before reopening. Vulnerable children do not have the luxury of time. Many local educational agencies, including my own, have NOT prioritized return to school for vulnerable children. The services they have provided during this past year have been weak and insufficient. Our children deserve much better. Thank you.

Chairman SABLAN. Thank you. Thank you, Ms. Davis, for your testimony, and finally we’ll hear from Dr. Lane. Dr. Lane please unmute your microphone and you have five minutes.

**STATEMENT OF DR. JAMES F. LANE, Ed.D., VIRGINIA
SUPERINTENDENT OF PUBLIC INSTRUCTION, VIRGINIA
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION**

Mr. LANE. Thank you. Chairman Sablan, Ranking Member Owens, and Members of the House Educational and Labor Subcommittee I am pleased to have this opportunity to be here this morning to share how this pandemic has uniquely impacted our youth in foster care and students experiencing homelessness, and how we have responded.

One of the most market insights to come from the COVID–19 pandemic is just how critical a role our schools play in every aspect of our students and families’ lives. Schools are more than the educational experiences they provide. They also serve as safe havens, reliable sources of food, connection, and stability.

Over the last year our students without stable housing, reliable access to devices or broadband, or difficult home environments felt the effects of the pandemic most profoundly due to interruptions in their connection to these vital services and supports.

For multiple reasons Virginia has worked hard to encourage or offer safe in-person learning to our students. Schools have risen to the challenge and consistently continued to expand in-person learning opportunities, while prioritizing the needs of students most disproportionately impacted by the pandemic.

This has been made possible only with the financial support from the Federal Government to help schools cover all costs from all manner of health and safety, including educational technology and student support services.

So I want to recognize the heroic efforts of teachers, support staff, school counselors, nurses, principals, and administrators and thank them all for their commitment and dedication to students. The pandemic has also strained the systems that support these

students in unprecedented ways, and the strain on the system has been two-fold.

First, we have seen increased demand for services. Families in Virginia have suffered from the economic repercussions of the pandemic. The same economic disruption, stress, trauma, and logistical considerations of the pandemic have disrupted existing foster families and created conditions that will likely increase the number of youth in need of foster placements.

These factors are interrelated, and the compounding effects against spikes in both rates of student homelessness and housing instability, and unique strains on the foster care system.

The second major strain on the system has been related to limitations on quickly identifying and serving families, remote learning, virtual family visitations, fewer home visits have disguised some of the telltale signs that students are struggling.

But Virginia has a solid foundation upon which to build because of the previous State and Federal investment in the systems that support homeless and foster youth, including our highly regarded work with Project Hope, Virginia's program for the education of homeless children and youth.

However, even before the pandemic resources were insufficient to meet the demand of families in need, so we've worked collaboratively to strategically leverage new Federal resources, to scale existing programs, and meet the needs in new ways.

Our department sought to bring many partners into the conversation around supporting homeless students. This has included bi-weekly calls with local McKinney-Vento liaisons so they could receive updates, ask questions, and share challenges and success stories. That collaboration has informed new technical assistance, including videos for liaisons, social-emotional learning quick guides, and new grants to scale work to meet the need.

This collaboration is focused on sharing best practices, and planning for the strategic deployment of the remaining America Rescue Plan Homeless Children and Youth Funds when they are made available to states.

Additionally, the joint agency team has continued to meet through the pandemic to provide guidance, policies to foster family connections, and communication across agencies and jurisdictions. Virginia and our localities have funded mechanisms such as virtual visitations, reimbursement for COVID-related testing or treatment, and virtual training and support for foster families.

Even though we all want in-person learning, the virtual communications environment has its unique benefits for some foster youth. For instance, one student in foster care was able to visit a relative in another State for a week due to virtual learning helping support family connections that are crucial to the well-being of children in foster care. The local department that shared this story also stated that they have felt an even stronger relationship and more support with their local school divisions around children and youth in foster care during the pandemic.

They specifically said they have seen a shift from, "That's not possible," responses to, "How do we make this work," perspectives in their conversations.

In conclusion, the response of our agency and local school divisions, COVID-19 has made possible through additional Federal funding intended for pandemic relief. As we begin to emerge from the pandemic, we know that the impacts will ripple through communities for years to come.

As such, sustained and flexible resources will continue to be necessary to ensure that states can be responsive and can provide the services necessary for these students to succeed. On behalf of Virginia students and school leaders, thank you for the significant investments that have been made in our schools and our students. [The prepared statement of Mr. Lane follows:]

PREPARED STATEMENT OF JAMES F. LANE

Written Testimony from Dr. James F. Lane
Superintendent of Public Instruction, Virginia Department of Education

U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Education and Labor
Early Childhood, Elementary, and Secondary Education Subcommittee Hearing
(5/19/21):

Picking up the Pieces: Strengthening Connections with Students Experiencing Homelessness and Children in Foster Care

Introduction

Good morning, Chairman Sablan, Ranking Member Owens, and Members of the House Education and Labor Committee's Subcommittee on Early Childhood, Elementary, and Secondary Education.

I am Dr. James Lane, Virginia's State Superintendent of Public Instruction, and I am pleased to have the opportunity to be here to share a bit about the student experience in Virginia during COVID-19, specifically how the pandemic has uniquely impacted our youth in foster care and students experiencing homelessness.

Overview of the Impact of COVID-19

The societal value and importance of our public school system is well-established, but I believe that for many of us, one of the most marked insights to come from the COVID-19 pandemic is just how critical a role our schools play in every aspect of our students' and families' lives. Schools are more than the educational experiences they provide; they serve as safe havens, as a reliable source of food, connection, and stability, and much more. This is particularly the case for some of our most vulnerable learners, namely our youth in foster care and students who are experiencing homelessness. The pandemic has also shone a bright light on the everyday, heroic efforts of teachers, principals, school counselors, and other school staff and their commitment to doing anything necessary to meet the needs of their students.

When schools closed in March of last year to help mitigate the spread of COVID-19 - albeit necessary for the public health and safety of our communities - the ripple effect of the decision disproportionately affected certain students. Notably, this includes those students in foster care or experiencing homelessness and housing instability who depend on our schools for vital wraparound services. Schools are essential for this population; the classroom is much more than a learning environment, it is a place of safety, routine, personal space, friendships, and support.¹ For a child, the classroom may be the only place where they can experience quiet, interact with others their age, and be recognized for success. And though our school divisions were quick to stand up their remote and virtual learning programs, our students without stable housing, reliable access to devices or broadband, or difficult home environments felt the effects of the pandemic in the most dramatic ways as it eliminated their connection to these vital services and supports, educational and otherwise.

¹ Oakley & Kling, 2000; referenced in Stronge, J. H. & Reed-Victor, E. (Eds.) (2000). *Educating Homeless Students: Promising Practices*. Eye on Education: New York.

Meanwhile, families in Virginia, and around the country, have suffered from the economic repercussions of the pandemic, losing jobs, steady sources of income, and housing as a result. [Data from the January 2021 Point in Time](#) count show that the number of people experiencing homelessness in the Richmond, Virginia region increased by 53 percent year-over-year, from 546 people in January 2020 to 838 people in January 2021. This was the largest recorded number of people experiencing homelessness in the region since 2014 and has been attributed directly to the COVID-19 pandemic, ensuing financial crisis, and significant reduction in rental vacancies. And, we find similar trends across the state. Implicit in these numbers are that more students have lost their stable home environments, are transient, unsheltered, or have had to double-up in their housing arrangements. Virginia responded quickly in the pandemic to try and alleviate housing instability, and was one of the first states in the nation to [create a statewide rent and mortgage relief program](#) with federal Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act funds distributing more than \$83 million to families in the Commonwealth, the majority of which include children. Despite federal and state efforts to stabilize housing, homelessness continues to be a major challenge for families and students.

Not only did school closures in March have a direct academic, social, and emotional impact on youth in foster care and students experiencing homelessness, but the systems that support these students have also been tested in unprecedented ways. The demands of resourcing and providing meaningful support in remote environments is compounded by the difficulty of identifying students in need of such support. Remote learning has changed the ways schools and students engage with one another, and in some cases, this can disguise some of the tell-tale signs that students are struggling with more than just changes to instructional modalities and classroom environments. In fact, Virginia has seen a dramatic 85 percent decline in referrals of incidents of child abuse and neglect, a corresponding drop in the number of children entering foster care, as well as a 14 percent decrease in student homelessness despite evidence to the contrary from local partners, pediatricians, and others.

The ongoing impact of the pandemic also exacerbated conditions for families already under immense stress and pressure. Foster parents, foster-to-adopt families, and kinship caregivers, also referred to as resource families, are critical partners in child welfare and reunification processes but have been strained by the transition to remote learning for their foster care placements. Resource families, like many others, have struggled to secure and sustain childcare for their remote learners. Some have been reluctant to take on additional placements out of COVID-related health concerns. The stress, trauma, and logistical constraints of the pandemic have also increased the instances of conflict, sometimes requiring a child or family to leave a host home without other options in place.

It is for these reasons, in addition to the profound academic needs, that Virginia has worked to offer safe in-person learning to students since last summer. Virginia's preK-12 reopening guidance has been grounded in safely bringing back first those students most disproportionately impacted, including young learners, students with disabilities, and dual language learners and safely expanding beyond that to provide opportunities for all students to receive in-person instruction. This has been made possible only with the federal pandemic relief packages targeted to PreK-12 schools (CARES, CRF, CRSSA, ARP) to help divisions cover all manner of health and safety costs as well as educational technology and student support services.

Although our divisions have sought to significantly expand their in-person offerings throughout the year, there has been and continues to be great variation in the willingness of families to return to in-person learning. While a new Virginia law passed during our 2021 legislative session requires that all divisions offer full time in-person instruction next year, early data indicates continuing hesitancy from some families.² A recent poll conducted by the L. Douglas Wilder School for Government and Public Affairs at Virginia Commonwealth University indicates that 73 percent of parents are willing to send their children back to school next year, however, there are stark differences based on participant demographics. For example, 77 percent of parents making \$100,000 or more a year are willing to send their children back, but only 60 percent of parents making \$50,000 or less are comfortable doing so. Additionally, parents of color are two - three times less willing to send their students back as compared to their white counterparts. Therefore, as operational plans are made for the 2021-2022 school year, the Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) and our divisions will be working diligently to implement and communicate the efficacy of strong public health measures in place to protect students and staff alike. Direct outreach from schools to individual families to discuss and address concerns will be necessary in order for many parents to feel comfortable returning their children to the school environment.

Because of the broad-reaching impact of the pandemic and the resulting effects on children in foster care and students experiencing homelessness, there is an urgent and pressing need to maximize our current resources and be innovative in our approaches. New federal investments have been and will continue to be critical to ensuring that all of these children are both back in school in-person and connected to the services that we know will help them thrive. I would like to present some of the ways in which the VDOE, our state educational agency, and Virginia's local school divisions supported these students before the pandemic, innovated and adapted to the pandemic, worked to serve students in-person throughout the year under challenging circumstances, as well as reflect on some opportunities for us to further such critical work with the help of additional federal funding.

Virginia Background and History of Supporting Youth in Foster Care and Students Experiencing Homelessness

Even prior to the pandemic, VDOE has worked to build strong networks and infrastructure for providing key student services to our vulnerable student populations. Through partnerships with other state agencies, institutions of higher education, and community-based organizations, VDOE seeks to help meet a range of needs for foster care students and students experiencing homelessness across the state through targeted outreach and service offerings.

Youth in Foster Care

² [Senate Bill 1303](#) (2021)

Children and youth in out-of-home care average one to two residential placement changes per year, a rate of mobility greater than their peers not in foster care.³ For these children and youth, a change in home placement frequently results in a change in school placement which is another very significant life event for our students. Virginia has long been recognized by federal technical assistance partners and other states for its leadership in strong interagency coordination at the state level to support the educational stability of students in foster care. VDOE works with other state agencies, such as the Virginia Department of Social Services (VDSS), to implement provisions of the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 (Fostering Connections) and the Title I, Part A provisions in the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) on behalf of our students in foster care. Further, joint guidance from Virginia's cross-agency partnerships focus on keeping students in the same school to provide continuity in education and maintain important relationships at school. This also provides stability during a traumatic time for the child as well as improving educational and life outcomes.

At the local level, VDOE collaborates with local child welfare agencies to help determine and meet the best interest determinations for students in transition. Additionally, interdisciplinary teams that represent education, social services, and community agencies work together to ensure case management and support for students still of school age and beyond.

Recognizing the volume of students in the foster care system, Virginia has invested in programs like the Children's Services Act Fostering Futures to ensure that youth in foster care who reach the age of 18 still have access to the services needed to facilitate a successful transition into adulthood for these youth. This work has been reinforced by legislation recently passed by the Virginia General Assembly to support and streamline enrollment for foster care students who have aged out of the system and are navigating the transition independently.⁴

Students Experiencing Homelessness

VDOE helps to ensure enrollment, attendance, and school success for students experiencing homelessness through public awareness efforts across the commonwealth and subgrants to local school divisions. A partner in this work is [Project HOPE](#), based at one of Virginia's public research universities, William and Mary. Through our statewide collaborative partnership with Project HOPE, VDOE is able to fund activities throughout the school year, including early childhood education, mentoring, tutoring, parent education, summer enrichment programs, and domestic violence prevention programs. Local school divisions are also able to employ federal and state funding to develop customized programs to meet the needs of homeless children and youth in their area. Local Homeless Education Programs supplement this effort, providing emergency services, referrals for health services, transportation, school supplies, and ease any barriers related to obtaining school records as available.

³ [Fostering Connections and the Every Student Succeeds Act: Joint Guidance for School Stability of Children and Youth in Foster Care Fostering Connections \(2017\)](#)

⁴ [Senate Bill 275 \(2020\)](#) and [House Bill 368 \(2020\)](#)

[Virginia's ESSA Plan](#) sets out a framework for these initiatives and details the ways in which VDOE and Project Hope identify students, assess needs, support students and staff, as well as facilitate access to services as part of meeting the requirements of the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, Title IX, Part A of ESSA, for the education of homeless children and youth program. In service of the work outlined in Virginia's ESSA Plan, Virginia's McKinney-Vento liaisons have been indispensable to our efforts and success with providing for students experiencing homelessness. For more than 20 years, Virginia has had a McKinney-Vento liaison in each of its 132 local school divisions. Liaisons must be well-trained and readily accessible to families seeking help. Having a dedicated liaison and single point of contact in our local school divisions also means there is always someone on hand who understands each family's individual circumstances, which is invaluable to those our liaisons serve. Liaisons are also advocates for the success of our students and many have deep bonds to and relationships within their communities which further promotes their ability to link their students with the academic and social supports they need, inside and outside of school.

In addition to their direct service responsibilities, liaisons are a resource for state leadership and help to inform statewide policy and offer input on the policies and practices of the VDOE and Virginia Board of Education. For example, our liaisons have offered feedback and insight into the implementation of the state accreditation system since the 2018-2019 academic year, bringing a unique lens and perspective on how these changes have impacted and improved student experiences for those experiencing homelessness.

Resourcing this Work

Even before the increased demands of the pandemic, many of the services and support Virginia has been able to offer to foster care children and students facing homelessness relied, in part, on federal funds. Title I funding for the improvement of academic achievement for the disadvantaged, Title IX funding under the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), SNAP for Women, Infants, and Children, and the John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Program, among others, have made these programs possible.

Adapting our Approach during COVID-19

At the State-Level

Virginia families, like those around the country, have been dramatically impacted by the pandemic. Job losses have led to housing instability and increases in rates of homelessness. These stressors are often linked to child abuse and neglect, which directly impacts the number of children entering the foster care system. The cascading effects of these experiences and trauma are a reminder of the need for long term, sustainable investments in services and supports for vulnerable families and students. However the school building closures in March 2020, coupled with students choosing or being required by their division to learn virtually this past year, have meant that school personnel have had a harder time quickly identifying students and families in need.

In light of COVID-19 and its repercussions for Virginia's public education system, Virginia has been fortunate in our ability to leverage existing capacity and strong resources to respond quickly and thoughtfully to ongoing and evolving pandemic conditions. We have also sought to amplify our support for Virginia's vulnerable learners and are working to ensure this augmented support carries into future years as students and families work through the ramifications of the pandemic.

Communication and information sharing has been a linchpin for our approach to supporting divisions in their work around foster care youth and students experiencing homelessness. Early in our response, VDOE convened stakeholders and work groups to develop guidance directed at serving students in foster care and homeless youth. This included developing and regularly updating user and family-friendly resources like our [Frequently Asked Questions page](#) and providing subject-specific guidance materials to practitioners in the field.

In response to some of the challenges we observed in facilitating foster care transitions, VDOE and VDSS utilized existing processes, such as notification forms and procedures for notifying schools when a child or youth in care is placed in a new residence during the school closures, and conducted joint training of school divisions and local departments of social services on this process. Staff from the VDOE and VDSS joint team have continued to meet through the pandemic and provide information and resources to local departments of social services. This guidance has ensured that the policies, practices and procedures ensure student safety, align with best interest determinations, and allowed access to remote learning opportunities. VDOE has also encouraged divisions to coordinate the provision of positive, proactive student engagement in learning when distance became a barrier to participation through a student's home school.

VDSS has worked to provide virtual family visitation for children and youth in foster care. Though a lack of access to technology poses a barrier for some, virtual visitation has largely been successful and many reports have found that families have maintained greater connection than prior to the pandemic. VDSS has also made various guidance changes to accommodate the realities of the pandemic, including working to provide adjusted payments to foster parents if children test positive for COVID-19 to help pay for treatment, identifying family-based foster homes that are willing to take children who have tested positive for COVID-19, and converting in-person trainings to virtual trainings for foster and adoptive parents. Family reunification hearings have also been made virtual and initial feedback from families has been positive, as the online hearings proceed at a slower pace and attending from home, as opposed to visiting a courtroom, is more comfortable for families.

Specific to our students experiencing homelessness, the office of the state coordinator for McKinney-Vento, based at William and Mary, created short videos with an overview of the McKinney-Vento program with a pandemic lens which liaisons could share with school staff. Videos were also paired with one-pagers focused on different staff roles (administrators, teachers, counselors, etc.). Similar resources were developed for early childhood providers. Our office of the state coordinator and our school nutrition staff stayed in contact with our liaisons to make sure they were aware of the changing rules for school meals and the issuance of pandemic electronic benefit transfers (P-EBT) to families, supported through federal dollars and is a lifeline for many.

To disseminate these resources and offer technical assistance, the office of the state coordinator began offering biweekly check-ins with our school division McKinney-Vento liaisons providing national and state updates and giving liaisons across the commonwealth a platform to ask each other questions and share challenges and successes. These meetings continue and have now begun focusing on the new America Rescue Plan-Homeless Children and Youth (ARP-HCY) funds.

Throughout the year, we have prioritized serving our most vulnerable learners in-person and ensuring students continue to receive necessary wrap-around services needed to thrive in such challenging circumstances. This has included continuing to prioritize foster care children and students experiencing homelessness in VDOE guidance and initiatives. For example, the agency developed [Social Emotional Learning Quick Guides](#), which were even recognized by the U. S Department of Education's Safer Schools and Campuses Best Practices Clearinghouse, that focused on supporting students in marginalized populations including homeless and foster youth. VDOE addressed these students through its comprehensive guidance for vulnerable learners in its [Recover, Redesign and Restart](#) document which was a comprehensive plan to move Virginia learners and educators forward through the pandemic and its impact. The VDOE has also developed resources for local school divisions through the [Virginia Leading Engaging Assessing Recovering Nurturing and Succeeding](#) (L.E.A.R.N.S.) taskforce to assist Virginia Educators in navigating uncertain times and specifically addressing learning loss for this population of learners.

As the 2021-2022 school year approaches, Virginia's local divisions are preparing to offer an in-person option for students per the new legislative mandate, but many families remain hesitant to send their students back in-person. The reasons vary, but include public health conditions, a student or family member's own vulnerable health status, or uncertainty or discomfort with the division's mitigation strategies. Therefore, because many of Virginia's schools will likely still have some hybrid and/or remote learning options for the 2021-2022 school year, VDOE has also developed additional guidance on setting benchmarks for success in virtual learning environments as well as when and how to engage students who may not thrive in the remote setting. These benchmarks will help divisions ensure that students disproportionately impacted by the pandemic and remote learning are appropriately placed in an environment next year that addresses all their instructional needs.

At the Local-Level

In Virginia, our local school divisions are responsible for the day-to-day supervision and oversight of our public schools. The effects of the pandemic not only impacted our students but placed a tremendous strain on our school divisions as they sought to find innovative and new ways to serve their students. Virginia's local school divisions have been exemplary in their response to the pandemic and exhausting their resources to support students under such unprecedented and challenging circumstances.

For our students in foster care, divisions have partnered with the local departments of social services in the joint decision-making process when one of their students moves into a new school division. These established pathways of communication were integral in supporting youth in foster care especially in facing new and unanticipated obstacles for maintaining consistency and stability for these children and youth.

McKinney-Vento liaisons have also mobilized to provide support to students experiencing homelessness in new and expanded ways. Securing meals has been among the many ways school division staff and McKinney-Vento liaisons provided for families during the pandemic. Liaisons have worked diligently since last March to guarantee students still receive their school meals and have gathered donations and food to meet broader family needs. Liaisons have attached flyers to meals served, which are a meaningful reminder to students and families that the liaison is still there to provide assistance despite school closures and remote learning. Other administrative and support staff positions have played an important role as well. One transportation director even drove well into another school division just to make sure a student had food they needed. Flexible federal pandemic relief funds have been essential to the success of such programs.

One outstanding local example in Virginia was with Richmond City Public Schools (RPS) and its liaison, which have been diligent in supporting its students and families in meeting a range of housing needs. The liaison partnered with a local shelter and was awarded a local Robins Foundation grant for a housing navigator as well as funding to cover first month's rent and security deposit for families connected to their McKinney-Vento Program. This school year, RPS has been able to connect about 30 families with 70 children to permanent housing and the success of the program has prompted its expansion into Henrico and Chesterfield counties. They created a housing guide with a step-by-step guide to best market a potential renter to a landlord and offers monthly group housing coaching open to all families. In their outreach, RPS has been thoughtful in considering needs beyond just housing and have sought to provide necessities such as diapers and formula needed for young children in the family. Liaisons have also helped families obtain important legal documents by hosting services like Department of Motor Vehicles Connect and birth certificate drop offs on a routine basis. This is one such example of how existing infrastructure funded by the McKinney-Vento resources have been essential in responding to the growing need created by the pandemic. However, it also illustrates that these innovative responses are emblematic of how communities, particularly those most fiscally stressed, have had to dedicate their own limited resources in the absence of sufficient state and federal funding.

In addition to helping students meet some of their essential needs, McKinney-Vento liaisons sought to procure computers for students who were homeless, find low-cost internet service, and create hot spots and other Wi-Fi access. They made sure students in a motel or other crowded spaces had a lap desk and noise-cancelling headphones to prevent distractions and were taught to use a virtual background to avoid feeling stigmatized by their surroundings. Liaisons reached out to parents, teaching them how to use the technology with some even hosting training sessions in their cafeterias when schools were closed during March 2020.

Funding a New Approach

As one might imagine, the scale and magnitude of this work during the pandemic has required a significant investment. Much of VDOE's and local school division's response to COVID-19 has been made possible through additional federal and state funding sources intended for pandemic relief and are indicative of the ongoing need for federal support, without which, essential programs would be forced to scale back or end. Both the CARES and the Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations (CRRSA) Act included earmarks for preK-12 education and Title I schools through their respective Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Funds (ESSER I and II Funds). Local school divisions are encouraged to reserve Title I, Part A funds for students experiencing homelessness whether or not they attend a Title I school. Uses for these funds have helped scale up programs that provide student support services, including personnel costs for homeless liaisons or other school social worker and administrative positions, transportation, professional development, and school supplies are most common. Among the initiatives undertaken with the state discretionary set-asides was an effort to make social emotional learning screeners available to divisions to help better assess the impact of the pandemic on social-emotional well-being and respond effectively to students who need the additional support.

Early in its response, Virginia created a statewide rent and mortgage relief program with CARES ACT funds. As of February 2021, the program has distributed more than \$83 million to families, many with children and students, across the Commonwealth. Virginia has also been able to maintain its rent relief program with the help of an additional \$524 million in federal funding through the Emergency Rental Assistance (ERA) program included in the federal stimulus package and will assist households and landlords with rent payments to avoid eviction.

Even with federal funding, need has outpaced new resources and required the state and local school divisions to find creative funding solutions for critical initiatives. VDOE has been able to leverage existing funds to support more divisions. For example, funding through McKinney-Vento and Title IX, Part A of ESSA is the main vehicle for supporting students experiencing homelessness but in a normal year, competitive grants only reach about 35 school divisions. The office of the state coordinator awarded non-subgrants via McKinney-Vento funding to school divisions that would not normally receive subgrants, increasing the number of divisions receiving direct funding at a time when it was needed most. VDOE has also been able to repurpose funds appropriated to the state educational agency and generally used for travel expenses related to training and federal program monitoring to support virtual platforms for meeting with families and services providers this past year. VDSS has directed local departments of social services to use federal funds through the John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Program to continue awarding stipends to help young adults maintain housing, and is actively working to increase access to SNAP, WIC and unemployment benefits for these individuals.

Virginia has also been fortunate that many of our school communities have been incredibly responsive to supporting its schools. In rural Southampton County, local sorority chapters donated to Southampton County Public Schools McKinney-Vento Program and we received stories that the liaison's office was overflowing with items to distribute to their families. Meanwhile, Spotsylvania County Public Schools orchestrated one-to-one parent training for their families living in the local motels. Roanoke City Public Schools is collaborating with their United Way and has funds donated by the community they can use to assist families who are experiencing or are on the verge of homelessness. This gives them a way to help families and students with non-education needs, such as paying an electric bill, providing funds to prevent an eviction or assisting with obtaining permanent housing. The liaison has gotten creative with other funders who paid off some judgments that cleared the way for families to access stable housing options.

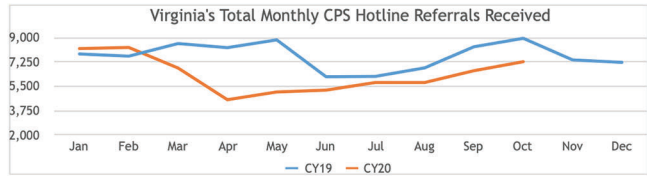
While these funding solutions are exemplary of spirit and innovation, they are not sustainable on their own and need to be supplemented by federal funding sources like the ARP-HCY. And, as we continue to observe the compounding impacts of the pandemic, both direct and indirect, on divisions and students, the ongoing need to resource programs and initiatives that help address long-term burdens are and will continue to be necessary.

Ongoing Challenges

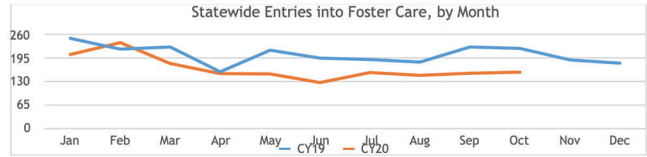
The pandemic created new sets of challenges for our students, families, and schools as well as brought to the forefront disparities that already existed in the system. Despite our best efforts to adapt and respond, there have undoubtedly been challenges and many persist as it relates to foster care youth and students experiencing homelessness. And, while some of these issues were more pronounced in remote educational environments, the ongoing transition to in-person learning has not itself resolved these widespread challenges. State and local leaders are planning for the long-term implications of the disruptions the pandemic created for families and communities, and will need sustained flexible financial resources in order to truly address the full impact of the pandemic on these vulnerable students.

Declines in the Number of Child Abuse and Neglect Reports

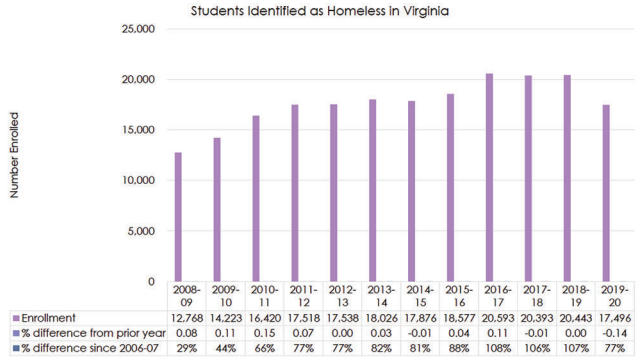
The foster care system in Virginia remains operational and effective at identifying and tracking the whereabouts of this particular subset of students already in foster care, but the remote academic environment has made it difficult to recognize other signs and signals of student distress. Virginia has seen a reduction in the incidents of abuse and neglect reported to Child Protective Services statewide. VDSS reported the number of calls to the Child Abuse and Neglect Hotline and differences in reporter sources as the referrals from school personnel decreased by over 85percent.



Because of the decrease in the number of calls to the CPS Hotline, there was also a decrease in the number of investigations and family assessments as well as children entering foster care as compared to 2019.



Declines in the Number of Students Identified as Experiencing Homelessness
 The number of students identified as experiencing homelessness decreased by 14 percent in 2019-2020 as compared to the previous year. McKinney-Vento liaisons have also reported continued low identification rates as the 2020-2021 academic year began.



What normally would be considered a promising trend, this data is a cause for concern. In the remote environment, educators are limited in the ways they can observe and meaningfully engage with their students on a routine basis, making it more difficult to detect red flags such as absenteeism, withdrawal, etc. thus reducing their ability to identify issues that lead to mandated reports of instances of child abuse and neglect.

VDOE and VDSS have circulated resources regarding how to identify concerns in a virtual environment to assist educators in their roles as mandated reporters. Additionally, VDOE has offered guidance to divisions on how they might rethink their attendance tracking and monitoring practices in a way that prioritizes connection, and student well-being within the hybrid and virtual environments. For example, VDOE recommended schools consider how to utilize different instructional personnel across the week, so teachers have a shared responsibility and workload for outreach but each student has a meaningful engagement with a teacher everyday. Additionally, we offered suggestions for ways to track engagement in remote and hybrid environments so any need for intervention was quickly identified.

However, school divisions continue to affirm these challenges, many reporting increases in absenteeism rates and having had trouble reaching vulnerable student populations, especially our families experiencing homelessness for the first time. They have shared instances of disconnected phones, unanswered communications, and even students having moved without a need or ability to inform the division. In cases where staff or a liaison may have followed up with a home visit under normal circumstances, quarantine and other safety factors have limited this type of outreach over the last year. The difficulty identifying these issues limits a teacher or divisions ability to intervene and respond.

The impacts of remote learning on our foster care youth and students experiencing homelessness are felt in the classroom as well. The same systemic concerns, like access to the necessary devices, reliable broadband, basic needs, familial supports, that can contribute to student disengagement or absence from the classroom also create subpar remote learning environments.

Additionally, absenteeism itself has detrimental effects on student outcomes. Virginia's state accreditation model recognizes the causal link between absenteeism and student outcomes. A necessary prerequisite for learning is being present to get the content and inversely, absences cause gaps in exposure to content and understanding as well as erode key relationships with teachers and peers. Though, as Superintendent of Public Instruction, I have been able to offer some relief to school divisions in waiving our state accreditation system this year, our disengaged students, notably foster care children and students experiencing homelessness, are at risk of missing opportunities to develop the critical knowledge, skills, and abilities they need to be successful. And, because the length of time away from the classroom increases the difficulty of reacquainting, these students and their educators will need to work harder to recover from learning loss and build new connections.

Remote learning presents a unique set of challenges, but even as communities have reopened and divisions heeded the Governor's call to transition back to in-person learning, many of these challenges for our vulnerable learners will remain an obstacle. Efforts to re-engage those students with their coursework must be redoubled if those students are to ultimately succeed academically. Virginia's recent experience with addressing absenteeism and truancy as a state accreditation consideration will provide a sound foundation for many divisions. However, schools will likely need to leverage federal financial resources to scale those efforts and ensure all students are meaningfully engaging with their academics as we transition out of the pandemic further.

This need for additional support comes at a time in Virginia when there are already teacher shortages and the strain of the past fifteen months have deterred some teachers from returning to their classrooms or their careers. Anecdotally, divisions are reporting that they are struggling to fill summer school positions and the increased positions necessary to provide tailored instruction to students as they return full time in person next fall. In order to provide sound, evidence-based remediation and instructional support, as well as social, emotional, and mental health support to students who have experienced significant traumas over the last year, schools will need to leverage federal resources for additional staff positions. However, workforce shortages and significant burnout may inhibit the ability of schools to do so successfully. Virginia fully intends to use some of the state set-aside from our federal pandemic relief funds to support statewide efforts to recruit and retain teachers and support staff in the wake of the pandemic.

The effect of absenteeism and teacher shortages on student success are particularly relevant examples of both the real-time consequences of the pandemic but also examples of the legacies that the pandemic will leave behind long after the public health crisis. We continue to do our best in anticipating the long-term impacts of COVID-19 for students and educators and address those concerns, like learning loss, head on. But, an ongoing challenge of this work will be ensuring the resources keep up with the need and dedicating adequate resources to those who need them the most.

Opportunities

Educators in Virginia have done incredible work over the past year to find and create solutions to these challenges, bringing students safely back to school in-person, while also tackling issues of access to broadband, meal services, social services, mental health supports, virtual connection to support networks, etc, for homeless and foster youth. We know more work lies ahead and recognize there are a number of opportunities for us to both innovate with existing state and federal resources and invest in those priorities we will know will make a difference in our schools and students' lives.

A silver lining of the pandemic has been the growth and transformation in the way we leverage technology. As an agency, technology has helped us streamline our communications to divisions and creating efficiencies in how we share information more and offer technical assistance. For example, as additional sources of federal funding have come online, VDOE has been able to quickly and effectively support divisions in deploying funds to support critical initiatives and also get a better understanding of division needs and priorities so that the agency can offer meaningful guidance. For instance, as the COVID-19 relief funds (ESSER I and II) were being released, the VDOE state coordinator held multiple virtual listening sessions with liaisons and other stakeholders to identify needs and meaningful ways the funds could be used. Later, the state coordinator was included in VDOE presentations to school division leaders when the funds and uses were being explained. Additionally, VDSS has used technology to provide virtual connections and family visitations with foster youth. This increased connectivity will continue to be invaluable as we hear from our local partners on forthcoming grant funding and support, such as the ARP support for homeless children and youth.

In our classrooms, technology has been a source of continuity and innovation for our educational system, allowing students to continue learning even when social distancing and logistical challenges limited the ways we could safely return to the classroom. On school days that would have been missed in the past, divisions are able to bring the classroom, including teachers and peers, to the student. Technology has also expanded our opportunities for connecting students with services, like telehealth, helping to keep students safe and healthy. Even in its limitations, remote learning and the technology that has supported it has been especially critical for providing as many supports and services to foster care youth and students experiencing homelessness as possible. Federal funding sources will continue to help bridge gaps in making sure students have the devices and connectivity they need to benefit from these enhancements.

While technology and virtual resources continue to evolve and expand what our schools can offer their students, for those like our youth in foster care and students experiencing homelessness, there is no substitute for the in-person learning experience. It is an important component of restoring safety and stability for these kids and VDOE has been an advocate for returning to in-person learning, while allowing school divisions flexibility to make decisions based on the nuances of their community and local health factors. With updated guidance from CDC and the Virginia Department of Health (VDH), most students that want to have begun transitioning back into the classroom in Virginia. But even after every hesitant families return and every school division returns to full in-person learning next year, there will still be significant logistical and operational needs to maintain safe and healthy learning environments. Whether a small or large division, these operational expenses can be burdensome and the federal pandemic relief funding (CARES, CRF, CRSSA, and ARP) allow divisions to reopen their doors safely and successfully. Once back in the classroom, we know that the lasting trauma of the pandemic will not immediately recede. All students will need additional instructional and wraparound supports to be successful in moving forward.

Trauma will be particularly palpable for those students who were already subject to instability. Prior to the pandemic, Virginia struggled to secure sufficient funding to meet all the requests from school divisions when McKinney-Vento funds were awarded on a competitive basis. In order to address significant new need, the American Rescue Plan (ARP) provided \$800M in direct funding to support students experiencing homelessness and will increase from \$1.7 million last year to an additional \$13 million above our normal McKinney-Vento award, allowing us to reach many more families and communities across the Commonwealth and continue our creative endeavors for improving outreach.

As noted earlier, only 35 percent of divisions receive funding through McKinney-Vento when awarded competitively. Though we have extended the reach of these funds already, the ARP will help to sustain division programs and efforts. This will be crucial in supporting liaisons and allowing them to do more of their work, better. And, because of the flexibility in allowable uses, this additional federal funding provides an opportunity to scale new, creative support programs that had formerly relied on local grants such as the Richmond example where families are not only connected with housing options, but the financial assistance necessary to secure it.

As more guidance from the U.S. Department of Education becomes available, more of our potential programming options will continue to take shape. A priority for the agency will be to build out new and existing training opportunities for divisions and staff in the provision of important student services. For our local school divisions additional hiring has been a common theme for how they are considering the deployment of funds. This might include the hiring of navigators to assist our families in accessing all the extra resources out there, employing recent graduates with lived experience to be near-peer mentors for our older high school students, or bringing on additional student services personnel to assist in wrap-around case management. Divisions are also exploring partnerships with the available runaway and homeless youth programs in Virginia to create more host homes for our older unaccompanied youth. We have heard from other divisions thinking about providing bilingual mental health for their newcomers who meet our definition and others are interested in having their McKinney-Vento materials translated. Additionally, there is interest in finding more opportunities for engaging our impacted youth voice, ensuring their voice and ideas are heard, and that funds are used to reach our underserved students.

Funding from the ARP will not only allow us to mend the gap and provide resources to programs and initiatives that have been under-resourced, but it is also an opportunity for us to shift our thinking from reactive to proactive, addressing the now alongside planning for the ongoing implications. VDOE is in the process of setting up a tracking and evaluation process for any funds based on the allowance for wraparound support like housing. This will help us show how these funds directly improve the lives of our families and students and we can capture creative ideas that might be fundable. This will also potentially be a resource to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, providing evidence-based data on the use and effectiveness of certain programming. Expansion of McKinney-Vento services have also highlighted a number of lessons-learned in terms of programming and supporting students.

Conclusion

I thank you for your time today and the opportunity to share some of the ways in which Virginia school leaders are striving to meet the vast and growing needs of our vulnerable learners, including our students experiencing homelessness and youth in foster care. As you have heard this morning, much of VDOE's and local school division's response to COVID-19 has been made possible through additional federal funding sources intended for pandemic relief.

Though we have much to be optimistic about as we begin to emerge from the pandemic, we are certain that the various trauma and impacts of the last year will ripple through the lives of students, families, communities, and schools for years to come. Both foster care and homelessness numbers are lagging indicators and we will be identifying students and families in crisis for many more months or even years. I hope it has been clear today that Virginia has experienced and committed leaders who have demonstrated their ability to strategically leverage resources and innovate to meet the growing demand for services amidst very challenging circumstances. However, the scale and nature of these challenges will require continued, sustained and flexible resources to ensure that states can be responsive to and ensure that supports for these students and their families continue long after the pandemic has passed. On behalf of Virginia's students and school leaders, thank you for the significant federal investments that have been made to date in our schools and students, and for your consideration of continued future investments to meet the significant and long-term need.

Chairman SABLAN. Thank you very much Dr. Lane. All the witnesses are just almost perfect in their timing. I just would like to say that only if we could figure out a way to just eliminate homelessness and foster care for school children and it's possible even to just remove poverty from the Nation.

Now we'll go to Member questions. I will ask staff to bring back the bell if necessary, but under Committee Rule 9(a) we will now question witnesses under the five-minute rule. I will be recognizing Subcommittee Members in seniority order.

Again, to ensure that the Member's five-minute rule is adhered to, staff will be keeping track of time and the timer will show a blinking light when the time has expired, and maybe bring back the bell if necessary. So please be attentive to the time, wrap up when your time is over and remute your microphone.

Now I would like to begin recognizing Members questioning by recognizing a teacher, a National Teacher of the Year Mrs. Congresswoman Hayes. Jahana please unmute your microphone and you have five minutes.

Mrs. HAYES. Thank you, Chairman, Sablan, and thank you for having this hearing. And thank you to all the witnesses. I have remarks prepared, but I just want to start by saying it is incredibly exhausting on this Committee when hearing after hearing we're having conversations as if we don't all recognize the importance of getting kids back to school.

I think both democrats and republicans share that. We've tried to do that safely. We're handling a once in a generation pandemic that none of us asked for, that none of us can account for, and we've all just tried to do the best that we can to protect students, families, teachers, and I say this in every hearing, to hear over and over teachers' unions berated.

I remind you of the irony in the fact that those unions are made up of teachers, the same people that you're saying your children need to go back to because they are the life blood, and they are the ones who invest in them, and nurture them and they are the ones who are the mandated reporters.

Those same teachers are listening to these hearings and being demoralized over and over and over again as if they're lazy, and too demanding, and only thinking of themselves. And I can assure you having been in the classroom for 15 years, there's no teacher that wakes up and does that job every day that doesn't first think about their students and children.

So it's just worth saying that we want kids to go back to school. We want every school to open. We want kids to grow and thrive and learn in those environments, but enough of this, Democrats don't want kids to go to school. That is just not true, and it is the reason why we voted overwhelming for funding and support and resources to assist with those openings.

So my question for you Ms. Erb-Downward, we've heard about all of these students and I worked very closely with McKinney-Vento in my school district, and we were a Title I school district with so many children who lived in poverty. My Connecticut State Department of Children and Families reports that most of the families that are struggling with homelessness also report poverty conditions, being disconnected from services, and these underlying things that are not abuse.

So at a time when poverty could be the underlying factor, and not abuse, especially coming out of this pandemic. We're going to see so many families who are dealing with just different ripple effect issues. How can we be sure that those families are not subjected to unnecessary investigations, and rather are helped by safety net programs that can help them to stabilize their families and get out of poverty, even though it may present as you know what someone else might call neglect or abuse.

Ms. ERB-DOWNWARD. Thank you so much for this question. I think it's a really, really great one, and it comes up frequently among both community organizations and among families. There is a great fear among families that if they acknowledge their homelessness that they will be at risk of losing their children.

I think the statistics that I shared, that you know there's a 14 times greater risk of children who are homeless entering in the foster care in the next year than their peers who are housed, is really telling of you know that challenge.

One critical piece there, so the first thing is I think that we need to understand that more, and we need to acknowledge that intersection. And I think we need to have more frank conversations about the fact that homelessness and poverty alone are not reasons that a child should be removed from their family. That is in the guidelines mandatory reporting guidelines. You know I recognize that as a mandated reporter, this can be a very challenging thing to disentangle.

But homelessness of itself, by itself, is not abuse. So how many children could we potentially be preventing from removal if we were actually just addressing the underlying instability there?

I think right now with the American Rescue Plan there are some resources that exist that can be used to help families and one of the great things about the 800 million dollars that's been allocated to serve homeless families, is we have an opportunity to reach those families and bridge some of those gaps.

So for example, 77 percent of families are not eligible for HUD or shelter supports because they're living or staying doubled up temporarily with another family. You know this really cuts people out of services, but we have the opportunity because these dollars are flexible in their funding that we can bridge those gaps.

So for example, a homelessness liaison could use dollars to temporarily put a family up in a hotel. Now this is not supposed to be the money supplanting other dollars for hotel stays or shelter, but if you take that money and help that family into a hotel for a few days, they can be eligible for HUD housing supports. That's giving them access without any student assists.

Mrs. HAYES. I'm sorry my time has expired, but I so appreciate your comments because that is the exact intent of the legislation that we passed in the American Rescue Plan to hit those core poverty issues and lift our children out of those situations. Mr. Chair I'll submit the rest of my questions and with that I yield back. I'm sorry for going over.

Chairman SABLAN. OK. Now I understand that the Ranking Member of the full Committee Dr. Foxx please unmute, and you have five minutes.

Ms. FOXX. Thank you Mr. Chairman I appreciate it, and I appreciate our witnesses being here today. My questions are for Ms. Davis. Ms. Davis thank you for your testimony and thank you for your family's willingness to participate in the foster system and love these children.

I truly hope there's a place in heaven for you all. I like when witnesses bring recommendations to our hearings, and you're the second parent to testify before the Subcommittee about the essential nature of schools. Many of us agree the initial closures last spring were reasonable given what was not known about the Coronavirus at the time.

But you argue for treating schools like hospitals and grocery stores that never close. Could you explain that in more detail?

Chairman SABLAN. Ms. Davis, I think your microphone.

Ms. DAVIS. I'm sorry. Thank you for that question. I just quite simply believe that schools are just as critical as hospitals. Learning is so critical for students and online is a poor substitute for in-person. It's important to have face time, and I'm not talking about the app. I'm talking about face time with teachers.

It's important for schools to provide as we've said over and over again the many other supports to families. My precious family that we are still very close with even though the children are not in our home anymore, they struggle daily because school is not open, and mom is struggling to figure out how to work on abbreviated hours, and figure out how to manage when the supports that she relies on dropping her child off at 8 a.m. and picking them up at 5 after daycare, has just been stripped away.

And what baffles me is the disconnect in knowing what we need to do and seeing districts around the country that have done it,

that have gone back in October and figured it out. Put on their masks, figure out social distance guidelines, and went to work. They figured out how to do it, yet there are so many communities like my own, in my own school district, Arlington Public Schools, that are just stuck and paralyzed.

And it just baffles me, and it has frustrated parents in the communities when we see the solution. It's not rocket science. Teachers want to do the best job they can, and they know that it's in person. I have to be honest the teachers have made lemonade out of lemons in this situation, but they're not able to do what they need to do because they're not in-person.

Ms. FOXX. I agree with you. I think most teachers want to be there and they have good hearts, they want to do it. And God bless you for continuing to work with the mother of the foster children. We've been critical of teachers unions that have resisted efforts to reopen schools. Again, there's a difference between the teachers unions and the teachers themselves.

In response we've been assured their resistance is really based on the desire to protect the health and safety of children. But it sounds like you believe the opposite is true, that keeping schools closed has been harmful to kids. Do you believe long-term closure of schools was the best way to protect the health and safety of children?

I think your answer to that is not, correct?

Ms. DAVIS. Correct.

Ms. FOXX. Thank you. You also discussed in your testimony the role of teachers and other school personnel as mandatory reporters when abuse is suspected. You also talk about the problem of under-reporting of abuse during the pandemic because of virtual learning.

From your experience as a foster parent, and a teacher, why is in-person interaction so important in identifying potential abuse, and what do you think will be the long-term implication of the reduced reporting?

Ms. DAVIS. Quite simply you can't report what you don't see. And I know that teachers, I have heard lots of amazing stories of teachers who have caught abuse online and sent school officers over and CPS got involved and those families were helped. But that is only what they see at that moment in time. And the amazing thing about teachers is that they are very intuitive, and they rely on face time with students, watching students carefully, interacting with students personally to pick up on subtle issues and problems.

Pediatricians have said there's going to be a huge mental health crisis. We've seen reports by even the CDC it's better for them to be in school. I mean it makes sense. And I do worry about raising a generation of children who have been scarred for 15 months by this pandemic when really things could have been back to normal back in October.

Ms. FOXX. Thank you very much. Mr. Chairman I yield back.

Chairman SABLON. Thank you. Thank you, Dr. Foxx. I now recognize Mr. Yarmuth. Mr. Yarmuth please unmute you have five minutes sir.

Mr. YARMUTH. Thank you very much Mr. Chairman, and thanks also to all of the witnesses. This is a topic that I have a great personal interest in. My district is the founding place of National Safe

Place. I was the author and principal sponsor of the Runaway Homeless Youth Act, so I've got a lot of background in the challenges that we face.

And I also just want to mention because it's related, but not directly on point, that my district has one of the largest school systems in the country 100,000 kids, and like in most urban school districts we have over the course of a year 50 percent of our students change school one or more times. And it's been an amazing experience talking to the teachers who are being held accountable year after year for teaching moving targets.

And this is something again related because I think that there is some point the lessons we have learned through this pandemic, the ability to use technology might have some relevance to this question of mobility in the school systems as well. And I was going to ask the question that actually Ms. Erb-Downward addressed, the significance of the 800 million dollars through the American Rescue Plan in dealing with these issues.

And I'm wanting to ask Mr. Lane about that if he can elaborate on Ms. Erb-Downward's answer, and also talk about the potential for technology to deal with some of these other issues, including mobility because most of those students who are mobile are essentially homeless. They're living with an aunt, they're living with a grandmother, they're shuffled off to different people and that's where they end up just disconnected from many at school.

Mr. LANE. Thank you Representative Yarmuth. The 800 million dollars is absolutely essential to supporting our needs to recover from the pandemic. Prior to the pandemic, Virginia struggled to secure sufficient funding to meet all of the requests from school divisions, especially when McKinney-Vento funds were awarded on a competitive basis.

So in order to address the significant new needs as you said, the American Rescue Plan provided nearly 800 million dollars and in Virginia this means our award will go from 1.7 million dollars a year, and increase by an additional 13 million dollars. This will allow us to scale up programs, support more programs in localities through grants, reach many more families and communities in the Commonwealth, and continue to create endeavors for improving outreach.

The funding from the ARP will not only allow us to mend the gap and provide services to programs and initiatives that have been under resourced but is also an opportunity for us to shift our thinking from being reactive to proactive because our funding at the level it was at really required a reactive approach. And so addressing that now alongside planning for ongoing implications.

And of course as it relates to technology, many of our localities, many of our school divisions have taken that funding that we've been able to provide in grants and in other ways, and incredibly expanded technology opportunities.

So technology has allowed us to identify students as homeless or youth in foster care to receive educational services and supports from their home school, and technology allowed us also to continue the education for students when we could not. This population of students can experience heightened levels of transiency, so technology has been an aid in ensuring stability for students as they

move from place to place, so they can continue their education and stay put in their home school.

Mr. YARMUTH. Great. Thank you for that response, and I just wanted to add you know unfortunately, there's been so much politicization of this issue about schools staying open or not open. I know in my State of Kentucky the Governor has been taking flak from a lot of people basically on the other side of the partisan aisle about keeping schools closed, but schools have actually been open in many parts of our State since last fall.

I was talking to a school superintendent in eastern Kentucky, and they've been open since last September or October. The problem is that half the kids, the families refuse to send their kids to school even though they were open and available in the classroom.

So this is not as cut and dry of an issue as it may seem as to whether we open or close schools, there's a lot of elements involved there, but my time is expired, and I yield back and thank you for your response.

Chairman SABLAN. All right. Thank you very much Mr. Yarmuth. I now would like to recognize the Ranking Member of the Subcommittee Mr. Owens. Sir you have five minutes. I think you need to unmute your microphone.

Mr. OWENS. Thank you once again Mr. Chair and all those who are testifying. I'd just like to say before I start my questioning, there's a difference in the teachers that love their profession, love the teaching, and those that are leading these unions that obviously have a different agenda. My dad taught as a professor for 40 years, my mom was a junior high teacher.

I understand what it is to be in a home where education is paramount and is loved by those who are teaching. So kudos to those teachers out there trying to do their best, but at the end of the day we have the data now my friends. There's a difference in the way the blue states and red states have approached this, and many people in the blue states are leaving because they want their kids to go to school and have a normal life, and not be traumatized by this process.

And until today we still have with all the data, we still have people they have districts, and do not have the good options for these children to go back to school. I just want to make that point. Ms. Davis you talked in your testimony about the academic struggles of foster children you care for during the pandemic.

A parent colleague of yours testified before this Subcommittee a couple weeks ago, and one of his frustrations was a lack of planning within the school system to address the learning loss that has occurred. And then according to a press report just last week, Arlington County Public Schools sent a letter to parents saying that too few teachers are willing to teach summer schools.

This leaves many elementary students not able to participate and to catch up. How frustrating is it for parents, and what do you think will be the long-term consequences to our children?

Ms. DAVIS. Thank you. That is a great question. I was shocked when I heard that my public school system was only going to offer summer school to 38 percent of the children eligible and was going to send the rest of them to virtual Virginia. I know for my foster daughter who will be in need of serious summer school services, I

pray she's one of those 38 percent, because I went through summer school with her last year, and it was a disaster online.

Young elementary school students do not learn well sitting in front of a screen. Elementary, as many of your know, teaching is you're moving, you're going to centers, you're around the classroom, you're trying things, you're hands on, you're doing all kinds of things to learn to read, write and problem solve that are kinesthetic and tactile, and to sit in a screen and to go to chat rooms and to be on computer programs just doesn't work.

And I am worried about the achievement gap, the widening of the achievement gap in our country as a result of not choosing to be in-person, and not letting teachers do what they know they need to do to educate, especially elementary kids.

I had three children in my home who were learning to read on a screen. And it actually has prompted me to go back to school to learn to teach reading because I was shocked at how ineffective the online education was. And these teachers were trying their hardest, but they know, and I know, that they need to be in school.

I worry about kids not being able to catch up sir. I worry about the dropout rate, kids getting so frustrated, and when they can dropout they're gone. I worry about kids not being on grade level. And you know if my school district is any indication, and they're only able to educate 30 percent to play catch up in the summer, that's a real problem.

Mr. OWENS. Thank you. And I just want to say that we are talking about foster children, homeless children, and housing insecure children. We're not talking about the kids that you and I, all of this on this conference. Not your children, not your grandchildren, these are kids who are already starting off behind, and they're not allowed to go to school.

This is a travesty my friends, and there's a difference. The data will show, and we'll look back on this year and see that there was a different way to approached this, and there's no excuse for us to put these kids at risk and have them go through the trauma they will be dealing with over the coming years.

So I just wanted to make that point and thank you so much Ms. Davis truly for your efforts and everyone else here on this panel who is really trying to make this thing work and I yield back.

Chairman SABLAN. All right thank you Ranking Member Owens. Let me now recognize Mr. DeSaulnier. Sir, unmute and you have five minutes.

Mr. DESAULNIER. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. And I really want to thank you and the Ranking Member for having this hearing and our Chairman and Ranking Member of the full Committee. And I want to thank all our panelists as well. Ms. Erb-Downward I spent a lot of time when I was in local government as a county supervisor in the Bay area on these issues, and the continuum of care for at-risk kids.

A lot of those strategies that we did in partnership with this Committee actually, my predecessor who was the former Chair of this Committee, we worked with crisis as what we are talking about today, and these kids, but then continuum of care is family planning, prenatal care, reduction in teen pregnancies.

In California we're very proud of the fact that we were able to do that significantly. The whole country has. But the dysfunctionality of the system was always painful. So you talk about stress and trauma, Federal statistics Ms. Erb-Downward, what I want to ask you is it shows that most kids are actually in the system for not a long period of time, like 50 percent of the time, but we know the struggle of having a CPS worker going out to a house in urban areas of California the retention rate for CPS workers is 50 percent.

A young person goes in, gets a master's degree, knows what they're getting into and still leaves. Retention is a problem. So getting the system to work and the stress on those kids in the system again is a continuum of care issue.

I wondered if you could give us, the Committee, what you've experienced in your research about fixing the system, but the short-term situations where kids are put in and out of the foster care system. And then second to that family unification which we all want isn't successful often times, so maybe you could tell us a little bit about the research on that and best practices to avoid that.

Ms. ERB-DOWNWARD. Sure that's a great question. One thing that I would like to start off with though is that you know in the research that I shared in my testimony it shows that there are incredibly negative outcomes educationally for homeless children and for foster care students.

But that does not have to be the case, and I think that is the point of this hearing today. You know what we see in the data is that it's the instability that causes negative outcomes. So for example, transferring schools mid-year, every time a student transfers school mid-year it's estimated that they are set back academically by up to 6 months.

Currently you know both in foster care and under McKinney-Vento law, children have a right to school stability, and that is really critically important. Yet in the homelessness data we've seen, 20 percent, 1 in 5 students transferring schools mid-year.

So that means that the system is as you say not working. But if we can identify kids, if we can identify kids and if we can provide them that point of support and connection, somebody to help them along their way, those outcomes don't have to be negative.

So there was a story of a young woman in Michigan. She was homeless prior to entering foster care. She entered foster care when her mother passed away. She transferred schools 18 times. She's attended 18 different schools prior to graduating. But the point is she did graduate, and the reason she graduated was because she had an educational mentor who was working with her and helping her through those transitions.

In the end she did end up finishing high school through a virtual program. That doesn't mean that virtual programs are the answer to every situation, but it was the ability of that person working with her, that person who knew her transitions, who knew her continuously across those points in time that was able to help her overcome these huge obstacles, recover credits that she was losing in high school every single time she transferred schools.

So I guess the bottom line in terms of your question is that what we need to address is we need to find kids before the experience

the instability. We need to make sure that if you identify a child when they're homeless, when they're in foster care, if the school is engaged there, and you could prevent that child from transferring, that is going to reduce their risk of being chronically absent from school.

Chronic absenteeism as everyone here knows, one of the biggest predictors of grade level proficiency and graduation rates. So we have to be active early, and that is what you know the funding here that Dr. Lane was talking about, really allows us to do. We have been in a reactive situation for years and years where, even prior to the pandemic, we were not close to identifying all of the children who are homeless. And now we have an opportunity to do that.

Mr. DESAULNIER. Thank you very much. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman SABLAN. Yes. Now I'd like to recognize Mr. Grothman. Sir, you have five minutes.

Mr. GROTHMAN. Thank you. I will talk to Gretchen Davis again. First of all thank you for all you've done. It sounds like you touched a number of children's lives since you've embarked on this path. It's really incredible.

I'd like to ask you, you know we've heard concerns about the changes in life that foster children have, you know bouncing from school to school, or parent to parent. You did mention that it's important, particularly important for these folks to be in school. I know in my district you hear complaints that for whatever reason some of the more rural school districts and the private schools managed to stay open, and some of the larger urban districts for whatever reason were not able to stay open.

But I wondered if in general you could comment on the benefits of in-person schooling, but also what you think we can do to avoid the bouncing around that we just heard about, you know, going from school to school. And in particular, how that affects people in a foster setting, and perhaps maybe even elaborate a little bit beyond what we talked about here.

Maybe the importance of somebody staying with you and their birth parent, that sort of thing.

Ms. DAVIS. OK. Well I think stability is huge. And schools providing stability and a place for kids to go, and parents relying on that stability is huge. Foster parents and biological parents. And so when you have a school that's functioning as it should, and is open, especially for the most vulnerable kids, then those services and that stability can be utilized.

When there's a disconnect between schools not being open, and the rest of the country trying to get back to normal, it makes it really hard for these families because the families have to go back to work, and foster parents have to go back to work, but yet the kids are still at home.

And I've talked about you know for some reason we're not on school on Mondays. It's asynchronous learning day, and the reason for that is to provide special support for students. But I'm not sure I'm seeing the special supports for students on those Mondays.

I think you know families rely on the stability that school brings, and our schools are amazing and the programs that are provided,

and the safety nets that are provided we're just not utilizing them now. We know what helps kids. We know what reduces the dropout rate.

We know what closes the achievement gap. We know how to teach reading well, and it starts with an excellent good-quality teacher who is with their students in the classroom. And as far as foster parents and what you know their job has been made harder by not being in-person in a lot of ways.

One of my jobs is to bridge the gap between families and issues that they have and to help families work together well, and it's hard when I cannot look the mom or the father in the eye and be in person with them. It's hard to do that on a screen. And so I'm just ready for people to go back to doing what we know works which is educating kids well and in-person.

Mr. GROTHMAN. OK. I'm sure you know a lot of other people in the same position as you. And like I said in my district for whatever reason, it seems to me the relatively rural schools were able to stay in session for all this. I think just about every private school was able to stay in session, but some of the larger school districts weren't.

And I'm sure you as well have seen different school districts reach different results, and I guess that's the result of local control. But have you seen any reasons why it would be justified for some schools to kind of shut down or put children in a position in which they have to teach virtually as opposed to other schools that are able to provide a stable in-person experience for the kids? It's going to be a big deal for summer school coming up if some schools still don't do in-person summer school.

I mean my goodness, the pandemic is almost over here, but can you see any justifications for it? Can you just comment on that in general?

Chairman SABLAN. Thank you very much for your good question, but maybe Ms. Davis can submit her answer in writing. Your time is up.

Mr. GROTHMAN. OK. Well thank you very much for giving me the five minutes.

Chairman SABLAN. Thank you, sir. Next up I'd like Mrs. McBath, Lucy you unmute your microphone and you have five minutes please.

Mrs. MCBATH. Thank you, Chairman. And I just really want to thank all of our witnesses that are here this morning. Thank you so much for testifying in what is a very, very timely conversations that we're having. And Chairman Sablan thank you so much for prepping for this hearing.

I think everyone here kind of agree that children are absolutely our future, and it's our responsibility as legislators of us that are here today to ensure that every child gets the quality education that they need and that they deserve. And I think you know we all know that COVID-19 has, you know, this pandemic has just exacerbated the inequities that we already knew existed in America.

So you know today I'm grateful that we're bringing attention to the children who have been experiencing homelessness, or who currently are in foster care, and the children who have already strug-

gled to get you know the support that they need to stay in school, so thank you for this today.

I represent Georgia, and just within the past year Georgia had around 14,000 children in foster care. It's a huge number. And according to the 2018 Atlanta Youth County Study, over 3,000 youth are currently experiencing homelessness in the Atlanta metropolitan area, and that grieves me greatly.

This number has really remained virtually unchanged since the last study was conducted in 2015. And across the State of Georgia, you know that number is even higher in the total of nearly 40,000 children that are homeless. So as a mother, even though I physically don't have my child with me anymore, my heart really breaks for these children that are not only having to navigate you know the unusual obstacles of you know their school lessons, but also having access to food and to clothing, and specifically under the tragedy of the pandemic.

Mrs. Linder-Coates, one of my questions is for you. You know we know that many students have lost great instructional time during this pandemic year. And although school closures have been just devastating for all our children, and that's what we've heard over and over again, the younger children in particular who have always had a harder time learning virtually.

They've been hit particularly hard by the effects of COVID-19. How does your program plan to address this issue in the coming months and beyond to support our young children, and particular those children experiencing homelessness and children in foster care?

Ms. LINDER-COATES. Thank you for that question. So specifically we will be using funds this summer to provide programing for students to ensure that they have the chance to catch up. And our youngest children who have participated, many who have participated in virtual programing, we're giving them the first opportunity with our homeless families, and our foster families giving first priority to take those seats.

Just going back a little bit to understand why in some instances the summer program may only be able to be offered to a smaller number of children in great part with our community is you know we don't have as many teachers who are ready to move back into that space.

So while we've been providing virtual pre-K as well as hybrid pre-K and full face to face pre-K during the entire pandemic, we did have families who chose to stay home with their children, whether it was by choice or by chance that had to stay home with their children, and specifically, for families who are experiencing homelessness, or children who are in foster care, we are providing the opportunity for those families to sign up for face to face programing during the summer in order to not only catch up on instructional time that's been lost, but also socialization that's been lost.

But we do know that our youngest children, they learn best by engaging with other children. So as much as having the teacher in place to provide the constructs for learning, we know that children learn from one another, so we are planning a very robust summer

program for in face, face to face learning for the number of children who we can serve.

And right now we're starting off with you know 500. We're going to try to get 500 children into face to face programming. And as we see families are interested, we will continue to add to that number, so I'm so thankful you asked that question because we're really excited about it.

Chairman SABLAN. Thank you very much Mrs. McBath. And I'd like to now call on Mr. Allen, Ranking Member of this Subcommittee of the last Congress, and a wonderful colleague. You have five minutes sir.

Mr. ALLEN. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and again I want to thank all of the witnesses. Ms. Davis you have an incredible story and legacy that would be good for all of America to hear based on what you sacrificed to try to help children.

My mom and dad were both educators, and so I've been involved in this process for a long time. I will comment you know I got my colleagues calling this politicizing the issue. I call it getting the truth out. The truth is in the 12th District of Georgia what I asked our school systems to do is the taxpayers pay for the schools to be open.

And for the students to be taught. And I said that if the taxpayers are going to foot the bill, we need to open the school whether one student shows up or every student shows up. And then the others we will do our best to do online learning or hybrids or whatever.

And our district responded. The largest school system in the district has been open since August of last year. The teachers have returned. Of course Georgia has led the Nation in the recovery as far as COVID. In fact our economy in Georgia has returned to pre-COVID numbers, and of course the biggest problems we've got is this America Rescue Plan has got everybody on enhanced unemployment, we can't get folks to come back to work.

And that's the biggest problem we've got with our economy right now. But bottom line is in Arlington I guess my question in Arlington, Virginia are the teacher's unions in Arlington running the school system?

Ms. DAVIS. Not yet.

Mr. ALLEN. Not yet OK. Why are the teachers not going back to class then?

Ms. DAVIS. I think that the administration has not put systems in place for that to be possible.

Mr. ALLEN. OK.

Ms. DAVIS. I think yes you have some teachers that are concerned, but overall you have most of the teachers that are concerned about the students and not their own health.

Mr. ALLEN. Right.

Ms. DAVIS. And who are following the science and are reading what the American Academy of Pediatrics says, and the CDC says, and they say let's go. But you know it doesn't matter how much they say that if the administrators are dragging their feet. And I've seen an incredible lack of planning and creativity in how to get things done.

And you know just like when you're parenting children, if you say mask up let's go, this is what we have to do, kids will do it. But if you say oh, I'm so sorry, this is so terrible, we've got to figure this out. There's just so many problems, then it delays and causes frustration that's not necessary.

So I think we have amazingly talented teachers, and highly qualified teachers. It's just there are not systems in place for them to go back to school 5 days right now.

Mr. ALLEN. Yes and frankly, like I said in the 12th District our teachers, if we had teachers that were compromised they did the online teaching, and those that had no pre-existing conditions or were not compromised were in the classroom, so. And we had the funds to put in the enhanced air-conditioning and filter systems as well.

In fact, in checking with all of our school systems, all of our school systems are financially in great shape, and we have pretty much all new facilities in my district. But as far as the root of the problem, and I'm running out of time. I've got about a minute. But you know we've thrown a lot of money at poverty. We've thrown a lot of money at housing, affordable housing, and opportunity zones, you name it. And we can't seem to fix this problem. It seems to be getting worse.

Obviously, there's a you know the family has been devastated in this country, and you know single parent homes seem to be the rule rather than the exception anymore. And you know if you get to the root of the problem, you know, obviously we keep throwing money at this, but I think we've got to fix the problem.

And can you give me some idea of what you think the real root of the problem is in about 7 seconds?

Ms. DAVIS. Well I think there needs to be an all-hands-on deck approach, and we have the systems in place, we just need to use them well. We have the staff, the teachers, we just need to use them well and let them do what they do best.

Mr. ALLEN. All right thank you I yield back.

Chairman SABLAN. Thank you, thank you Mr. Allen. I now recognize Mr. Levin. Unmute your mic and you have five minutes sir.

Mr. LEVIN. Thank you so much Chairman Sablan for recognizing me, and for putting together this really important hearing today on education for homeless and foster youth. According to research conducted by Poverty Solutions at the University of Michigan, research with which our witness Ms. Erb-Downward is involved, one of our every 12 Michigan fifth graders experiences homelessness at some point during elementary school, so troubling. And as with so many of the major crises we experience in the United States, students experience homelessness more frequently when they're part of underserved populations, including rural students, students of color, students with disabilities, English language learners, LGBTQ plus students, and pregnant, parenting or caregiving students.

So Ms. Erb-Downward, would you elaborate on the intersections among students experiencing homelessness and these populations that I've mentioned?

Ms. ERB-DOWNWARD. Definitely, and thank you for this question. So it is absolutely true that there are intersections, and that all of

the groups that you've mentioned experience particularly disadvantages when it comes to homelessness.

I already referenced that black and Hispanic students are 1 in 7 are experiencing homelessness at some point before they graduate as compared to 1 in 10 homeless students in Michigan. You know nationally we see LGBTQ students experiencing significantly higher rates of homelessness, that's 2.9 times the rate of their non-LGBTQ peers.

I think when we look at these intersections what we have to think about is what are the systems in place to actually serve these different populations, and are we actually making sure that the services are in place in a way that meets the needs? I think it's particularly true and you referenced that rural students face a disproportional rate of homelessness too, and I think that's a really important point as well because we tend to think homelessness is more of an urban issue. You know, historically that has been the story that's been told. If you were to look at the map of Michigan, you would see that some of the highest rates are actually in some of the more rural counties of the State. A lot of that has to do with the definition of homelessness.

Families love their children. I think we can you know let's start with that. Families love their kids, and they want to protect them, and that means that in places which do not have shelters which are the majority of places in the United States—most places do not have shelters, families don't have any other options other than to double-up with another family.

They do not have access to the services that exist, and we limit access to services in many ways because of these different definitions, and so going back to you know thinking about what opportunities exist now, again, we can bridge some of these gaps. For families that are living doubled-up, we have the opportunity to make them eligible for other funding streams through HUD, right now housing services, housing support services.

Another thing that I you know think it's important to think about is the expansion of the child tax credit. I realize that this is outside of the Education Committee right now, but when we're talking about poverty, homelessness, foster care, housing instability is an issue of poverty, and very deep poverty and instability.

Families are just living on the edge.

Mr. LEVIN. Listen, I really agree with you. It's a super important point, and I also want to point out that the, you know, the Department of Education's guidance for the American Rescue Plan funds dedicated to serving homeless students encourages states to partner with community-based organizations that specialize in serving these historically underserved populations, so I really hope that we see a lot of great programs there.

But in the little time I have left, I've been listening to all this talk on you know schools being open and not. My own daughter has been you know first they shut down her school, then she was in virtual, then she was in hybrid, then she was in virtual, you know, now she's fully back in school.

But Dr. Lane can you tell us what's going on in Virginia to re-open schools because I think people are working very hard on this.

Chairman SABLAN. Yes, actually you're out of time Mr. Levin. Could the answer be sent in, be written, and sent into Mr. Levin?

Mr. LANE. Yes.

Mr. LEVIN. All right thanks Dr. Lane and thank you Mr. Chairman I yield back.

Chairman SABLAN. Thank you, Mr. Levin. I now would like to recognize Mr. Keller for five minutes, Mr. Keller.

Mr. KELLER. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I appreciate the topic of today's hearing, but I'm noticing a pattern of topics during the recent activity that seems to ignore the heart of the issue at hand. No matter which group of students we're talking about, schools remaining closed for in-person instruction hurts every single kid.

Now that so many Americans have had access to vaccines it is essential that we do not waste another day before fully and safely reopening our schools. We're talking about families in poverty, and this subject is very near and dear to me. I grew up in a poor family and understand some of the challenges children and families in poverty face.

Having been homeless at one point in time in my life, it's not fun. And it's hard. Between first and seventh grade I moved about four times. So what we really need to look at, and these challenges that are facing our children and families in poverty, we need to talk about education, instilling a work ethic and hard work, you know.

Because of education and hard work, I was able to make sure that my kids were never homeless, and never had to go to bed hungry. So we need to be providing every tool possible to create opportunities and help children and families, and the best way to do so is through education and good-paying jobs. So Ms. Davis thank you for being here today, and for sharing with us the challenges of COVID-19 and what it has presented foster parents and families with.

The idea of any child not having enough to eat, or a roof over their head is unconscionable. Thank you for the great work you have done in your community to provide homes for students who need them. Can you say more about what challenges will remain for foster families in the aftermath of the pandemic?

Ms. DAVIS. Yes, thank you. I think we will be playing a lot of catch up. I think we will be trying to mitigate a lot of damage. Arlington has a wonderful human services department, and they are very hands on with their foster parents. But even they have had kind of their hands tied because everything's been closed.

I think when things reopen, I loved hearing what Ms. Linder-Coates said about offering surveys and re-evaluating what's working, what's not working, and making changes. And I think that will have to happen.

And I can tell you that foster families have always wanted to do the hard work, and now there's just going to be a lot more hard work to do just to get kids in a safe place. I think we have a mental health crisis that we're going to have to deal with in children. We haven't even talked about the dangerous screen time, and kids being left with devices you know, unattended, and the amount of time we have our children on screens as a result of this crisis.

And the impact of that. You know social media can destroy children. And we have to as foster parents and as parents and as educators, have to mitigate that damage for sure. And so I think we've got a lot of fixing to do. I believe that we have great systems already in place to do that, we just need to do the hard work of helping children.

Mr. KELLER. What would be your advice to governments, school districts, local education authorities, school administrators, teachers, and others about how to ensure that schools remain open and ensure that we don't need to make up any additional lost time once schools are open fully and operational again? I think Mrs. Davis is still muted.

Chairman SABLAN. Yes, you are muted Ms. Davis.

Ms. DAVIS. I'm sorry. I can't see you. Can you hear me?

Mr. KELLER. Yes.

Ms. DAVIS. OK I apologize. Advice, well I think we can definitely look back and see what we have learned from this. I think we need to reopen much more quickly if this ever Lord willing does not happen again, but if it ever does, looking at the critical nature of face time, and again not the app, but one to one personal communication with children.

The critical nature of giving families accurate information, not fear mongering, not being living in fear.

Chairman SABLAN. Thank you. I'm sorry to interrupt, but I gave you additional seconds Ms. Davis, I mean Mr. Keller. Thank you very much sir.

Mr. KELLER. Thank you.

Chairman SABLAN. All right. I'd now like to recognize Ms. Manning. Ms. Manning would you unmute, and you have five minutes please.

Ms. MANNING. Thank you very much Mr. Chairman. Thank you for holding a hearing on this very important issue. Certainly, children in foster care, and homeless children deal with terribly difficult issues during normal times, and it's devastating to hear how the pandemic has impacted these very vulnerable children.

Ms. Erb-Downward Congress recently appropriated 800 million dollars dedicated to the identification enrollment and school participation of children and youth experiencing homelessness, including wrap around services. And the Department of Education recently released 200 million of these funds so that states and local districts can meet the urgent needs of homeless children and youth.

Can you talk to us about how local education agencies can use these funds to better serve homeless students in the immediate future, and the rest of the funds in the coming months in the upcoming school year?

Ms. ERB-DOWNWARD. Yes, thank you for the question. So I think the first thing is identification. We cannot help children if we don't know who they are, and what Ms. Linder-Coates brought up about asking questions in a way that is sensitive to families is a critical thing for all schools and all districts to take away from this hearing today, and to move forward with.

Families are scared to identify as homeless, and therefore the outreach needs to be sensitive, and it's best done in collaboration with community partnerships, with agencies that know those fami-

lies, and know the children through other means. So I think that's step one. Really looking at what can be done in schools to reach out to families and to identify families.

Other things that can be looked for at the school level are you know signs like chronic absenteeism, transferring schools, not showing up for remote learning, all these can be indicators that there's instability going on in the home.

And so that can be a reason to reach out. Find out how we can help families. Connecting families to summer programs is a very important element, and then transportation is a huge need. Families are moving frequently like we've discussed. Children who are homeless have a right to maintain stable enrollment in their school of origin.

When that does not happen, we see negative outcomes. If the smooth transition can be made that is you know much better, but if we can keep that child in the school of origin and provide transportation supports that is huge. The last thing I'll say, and then I will turn it back over, is making sure families are connected to other programs. For example, homeless families are at risk of not having ever to file their taxes.

If they don't file their taxes, they are not going to be receiving the extended child tax credit. This child tax credit is estimated to reduce child poverty by 44 or 45 percent nationally. We are talking about issues of poverty. If we could reduce child poverty in this country by 45 percent, we would not be having the same conversation about homelessness and foster care.

So really connecting families to those other supports is critical. Thank you.

Ms. MANNING. Thanks very much. Mrs. Linder-Coates Head Start's two generation approach is a uniquely strong model in the in the education system and understanding that children's success is dependent on their parents, Head Start invests in parents as well as kids to ensure the entire family is supported.

Can you tell us how Head Start's two generation model supports these problems, and what role do family service workers play in your Head Start program?

Ms. LINDER-COATES. Sure. Thank you for that. So you know speaking of the two generational model. We initially had a requirement that families volunteer right, in the program, so that they can see the benefit of the program, and we have been encouraging families of course to obtain employment, become self-sufficient, specifically for families that are experiencing homelessness.

One of our initial processes that we undertake with families when they come into our program and enroll in our program is establishing a family partnership agreement. And that family partnership agreement between our family service workers and our parents, is really to help families think through what supports they may need in order to be successful in terms of moving toward self-sufficiency.

Sometimes that includes completing their high school diploma. Sometimes it includes going back to school and finishing a degree. Sometimes it's you know about obtaining new skills so that they can be more employable in a different marketplace. So for us that

is the cornerstone, or the bedrock of our intake process is really figuring out how we can help them.

Chairman SABLAN. Thank you very much. Thank you, Ms. Manning. Now I'd like to recognize, she's been here the whole time, very patient, Ms. Miller. Ms. Miller please unmute, you have five minutes.

Ms. MILLER. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and I want to thank the witnesses and my colleagues for entering into this essential civil discourse on this important topic. I also want to address Mrs. Hayes' comment that the teacher's unions have been constantly berated by us.

That is definitely not my intent, and I don't believe it is the intent of my colleagues, but I do want to say that the schools are the only essential workers that are not back to work. And so in light of that fact, yes, we have been critical, and I would tell my children when they were growing up if the shoe fits you need to wear it.

On March 5 I joined 58 of my colleagues on a letter to the CDC Director Doctor Walensky to share concerns about the stringent school reopening guidelines that agency had issued that did not seem to follow the science. I was concerned that so many schools remained closed when we had so much evidence that shows schools could be safely reopened, and a lot of them did, including the school in my community.

Well it turns out the CDC and Biden administration officials have been consulting with teacher unions about school reopening guidance. The same teacher unions that lobbied to keep our schools closed all year. On May 10 I joined a letter with Representative Bob Good, Ranking Member Virginia Foxx, and several other colleagues from this Committee asking for an investigation into whether the CDC's school reopening guidance was politically influenced by teacher unions.

This is a very serious concern, and I'm eager to receive a response. What has gone on this year with school closures has been shameful, and it has disproportionately harmed the most vulnerable children in our society as we have heard from the witness. And I want to give Ms. Davis a chance to share with us a little bit more.

I do also want to say that my sister is one of the noble people that have pursued a career in education. She's a special ed instructor with a specialty in reading. And she was so grieved about schools being open that she petitioned her urban school to allow her to return to school because she's a special ed instructor.

She and several other special ed instructors were allowed to go back. They have had in school, in-person instruction all year. And but anyway, so my question for Ms. Davis. Can you share more with the Committee why you believe Arlington County resisted calls from parents to reopen schools, and to try to find a way especially to serve what I would call the extra vulnerable population.

Ms. DAVIS. Yes, I will try. Thank you. I am baffled really by why we have not opened. I hear stories from friends who are teachers about for example, a high school student who is living with her father. She's a special needs student, and her father had to go back to work, and she has no transportation to school.

And when Arlington began hybrid, they took away some of the days that they gave special education students who were the first ones to go back in January. So those special ed students went from 5 days to 3. I'm not sure how many. And this student begged her teachers, emailed them please let me come back to school.

And the problem that the teachers were told was the problem was transportation. And I'm baffled when I hear things like oh, it's a logistical nightmare. Oh, it's too hard. We can't figure out how to make it work. I just think there's a lot of excuses, and a lack of creativity, and frankly, a lack of planning.

Yes, Arlington is a complicated school district, but so are a lot of districts that are making it work. So I would say a lack of creativity and a lack of planning.

Ms. MILLER. Also I do want to add you brought it up. I've taught in public school, private school, and home school, and I agree that all day virtual education is a very poor substitute, and I cannot imagine how the schools think. I don't even know how they could claim that there's accountability that education is happening.

What I've observed for you know I have 7 children, and a lot of grandchildren, and a lot of experience with children in educating them. This is extremely unrealistic. Children need relationships. They're unique individuals and they need people to know who they are and to respond to them. They need variety during their school day, and they need to be allowed to move.

And I talked to educators, and they have communicated with me that there really is no way to keep the adults that are supposed to be accountable and responsible for the education to actually make sure this is happening.

And I just think it is such a shame. I think anybody that is advocating for schools to stay closed should feel ashamed, and those that think that we are berating unions should be told that we are here to advocate for the students.

Chairman SABLAN. I'm sorry the time is up ma'am. Thank you very much Mrs. Miller. I'd now like to recognize Mr. Bowman sir please unmute and you have five minutes.

Mr. BOWMAN. Yes, thank you so much. My first question is for Dr. Lane. Dr. Lane can you speak to how trauma and how necessary trauma informed schools are at this moment as to support not just our foster care population, but all of our students after we come out of this pandemic. Can you speak to the trauma informed approach to education?

Mr. LANE. Yes sir. Obviously, as our students began returning back to school at the beginning of the school year, and as some are just returning now as parents were hesitant, or school divisions have been opening, our students are facing a lot of trauma. Many have seen family Members pass away in this pandemic.

Many have, you know, seen significant illness in their homes. And it's important for our schools to understand the trauma that students are going through and have strategies in place to respond to that trauma to be able to successfully make sure that student is prepared to learn.

We all know we talk about you know Maslow's research. Students have to feel like their safety and psychological needs are met before they can learn, and that's what trauma informed care is

about. And so we work diligently in the Commonwealth through our agency to partner with school divisions and provide resources and support to make sure that our students have the wrap around supports necessary to make them successful in our schools.

Mr. BOWMAN. Thank you so much. My next question is for Dr. Linder-Coates. Dr. Linder-Coates as a former educator I've seen first-hand just how difficult it is to nurture the growth of a child, especially when considering the roadblocks to success many foster youth face.

Speaking with stakeholders in my district, such as the Good Shepherd Services, and other organizations that support foster youth, and those experiencing homelessness, the issue of special education became a reoccurring theme of conversation. In particular, I worry about the foster children with special education needs.

In the absence of a parent solely concerned about the well-being of their child, I worry that many foster children may fall through the cracks and fail to receive the specialized education they are legally entitled to. How can we make sure that every foster child receives the individualized education plan they have a right to?

What can the Federal Government do to best support foster parents as they advocate to give their children the education they deserve?

Ms. LINDER-COATES. So, good question. So the first thing is just making sure that the foster agencies are clear about what the IEP's for children who have special needs entail. And a lot of times the information that is in the IEP's that will support children in making sure that they make progress, whether it's you know, during this pandemic, or any other time, making sure that all of the stakeholders are clear about what the goals are.

That for us is one of our major challenges. And so the first response that we have is making sure that our special needs coordinators who we have on staff are sitting with teachers and family Members and in the case of children who are in foster care, and/or who are experiencing homelessness, making sure that everyone is clear about what those goals are.

So for what I would recommend is to have funds that are earmarked specifically for the education of those, in our community we have large umbrella organizations that are responsible for coordinating the services, so making sure that there is enough funding to ensure that the children have, and the families have, access to those supports that are outside of the school.

So for instance children may need wraparound service. They may need a person to sit with them in the school in order for them to be successful during the day, making sure that those supports are available, but also making sure that the stakeholders who are involved in ensuring that those supports are available are educated enough to know what they need to look for.

A lot of times we don't know what we don't know, and I think if there are funds that are specific to that cause, making sure that there is enough services available, and also making sure that folks are educated about the services that are available, so that each individual teacher, parent and child and service coordinator can sit

down and make sure that the progress is being made. That's what I would recommend.

Chairman SABLAN. Thank you very much Mr. Bowman. I'd now like to recognize Ms. Steel. Please unmute and you have five minutes.

Mrs. STEEL. Thank you very much Chairman Sablan and Ranking Member Owens. Ms. Davis, I want to say thank you to all the witnesses coming out. Ms. Davis thank you for sharing your testimony with the Committee. Your family story is heartbreaking.

Your sacrifice and dedication to the foster system is extraordinary. It is sad and unacceptable that school districts across this country turned their backs on our most vulnerable children. You brought up a major concern in your testimony. Many students and family Members did not, and still do not have access to community support.

Many of these families are already facing significant obstacles. Why is having access to in-person learning worth the risk that exists?

Ms. DAVIS. That's a great question. As I have said before face time is important interpersonal communication is critical. Knowing your students well, and I have to say that the teachers that I come in contact with really are trying hard, but you just cannot use what was supposed to be a stop gap measure, which is an iPad and some Wi-Fi as the normal way to now teach reading, or to teach high level math. It just doesn't work.

And if students are able to come back to the classroom, then teachers can use all the tools in their toolbox and not be limited to just those on a screen. And one example Ms. Steel is when you are teaching reading, you are teaching phonemic awareness which involves you to look at a child's mouth, and to see that they are forming the sounds and you know the letter sounds correctly.

And that's very hard to do on a screen. You also engage children in several hands on activities when you're teaching reading that go over phonics instruction, and phonemic awareness and fluency, and you cannot do that on a screen, and it works so much better when you're doing that in-person, and when you're in small groups and engaging in activities and learning centers.

And teachers know that. And so it's I'm sure very frustrating, I know very frustrating for the teachers that I've talked to that they can't deliver their best instruction because administration, and those who are not in the classroom are dictating wait, see, let's wait until everything blows over, you know let's wait until next year.

That is one of the most egregious to me is let's wait until next year. Because I have kids in my care, and my own children, and the others who need services today. They need to learn to read, write and problem solve today. And to be told oh, we're going to wait, and we'll be our best in August, that's just not OK.

That's a lot of time and vulnerable children do not have that time.

Mrs. STEEL. And not just vulnerable children, but all the students because I saw the assessment test result came out, and what a difference between those schools being open since last September, and those schools being closed since last year. I mean they've al-

ready damaged enough children here, and I think it's time to open up.

And we're going to make sure that kids are really looking at they are going into the classroom and they're going to learn. And they're not just learning knowledge, but they're learning social skills and others that you know more important than ever, and you know what I really want to do that.

So do you feel many families lack the opportunity to tell their story and express their frustration about their children being left behind because since you are testifying today, but a lot of people don't have a chance to testify at exactly what's going on with their children? You are muted.

Mrs. DAVIS. I'm sorry. Can you repeat that question I'm sorry?

Mrs. STEEL. Do you feel many families lack the opportunity to tell their story and express their frustrations about their children being left behind since you are one of the witnesses and you can express yourself with you, you know, about your children. But a lot of parents that totally agree with you, but they cannot express to anybody because it's kind of like you are not the wall, that nobody is really listening at this point.

Ms. DAVIS. Yes ma'am. I think a lot of families are unable to, they've tried. You can submit emails and make comments to school boards, but there is not let's say active listening going on in a lot of those areas, and it is unfortunate. I mean parents are in crisis. Kids are really in crisis.

Chairman SABLAN. I hate to interrupt, but time is up.

Mrs. STEEL. Thank you, Ms. Davis, thank you Chairman. I yield the balance of my time.

Chairman SABLAN. I'd now like to recognize the most junior Member of the Subcommittee, but actually the Chairman of the full Committee, Chairman Scott will you please unmute you have five minutes.

Mr. SCOTT. I thank you Mr. Chairman. Dr. Lane we've had a lot of back and forth on the opening of schools. There is no debate about the value of opening schools, and everybody knows it. The CDC has published guidelines on what it takes to safely open the schools: Ventilation, transportation, fewer students on buses, spread out the students, it might require smaller class sizes, PPE and disinfectant, and staff to disinfect because schools aren't going to disinfect themselves, maybe school nurses.

We know what it takes. But all of that costs money, and now that you have the money under the Rescue Plan, is there any question that the schools will be opening in September?

Mr. LANE. Chairman Scott thank you for the question. No there will be no questions there in Virginia. We passed legislation this year in a largely bipartisan manner, and it was signed by the Governor that will mandate a five-day week opening for all schools in the Commonwealth in the fall.

In addition to that we've stayed in alignment with CDC guidance. We have put out joint VDH and VDOE guidance throughout the year. CDC released new guidance on Thursday, we had our guidance out in the State on Friday, but as this pandemic evolved the Governor came out in Virginia in February, and stated clearly that he wanted to see all school divisions opened by March 15.

Mr. SCOTT. Well the question though is not whether or not you want the schools open, but whether you're going to do it safely. Some of us wanted the schools opened when it could be done safely, and we've provided you the funds and I thank you for using the funds to make sure that the schools would be opened.

You mentioned the homeless funding that you've upscaled. Are you able to provide sufficient funding to appropriately serve all the homeless students in Virginia?

Mr. LANE. Mr. Chairman. The funding that was available before the American Rescue Plan no. We certainly needed more funding. We were not able to meet all requests when it was competitive grant application, and so the funding in the American Rescue Plan goes a long way toward ensuring that we can meet all the needs in the Commonwealth.

Mr. SCOTT. Thank you. And Ms. Erb-Downward one of the problems that occurs when you have this kind of disruption is that people fall through the cracks. Are we finding that all of the homeless students are actually signing up for education, or are some of them just disappearing?

Ms. ERB-DOWNWARD. So the latest research that we have on the homelessness liaison surveys that was done in the fall. And in those surveys, we found that there was a 28 percent decrease in the number of homeless students who were being identified by their schools that equates to about 420,000 students.

So you know there are a lot of students who are slipping through the cracks. We have the opportunity and the obligation now to identify them and make sure that we're supporting them.

Mr. SCOTT. Thank you. Dr. Lane the American Rescue Plan distributed money for K through 12 education essentially using the Title I formula, meaning it was disproportionately aimed at low income areas, and at least 20 percent must be used for learning loss. We should expect significant progress in eliminating achievement gaps.

You got money for smaller class sizes, summer school and that kind of thing. What is your office going to do to make sure that this money is used to significantly reduce or eliminate achievement gaps?

Mr. LANE. In Virginia we formed a work group of education stakeholders that we call Virginia Learns. You can see the information that came out of that on our website. But Virginia Learns released guidance about how to think about recovering from the pandemic.

It provided everything from what are the most impactful and powerful standards that are necessary for making sure the students know them to be successful, to how to spend money, to how to think about mental health. But of course, we provided significant guidance to our school divisions on you know the requirements under the American Rescue Plan and of course, CARES II and before.

In Virginia, this investment will absolutely be huge for us. The State set aside alone is nearly 210 million dollars of which about 105 million has to be used directly for learning loss. That is going to be a game changer. And just last week we announced 62.7

million dollars in Cares II grants to make sure that our students are being addressed with learning loss in the summer of this year.

Mr. SCOTT. Well we're going to count on you to follow through on that, and if you could keep us posted on how you're doing we'd appreciate it.

Mr. LANE. Thank you, sir.

Mr. SCOTT. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman SABLAN. Thank you very much. I now would like to ask I think we tend to forget that nobody wanted this virus to come into our lives, and you know interrupt our life, but we tend to forget the exceptional outstanding ingenuity, the genius of science is that we're able to sequence the genome of this virus in such a short time.

It took them less time to sequence the genome than they did in actually performing clinical tests, and that's some of the things we tend to forget, and we only look at the interruption in our lives. But let me go Ms. Erb-Downward school can be more than just a place for students to learn, for students experiencing homelessness, and students in foster care school can be a lifeline to meeting their basic needs, including food and clothing in addition to education.

So what are some of the challenges that homeless students and students in foster care face during the pandemic, and how does the President's oath to reopen schools address both challenges?

Ms. ERB-DOWNWARD. So I think when we think about the challenges that homeless students face if anyone has children you can think about the challenges you see your children facing and you can magnify that by 1,000. One you know in terms of opening school the first thing the President's plan does is focus on opening schools safely.

We have to open schools. That is critical. They need to be open safely. Many parents are still scared to send their kids to school. So we have to figure out how do we provide parents the supports they need to feel comfortable getting their children to school.

So you know I think the additional pieces there are really ensuring access to transportation, making sure that we are addressing food support needs, you know, in the interim, and at school. You know one thing that I you know have to go back to what Dr. Lane said that you know before the pandemic there was not enough funding to meet the needs of homeless students.

You know I'd like to give the example of in Detroit where I work they have done incredible things to improve their identification system, but you know initially they had identified the school which serves you know 46,000 children, had identified 615 homeless students.

Chairman SABLAN. Yes.

Ms. ERB-DOWNWARD. Just to give you perspective, 16 percent of students are estimated to be homeless there so.

Chairman SABLAN. OK. How does allowing schools to use funds for these purposes help students experiencing homelessness? Just as short an answer as you can.

Ms. ERB-DOWNWARD. I think it provides flexibility for people to actually focus on meeting the needs of homeless students. People have different needs.

Chairman SABLAN. All right. So in the short time I have left Ms. Linder-Coates, Congress has appropriated a total of 2 billion dollars in supplemental funding for Head Start programs during the pandemic, so can you please tell us how your program has taken advantage of these funds, and how have those funds, been used to support children experiencing homelessness, or children in foster care?

Ms. LINDER-COATES. Thank you. So as I discussed earlier, one of the primary ways we used was really to keep children connected, and also to provide PPE for those children who were face to face. We really did want to make sure that we had spaces available for families of children who wanted to continue face to face, and we had partnerships with our childcare agencies, so although our district was closed for programming, our childcare partners remained open with spaces that serve our families.

And we also again, I just wanted to reiterate we also spent money to inform the teachers and help the teachers do the best that they can in the digital space for those families who chose to remain.

Chairman SABLAN. Yes. And I have two of my youngest are actually teachers. One of them is a special ed teacher, and I did watch some of the frustrations they had, and now both are very open to coming in and teaching summer school for their students that need to catch up, and you know of course that's their summer, but as you said their commitment is very important that their students catch up.

So I want to thank you, thank you very much. My time is just about up, but I'd like to you know I want to remind my colleagues that pursuant to Committee practice materials for submission for the hearing record must be submitted to the Committee Clerk within 14 days following the last day of the hearing, so by close of business on June 2, 2021, preferably in Microsoft Word format.

The materials submitted must address the subject matter of the hearing. Only a Member of the Subcommittee or an invited witness may submit materials for inclusion in the hearing record. Documents are limited to 50 pages each. Documents longer than 50 pages will be incorporated into the record via an internet link that you must provide to the Committee Clerk within the required timeframe.

But please recognize that in the future that link may no longer work. Now pursuant to House rules and regulations items for the record should be submitted to the Clerk electronically by emailing submissions to edandlabor.hearings@mail.house.gov. Again edandlabor.hearings@mail.house.gov.

Again I want to thank the witnesses for their participation today. Members of the Subcommittee may have some additional questions for you, and we ask the witnesses to please respond to those questions in writing. The hearing record will be held open for 14 days in order to receive those responses.

I remind my colleagues that pursuant to Committee practice witness questions for the hearing record must be submitted to the Majority Committee Staff or Committee Clerk within 7 days. The questions submitted must address the subject matter of the hearing.

OK. I'd now like to recognize the Ranking Member Mr. Owens for his closing remarks.

Mr. OWENS. Thank you once again Mr. Chairman for this hearing. I wanted to also thank all the witnesses for offering their expertise today. It truly has been invaluable. I wanted to focus my closing on something I said earlier in the hearing.

One of our colleagues on the other side of the House says she's tired of the criticism of those who refuse to follow the science and reopen the schools. She says yes it was unfair. Mr. Chairman do you know what's unfair? The mother we've heard about today who's trying to create stability for her and her two children who can't get a job because her two children are in school for just a few hours 2 days a week on different days.

Do you know what's unfair or who's Tara, Ms. Davis who served her community for 8 years as a foster parent and has seen firsthand the horrifying potential permanent damage being done by keeping children out of school, who also is a teacher herself for 15 years and understands the challenges teachers face and who not so ever have spent the last 2 hours telling us that schools must be open.

To add to that list Mr. Bush who testified at our last hearing about whose son ended up in a hospital because he was separated from school. And also added to that list is Ms. Dale who testified before this Subcommittee in late March about the harm being done to her daughter and kids like her daughter from this disruptive education.

These stories represent millions of other families all around our country pulling out of work, worrying about what's happening to the children. It baffles me that the response from our friends on the other side of the aisle seem to be that we're being too mean or unfair to teachers unions.

Mr. Chairman it's our job to point out when the education is failing our children, especially our most vulnerable children. Of course response from other side of the aisle is always more money. We've heard that today. They seem to think that we can just write a big check and that everything would be taken care of.

But the Congressional Budget Office said almost none of this money will play any role in reopening schools. We know that Arlington County Public Schools have financial resources to offer teachers financial incentives to teach summer school, but still can't get more than one-third of the children back in-person.

Mr. Chairman republicans tried to tie tens of billions of dollars of COVID aid to requirements to reopen schools. The democrats voted no five times. And that's five times no. Mr. Chairman thank you again for this hearing. Thank you for giving a mother a platform to speak on behalf of millions of other families who see firsthand the harm still being done to our children.

But now Mr. Chairman let's actually listen to what those families are saying. Let's respect them enough to not just list their experiences. Let's worry more about them than the delicate accessibilities of our union leaders. I yield back.

Chairman SABLAN. Thank you. Thank you, Mr. Owens. I'm going to take the high road here and just thank you again. Thank our witnesses for being with us today. We now have a greater under-

standing of just how many children are homeless in America, how widespread the problem is, and it happens with or without the COVID, with or without the virus.

And so I think the expert testimony gave this Subcommittee a sober assessment of the harmful consequences of this homelessness and of foster care, not only for the educational development of young people, but also for the long-term well-being of our country.

The research is clear. Students and children who do not have the stable housing situation, who are removed from their families must struggle to get the education they need to lead independent and fulfilling lives. And that the money that Congress has made available to help these students, these families with their needs to live independent and fulfilling lives, to grow and to be good Members of our society.

Particularly, our black and brown children, children with disabilities and other historically underserved groups are affected because homelessness and reliance on foster care are manifestations of a larger web of systemic inequities. Congress has made significant investments over the last year to make sure all of America's children can continue their education, and as we confirmed today, these investments have particularly made the difference in the education and lives of children who are homeless, or in foster care, particularly this money we have made available will give us greater hope, and hopefully almost certainly make sure that we have schools that will open in September.

I have to believe no matter our political affiliations, we can all agree these investments in America's children are worth taking. And I look forward to working with all my colleagues to build off today's discussions and ensure all our children have what they need to reach their full potential.

If there is no further business without objection the Subcommittee stands adjourned. Thank you for all our witnesses again and thank you for our Members for today's insightful hearing. This hearing is adjourned.

[Question submitted for the record and the response by Mr. Lane follow:]

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May 27, 2021

Dr. James F. Lane, Ed.D.
Virginia Superintendent of Public Instruction
Virginia Department of Education
P.O. Box 2120
Richmond, VA 23218

Dear Dr. Lane,

I would like to thank you for testifying at the May 19, 2021 Subcommittee on Early Childhood, Elementary, and Secondary Education hearing entitled *"Picking up the Pieces: Strengthening Connections with Students Experiencing Homelessness and Children in Foster Care."*

Please find enclosed additional questions submitted by Committee members following the hearing. Please provide a written response no later than Thursday, June 3, 2021, for inclusion in the official hearing record. Your responses should be sent to Mariah Mowbray, Lakeisha Steele, and Joe Herrbach of the Committee staff. They can be contacted at 202-225-3725 should you have any questions.

I appreciate your time and continued contribution to the work of the Committee.

Sincerely,

ROBERT C. "BOBBY" SCOTT
Chairman

Subcommittee on Early Childhood, Elementary, and Secondary Education Hearing
"Picking up the Pieces: Strengthening Connections with Students Experiencing Homelessness and Children in Foster Care"
Wednesday, May 19, 2021
10:15 a.m. (Eastern Time)

Representative Lucy McBath (D – GA)

1. Dr. James F. Lane, Ed.D, what challenges are school districts facing in identifying and supporting homeless youth and children in foster care?



Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction
James F. Lane, Ed. D.

June 4, 2021

The Honorable Bobby Scott, Chair
U.S. House of Representatives
Committee on Education & Labor
2176 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20515-6100

The Honorable Lucy McBath
U.S. House of Representatives
Committee on Education & Labor
1513 Longworth H.O.B.
Washington, D.C. 20515

Delivered via Email

Dear Congressman Scott and Congresswoman McBath:

Thank you for your question regarding what challenges school districts are facing in identifying and supporting homeless youth and children in foster care. As we consider the many roles that our schools play for our students – hubs for learning and socialization, connector to social services and supports, and a safe and stable environment for children – COVID-19 has tested how schools can continue to provide these critical services. Among the many strains we have seen on the system is related to the limitations on quickly identifying students and families in need of support.

As is the case in many other states, educators in Virginia serve as mandated reporters meaning they are legally required to report any suspicion of child abuse or neglect to the relevant authorities. However, in the remote environment, educators are limited in the ways they can observe and meaningfully engage with their students on a routine basis, making it more difficult to detect red flags such as absenteeism, withdrawal, etc. thus reducing their ability to identify issues that lead to mandated reports of instances of child abuse and neglect. In fact, Virginia has seen a dramatic 85 percent decline in referrals of incidents of child abuse and neglect.

Whereas the foster care system in Virginia remains operational and is effective at tracking and supporting students in the foster care system, the pandemic has presented unique challenges for those systems that help identify and support students experiencing homelessness. The number of students recognized as experiencing homelessness decreased by 14 percent in 2019–2020 as compared to the previous year. McKinney-Vento liaisons have also reported continued low identification rates as the 2020–2021 academic year began. Part of this trend can also be attributed to necessary changes in the instructional environment, where remote and asynchronous learning has made it difficult to notice when students may be transient or dealing with housing insecurity.

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As expected, difficulties in identifying issues such as abuse or homelessness has also limited educators' ability to intervene and respond as early as possible. And, challenges in connectivity have also compounded the ability to provide support. For example, many school divisions that have reported increases in absenteeism rates and have also had trouble reaching vulnerable student populations, especially our families experiencing homelessness for the first time. They have shared instances of disconnected phones, unanswered communications, and even students having moved without a need or ability to inform the division. In cases where staff or a McKinney-Vento liaison may have followed up with a home visit under normal circumstances, quarantine and other safety factors have limited this type of outreach over the last year.

In response to these challenges, the Virginia Department of Education (VDOE), other state agency partners, and local school divisions have been quick to respond, providing resources and expanding services where possible. VDOE and the Virginia Department of Social Services have circulated resources regarding how to identify concerns in a virtual environment to assist educators in their roles as mandated reporters. Additionally, VDOE has offered guidance to divisions on how they might rethink their attendance tracking and monitoring practices in a way that prioritizes connection, and student well-being within the hybrid and virtual environments. For example, VDOE recommended schools consider how to utilize different instructional personnel across the week, so teachers have a shared responsibility and workload for outreach but each student has a meaningful engagement with a teacher everyday. McKinney-Vento liaisons have adapted their outreach strategies and have worked to provide assistance to students and families in securing housing, meals, and other necessities, including those required to continue their education in remote environments.

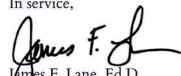
A challenge across this work, in the classroom and beyond, is that the need for services often outpaces new resources and the state and local school divisions must find creative funding solutions for critical initiatives. Even as communities reopen and divisions heed the Governor's call to transition back to in-person learning, many of these challenges for our vulnerable learners will remain an obstacle. The state and school divisions will need financial resources in order to redouble efforts to reengage students in the classroom and maintain those wraparound services necessary to ensure students are safe, healthy, and well-equipped to succeed in their academics.

We hope this provides some insight into the challenges brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic specifically as it relates to Virginia's local school divisions and their efforts to identify and

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support homeless youth and children in foster care. While the pandemic has been trying for our educators and students, our divisions have been creative and adaptive in ensuring students have the resources they need - academic and otherwise - to thrive. Much of this work has been made possible by support from the federal government and we are appreciative of your ongoing commitment to ensure we are able to serve our most vulnerable learners.

In service,



James F. Lane, Ed.D.
Superintendent of Public Instruction
Commonwealth of Virginia

c: Mariah Mowbray
Lakeisha Steele
Joe Herrbach

[Whereupon, at 12:40 p.m. the Subcommittee was adjourned.]

