

# SUPPORTING YOUNG CHILDREN EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS

## Spotlight on State Coordination for Early Childhood Education



This National Center for Homeless Education brief is an extension of an earlier brief, *Early Care and Education for Young Children Experiencing Homelessness*.<sup>1</sup>

### THIS DOCUMENT FOCUSES ON:



Building or enhancing public preschool and Head Start collaboration by combining the rights and services for preschool-age children under the McKinney-Vento Act with services for families with children through the Head Start Act;



Spotlighting how two states — Nevada and North Carolina — are supporting coordination between school districts and early childhood programs; and



Identifying opportunities for sustainable collaboration between practitioners of Education for Homeless Children and Youths (EHCY) and Head Start to increase identification of children experiencing homelessness and connecting them to wraparound and educational support services.

## Introduction

State Coordinators and local liaisons have responsibilities under the McKinney-Vento Act to conduct outreach and coordination with other entities and agencies, ensuring that preschool-age children experiencing homelessness can access Head Start/Early Head Start programs as well as preschool programs funded under Title I, Part A of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA). Head Start staff have specific responsibilities to prioritize recruitment, selection, and enrollment for families with preschool-age children experiencing homelessness. State Coordinators, local liaisons, Head Start state collaboration directors, local Head Start program directors, and State Advisory Councils authorized under the Head Start Act should partner together to share resources and carry out their combined responsibilities. Coordination across these programs creates opportunities to remove barriers to educational access and implement systems for timely referrals and enrollment for families with young children.

Collecting and sharing data across programs about preschool-age children experiencing homelessness can improve collaborations between education agencies and Head Start programs. From school year 2019-20 to 2020-21, overall preschool enrollment for children aged 3 to 6 declined by 9.3% (51.1% to 41.8%).<sup>2</sup> During school year 2021-22, states reported that 58,433 children from birth

to age five (but not enrolled in kindergarten) were served by McKinney-Vento Act subgrants.<sup>3</sup> Simultaneously, Head Start programs are expected to conduct a community needs assessment, [the Head Start Community Assessment Matrix](#), and utilize the findings to develop robust opportunities for systems to collaborate, compare data, and ensure young children's needs are being met. For this reason, education agencies and Head Start programs (at state and local levels) can use and integrate their data on young children experiencing homelessness to drive collaborative decision-making and increase the identification of students and provision of services. To find a Head Start program in your local community, visit <https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/>.

### A COMMON DEFINITION

The Improving Head Start for School Readiness Act of 2007 adopted the McKinney-Vento Act's definition<sup>4</sup> of homeless (42 U.S.C. § 9832(11), 2011). Therefore, all young children meeting the definition are categorically eligible for Head Start/Early Head Start programs. By school year 2020-21, Head Start saw a significant increase in enrollment, identifying nearly 42,000 families experiencing homelessness. The shared definition of *homeless* encourages collaboration between school districts and Head Start programs. Collaboration is

<sup>1</sup> This 2018 NCHE report provides an overview of federally funded early childhood education programs. To access early childhood education program descriptions, eligibility requirements, specific service provisions, and contact information, see the chart on p. 13. [Early Care and Education for Young Children Experiencing Homelessness](#)

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/publications/2023/acs/acs-55.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> National Center for Homeless Education. (2023). *Student homelessness in America: School years 2019-20 to 2021-22*. [https://nche.ed.gov/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/SY-21-22-EHCY-Data-Summary\\_FINAL.pdf](https://nche.ed.gov/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/SY-21-22-EHCY-Data-Summary_FINAL.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> See seminal brief for the definition of *homeless* as defined in the McKinney-Vento Act, Improving Head Start for School Readiness Act, and IDEA. [Early Care and Education for Young Children Experiencing Homelessness](#)

important for expanding Head Start enrollment – state-level staff can help facilitate this process (e.g., joint trainings, roundtable discussions, etc.). Creating a formal agreement, such as a memorandum of understanding (MOU), can help school districts and Head Start programs identify shared goals along with steps each will take to achieve those goals. For information related to the development of MOU, please see NCHE’s *Guide to Effective Collaborations with Community-Based Organizations to Support Students Experiencing Homelessness*.

This brief explores two examples of how Head Start, public preschool programs, and school district McKinney-Vento Act programs have been coordinated at the state and local levels. Nevada and North Carolina have each coordinated McKinney-Vento and Head Start efforts at the state level in promising ways that can be replicated by others. Finally, this brief will conclude with a list of common recommendations for McKinney-Vento Act and Head Start staff to use in their work to build or enhance collaboration and increase access to and enrollment in high-quality early childhood programs for families with young children experiencing homelessness.

### Spotlight: Nevada

In 2015, the Nevada Department of Education (NDE) was awarded a \$43 million federal Preschool Development Grant (PDG)<sup>5</sup> to expand the state’s preschool program [Nevada Ready! State Pre-K Program](#). The program included full-day instruction and the provision of wraparound services in five high-needs communities.<sup>6</sup> This grant was braided with federal funds (Title I of the ESEA, Head Start, and Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA)) and private donations until the PDG expired in 2019. This same year, Nevada legislators voted to award \$19 million to sustain the 3,000+ seats established through the 2015 PDG, resulting in the passage of SB84, which amended the Nevada Ready! State Pre-K program requirements<sup>7</sup> and entered the requirements into statute

NRS 387 (Nevada State Board of Education, 2023). Nevada Governor Joe Lombardo and the NDE announced the availability of a \$70 million grant program called the [Early Childhood Innovative Literacy Program](#). This competitive grant program is intentionally focused on increasing literacy and school readiness for young children. The funding was released in two phases, in July and September 2023.

### EDUCATION FOR HOMELESS CHILDREN AND YOUTHS (EHCY) PROGRAM COORDINATION FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD

In school year 2019-20, [Nevada’s Department of Education EHCY Program](#) partnered with [SchoolHouse Connection](#) to design an app for statewide referrals. The app would help educators, service providers, and community agencies connect families with children to academic and other educational supports. Development of the app was paused in 2020 due to the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic. In July 2023, the EHCY office resumed app development, expanding the design with digital tools to improve identification, immediate enrollment, and service provision for early learners (birth to third grade). State-reserved EHCY and [American Rescue Plan Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief – Homeless Children and Youth \(ARP-HCY\)](#) funds were braided to support the design and maintenance of the app. The new statewide referral app, *Finding Your Way in Nevada*, akin to Pennsylvania’s [Finding Your Way in PA](#), has an anticipated launch date of school year 2024-25.

The Nevada [State Board of Education’s Strategic Improvement Plan](#) Goal 1 focuses on improving access to quality early care and education for all children from birth to third grade by 2025. NDE’s cross-office collaborative workgroup, *All Things Pre-K to Third Grade*, was developed to support the work of Goal 1 and includes Nevada’s state Offices of Early Learning and Development, EHCY, Title I, and Head Start. Recognizing opportunities to further collaborate across programs, Nevada’s State Coordinator supported each school

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<sup>5</sup> The Preschool Development Grant (PDG) is a federal competitive grant awarded to states and territories to support early childhood education for children birth to age five and is jointly administered by U.S. ED and HHS. <https://oese.ed.gov/offices/office-of-discretionary-grants-support-services/innovation-early-learning/preschool-development-grants/>

<sup>6</sup> Churchill, Clark, Lyon, Nye, and Washoe County each received a subgrant award to operate a high-quality preschool program (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). <https://www2.ed.gov/programs/preschooldevelopmentgrants/applications/nva-applicationpdg2015.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> Nevada reduced the maximum age of eligible children from six to five. <https://www.leg.state.nv.us/nrs/nrs-387.html#NRS387Sec652>.

district's successful establishment of MOUs with local Head Start programs. Additionally, NDE added an ARP-HCY program specialist position to the EHCY program office to expand the capacity of the State Coordinator and the coordination of services for students and families. This additional staff provides an opportunity for the State Coordinator to increase technical assistance, professional development, and resources for cross-office collaboration at the state and local levels.

### Spotlight: North Carolina

Historically, North Carolina has long focused on improving educational opportunities for young children.<sup>8</sup> Governor Roy Cooper released the [2019 North Carolina Early Childhood Action Plan](#),<sup>9</sup> a data-informed plan with specific guidance on meeting the early education needs of children from birth to age eight by 2025. In 2021, the North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) implemented an early education collaborative network for infant and toddler programs, including Early Head Start and IDEA early interventions.<sup>10</sup> Supporting the coordination of enrollment and services for young children, North Carolina DHHS, Division of Child Development and Early Education (DCDEE)<sup>11</sup> implemented the [Action Plan for an Early Childhood Homelessness Support System](#) in 2023. The goal of this Action Plan was to provide higher-quality learning experiences and support the kindergarten transition for children experiencing homelessness, building upon the 2019 North Carolina Early Education Action Plan.

### EHCY PROGRAM COORDINATION FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD

The [North Carolina Homeless Education Program \(NCHEP\)](#) is committed to supporting liaisons, school districts, charter schools, and early education programs in meeting the needs of preschool-age children. NCHEP actively collaborates with the state offices of Title I Preschool, Head Start, NC Child Care Resource and Referral (CCR&R), NC Pre-K, the state workgroup Yay Babies NC, and other programs. In 2018, NCHEP offered mini-grants to LEAs to

increase identification, create strategies to support students and families with young children, and develop procedures to build communication and support structures in their local communities. Liaisons and school personnel were provided professional learning and heard about promising coordination practices from various state leaders<sup>12</sup> such as the Early Child Education Title I Consultant, Head Start Director, and the Early Child Foundation of NC Director (NCHE, 2018).

During school year 2022-23, NCHEP hired an early childhood program specialist to provide technical assistance and professional learning and support state-level collaboration with Title I Preschool and Head Start. Beginning in February 2024, NCHEP launched annual Head Start trainings for district-level liaisons, Head Start points of contact, shelter directors, and other community partners to develop joint program goals. These district community teams created an action plan with strategic goals for the coordination of services (e.g., identification, parent and family engagement activities, strategies for challenges with access and enrollment) to increase identification and access to Head Start programs for families with young children experiencing homelessness. After each team has implemented their Head Start action plan, district-level liaisons are required to incorporate critical evidence and data into their LEA's annual comprehensive needs assessment that is submitted to NCHEP. Head Start and NCHEP are working to develop a resource guide to help educators across North Carolina meet the needs of young learners.

Additionally, NCHEP utilized a portion of its ARP-HCY state reservation funding to focus on the immediate needs of early learners. In partnership with [ApSeed](#), NCHEP provided learning tablets for young children living in a shelter (or another living situation eligible under the McKinney-Vento Act) who are not attached to a Title I preschool, Head Start, or Early Start program. School supply kits and backpacks are distributed at no cost to young children living in a shelter (or another living

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<sup>8</sup> The T.E.A.C.H. scholarship program began in 1990 for undergraduates majoring in early childhood education. [Smart Start](#), established in 1993, serves as the first statewide public/private partnership to implement an innovative approach for early education, and remains a critical partner in implementing high-quality preschool programs across North Carolina.

<sup>9</sup> Action plan resulting from Executive Order No. 49 issued in 2018, a directive that required participation from N.C. DHHS, N.C. Early Childhood Advisory Council, and other stakeholders in development of a statewide strategic plan targeting improved early childhood education outcomes for students by 2025.

<sup>10</sup> The network developed a pyramid service model, supporting the social-emotional competence needs of infants and toddlers (birth to age three) within early intervention and early education programs.

<sup>11</sup> The DCDEE participates in the state workgroup, North Carolina Yay Babies Initiative, to increase early intervention and early education services delivered to children birth to age five experiencing homelessness.

<sup>12</sup> Leaders provided "planning" workshops for LEAs and community partners to identify shared goals for children, birth to age five.

situation eligible under the McKinney-Vento Act) and not attached to a Title I preschool, Head Start, or Early Start program.

## Conclusions and Recommendations

These examples of partnerships between state and local education agencies and Head Start programs highlight the value of interagency collaboration in enrolling preschool-age children experiencing homelessness in early education programs.

- **Build Strong Relationships and Trust.** State and local educators and Head Start practitioners should invest time and resources into building strong relationships and trust with children and families experiencing homelessness. Families have the lived experience and expertise to help educators understand the needs of young children and how they can be best served. Both school districts and Head Start programs have family involvement or engagement efforts that each might benefit from staff participating in, particularly when helping families overcome barriers to access and enrollment in high-quality early education programs.
- **Build Educator Awareness of McKinney-Vento Act Eligibility and Support Interagency Collaboration.** State and local educators and Head Start practitioners should conduct joint trainings to educate staff on McKinney-Vento Act eligibility (including an accurate application of the McKinney-Vento Act's definition of *homeless*) and support better collaboration between school districts and Head Start programs. Leveraging interagency collaboration<sup>13</sup> can help with the development of clear partnership agreements (MOUs), cross-trainings, referral procedures for enrollment, the provision of tailored wraparound services, and the raising of community awareness around access to higher quality early childhood programs.
- **Strengthen Data Collection Systems.** School districts and Head Start programs should strengthen their data collection systems to improve overall identification counts and data sharing regarding preschool-age students experiencing homelessness who are enrolled in public school districts or served by Federally administered programs.

## RESOURCES

State Coordinators, local liaisons, and Head Start staff seeking to expand their knowledge on building early childhood education collaboration should consider resources beyond this brief, including NCHÉ's [Preschool-Early Childhood](#) landing page, the [Head Start Early Childhood Learning & Knowledge Center \(ECLKC\)](#), and the [National Head Start Association](#).

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<sup>13</sup> EHCY State Coordinators already serve on State Intervention Coordinating Councils under IDEA, Part C. Additionally, Head Start State Collaboration Directors are central to the State Advisory Councils on early childhood education. This interagency collaboration can have an impact on a broad range

of programs serving young children experiencing homelessness instead of a piecemeal or reactive way of serving children and families only as they present themselves as homeless to either program.

## References

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