

Beating the Odds:

How Can Schools and Districts Support Students Experiencing Homelessness?

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*A report from **Schoolhouse Washington**,*
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Introduction

According to a recent report by Schoolhouse Washington, students experiencing homelessness in Washington State have academic outcomes well below those of their housed peers.¹ While there are likely a variety of factors at work, schools can play a key role in addressing these poor outcomes by ensuring their practices and instructional strategies are tailored to the specific needs of students experiencing homelessness.

Unfortunately, there is relatively little research that empirically links effective practices and strategies that schools can use to student outcomes. Indeed, a review of published research on teaching and classroom strategies conducted on behalf of the National Center for Homeless Education (NCHE) found that few studies focused on successful teaching strategies exclusively for this population of students.² A notable exception is work by Kerri Tobin, which helped to inform the design of our study.³

Although there is relatively little empirical research linking strategies to outcomes, several sources provide recommendations on best practices to support students experiencing homelessness. For example, NCHE provides a variety of best practice briefs focused on implementing provisions from the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act,⁴ such as determining eligibility for services, addressing absenteeism, and maximizing credit accrual.⁵

There is also an emerging literature that identifies best practices and recommends strategies based on feedback from school staff and directly from students experiencing homelessness. For example, a recent study used surveys, focus groups, and interviews with youth experiencing homelessness and with McKinney-Vento liaisons to examine the impact of homelessness on students and to generate recommendations on ways to provide support.⁶

In addition, there has been an increased focus recently on meeting the needs of students experiencing homelessness in Washington State. In addition to the work we have done at Schoolhouse Washington, the Office of the Washington State Auditor recently completed a performance audit that highlights challenges and identifies opportunities to strengthen the ways that schools and other agencies can “identify, support, and connect students to services they need to succeed academically.”⁷

¹ Lemon, M. (2019). *Students experiencing homelessness in Washington’s K-12 public schools: 2015-2018 trends, characteristics and academic outcomes*. Seattle, WA: Schoolhouse Washington, a project of Building Changes.

https://www.schoolhousewa.org/wp-content/uploads/SchoolhouseWA_OutcomesReport_2019.pdf.

² Moore, J. (2013). *Research summary: Teaching and classroom strategies for homeless and highly mobile students*. University of North Carolina at Greensboro: National Center for Homeless Education. <https://nche.ed.gov/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/res-summ-teach-class.pdf>.

³ Tobin, K.J. (2011). *Identifying best practices for homeless students* [Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Vanderbilt University]. https://etd.library.vanderbilt.edu/available/etd-07212011-135524/unrestricted/Tobin_dissertation_final.pdf. Tobin examined test scores for students in grades 3-5 in a large northeastern city, conducted interviews with school staff, and looked at strategies in schools that performed well compared to those that did not. We built on this work by examining additional outcomes (including attendance and graduation), including all grade levels, and using a statewide dataset.

⁴ 42 USC Chapter 119, Subchapter VI, Part B: Education for Homeless Children and Youths.

<https://uscode.house.gov/view.xhtml?path=/prelim@title42/chapter119/subchapter6/partB&edition=prelim>.

⁵ See <https://nche.ed.gov/resources/> for more information.

⁶ Ingram, E.S., Bridgeland, J.M., Reed, B., & Atwell, M. (2016). *Hidden in plain sight: Homeless students in America’s public schools*. Washington, D.C.: Civic Enterprises, Hart Research Associates, and America’s Promise Alliance.

<https://www.americaspromise.org/report/hidden-plain-sight>.

⁷ Office of the Washington State Auditor. (2019). *Opportunities to better identify and serve K-12 students experiencing homelessness* (Report Number: 1023748). https://www.sao.wa.gov/performance_audit/opportunities-to-better-identify-and-serve-k-12-students-experiencing-homelessness/.

Schoolhouse Washington conducted the study described in this report to identify and learn from high-performing schools and districts that show positive educational outcomes for students experiencing homelessness. The results add to the limited amount of empirical research linking strategies to student outcomes, contribute to the emerging literature on best practices, and inform improved practices to support students experiencing homelessness in Washington State.

The study comprised two phases designed to distill and disseminate information about effective practices and strategies. In phase one, we analyzed school-level data covering nearly all of the public schools in Washington to identify schools that “beat the odds”—those with higher-than-predicted outcomes for students experiencing homelessness—as well as schools with lower-than-predicted outcomes.

In phase two, we reached out to staff at the two groups of schools (and their corresponding districts) identified in phase one and conducted interviews to learn about what they were doing to support students experiencing homelessness. We asked about practices and strategies related to training and professional development, identification, academics, housing, and more.

It is important to learn from both higher- and lower-performing schools in the interest of rigor and future scalability. That is, if the same strategies are being used in both high- and low-performing schools, then better outcomes could be due to other unique factors (such as an extremely effective McKinney-Vento liaison), rather than specific strategies that can be tried elsewhere.

While this research design does not establish that specific practices cause changes in outcomes, we were able to identify practices more common in schools and districts with higher-than-predicted outcomes for students experiencing homelessness.

The remainder of this report briefly summarizes the methods we used to identify schools and interview staff and describes the findings of our analysis. We describe several general themes and eight specific practices and strategies used more often in higher-performing schools and districts. Additional details on our methods and results, as well as a list of interview questions, are provided in the appendices.

Identifying Schools with Higher- and Lower-than-Predicted Outcomes for Students Experiencing Homelessness

The first step in our study was to identify schools that beat the odds with higher-than-predicted outcomes for students experiencing homelessness and to identify schools with lower-than-predicted outcomes. These schools and their corresponding districts formed the sample to which we reached out for interviews in the second phase of study.

To identify schools, we used a dataset on 2,313 schools covering the 2014-15 to 2016-17 school years, obtained from Washington’s Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI).⁸ We built statistical models that examined school-level outcomes using a multiple regression approach similar to several previous beating-the-odds studies. The models controlled for school-level characteristics of students experiencing homelessness, including race/ethnicity, special education status, English language learner status, and grade level.⁹

We analyzed several outcomes, including regular attendance rates, English language arts (ELA) and mathematics proficiency rates, and graduation rates, and ran separate analyses for schools serving students in grades K-8 and schools serving students in grade 12.¹⁰

Schools were classified as higher- or lower-than-predicted for each outcome if their actual performance was at least one standard deviation above or below their predicted performance based on our model.

In order to be selected for the interview sample, schools had to be identified as higher- or lower-than-predicted in regular attendance and at least one other performance outcome. This two-outcome selection method helped to identify schools with consistently higher or lower performance across outcomes and ensured the outcomes considered captured broader measures of performance—beyond test scores or graduation rates. Schools serving students in grades K-8 were selected for the interview sample based on regular attendance and either ELA or mathematics proficiency. Schools serving grade 12 students were selected for the interview sample based on regular attendance and either on-time or extended graduation.

We identified a total of 75 schools for the interview sample, including 44 schools identified as higher-than-predicted and 31 identified as lower-than-predicted (Table 1). This represented just greater than 3% of the total number of schools in our initial dataset.

⁸ The school-level dataset was obtained from OSPI via data-sharing agreement in spring 2018. All analyses and interpretations are the author’s and do not necessarily reflect the views of OSPI.

⁹ Previous beating-the-odds studies include the following: Abe, Y., Weinstock, P., Chan, V., Meyers, C., Gerdeman, R.D., & Brandt, W.C. (2015). *How methodology decisions affect the variability of schools identified as beating the odds* (REL 2015-071). Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education, Institute for Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Regional Education Laboratory Midwest; Cole, W. (2008). *“Beating the Odds” on the WASL, revisited: Identifying consistently successful—and struggling—schools* (Document No. 08-05-2201). Olympia, WA: Washington State Institute for Public Policy; and Koon, S., Petscher, Y., & Foorman, B.R. (2014). *Beating the odds: Finding schools exceeding achievement expectations with high-risk students* (REL 2014-032). Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education, Institute for Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Regional Education Laboratory Southeast.

¹⁰ Schools serving students in grades K-8 captures all schools serving students in these grades, regardless of grade span (schools with grades K-5, K-12, 6-8, etc.). Schools serving grade 12 students captures all schools that graduate students, regardless of grade span (schools with grades 9-12, K-12, 6-12, etc.).

*Table 1:
Number of Schools Identified for Interview Sample by Status, Grade Span, and School Type*

	Higher-than-Predicted	Lower-than-Predicted	Total
Schools serving K-8 students	31	25	56
Schools serving grade 12 students (traditional)	11	6	17
Schools serving grade 12 students (alternative)	2	0	2
Total	44	31	75

The schools were part of 52 districts across the state. The number of selected schools per district ranged from one to five. In addition, some districts included both higher- and lower-than-predicted schools (Table 2).

*Table 2:
District and School Counts by Identification Status*

	Number of Districts	Number of Schools
Higher-than-predicted only	27	34
Lower-than-predicted only	18	23
Both higher- and lower-than-predicted	7	18
Total	52	75

Additional details on our methods, including regression results and descriptive statistics, are provided in Appendix A.

Learning from Schools that Beat the Odds

Methods

As described in the previous section, we identified a sample of 75 schools in 52 districts across the state that had either higher-than-predicted outcomes for students experiencing homelessness (i.e., beat the odds) or lower-than-predicted outcomes.

To learn more about what schools were doing to support students, we reached out to staff from each school and district to set up interviews. We included district staff because of their central role in implementing services and support under the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act. Responses from both schools and districts are included in our analysis.

The overall response rate was 42%. We conducted a total of 52 interviews with staff members from 23 schools and 31 districts (two interviews combined staff from both the district and school). Of the 31 districts we interviewed, we conducted interviews with staff from one or more identified schools in 14 districts. In the remaining 17 districts, we conducted interviews with district staff only and were unable to interview staff at any of the identified schools. In addition, we interviewed staff from five schools in which we were not able to interview staff from their corresponding districts. Almost half of the completed interviews (48%) were with higher-than-predicted schools and districts (Table 3, next page).

A total of 72 individuals representing various staff roles participated in the interviews (Table 4, next page). Nearly half were McKinney-Vento liaisons and nearly one-third were part of school or district

leadership, including principals and directors. The remaining participants worked in various types of student and family support roles.

*Table 3:
Number of Interviews by Identification Status, Grade Span, and Type*

	Number Interviewed (% of interviews)
<i>Schools serving K-8 students</i>	
Higher-than-predicted	6 (38%)
Lower-than-predicted	10 (63%)
Total	16 (100%)
<i>Schools serving grade 12 students</i>	
Higher-than-predicted	6 (86%)
Lower-than-predicted	1 (14%)
Total	7 (100%)
<i>Schools overall</i>	
Higher-than-predicted	12 (52%)
Lower-than-predicted	11 (48%)
Total	23 (100%)
<i>Districts</i>	
Higher-than-predicted schools only	15 (48%)
Lower-than-predicted schools only	10 (32%)
Both higher- and lower-than-predicted schools	6 (19%)
Total	31 (100%)
<i>All interviews</i>	
Higher-than-predicted schools/districts only ¹	25 (48%)
Lower-than-predicted schools/districts only	21 (40%)
Districts with both higher- and lower-than-predicted schools	6 (12%)
Total	52 (100%)

Note: Totals may not add to 100 due to rounding.

¹ Two interviews included staff from both the only identified school within the district and the district itself and are thus counted only once in the total.

*Table 4:
Interview Participants by Job Title/Role*

Primary Job Title/Role	Count (%)
McKinney-Vento liaison	33 (46%)
Principal/assistant principal	15 (21%)
Department director (e.g., director of categorical programs)	8 (11%)
Counselor	6 (8%)
Family resource and support	6 (8%)
Other (e.g., social worker, graduation specialist)	4 (6%)
Total	72 (100%)

We employed a semi-structured interview approach in which specific, predetermined questions and topics were covered while also allowing flexibility to adjust question order or wording and to follow up on topics as needed based on each respondent's answers.^{11,12}

An interview guide was developed and included 15 questions organized under the following four topics:

1. Staffing and professional development/training
2. Identification practices and strategies
3. Academic support practices and strategies
4. Housing and other non-academic support practices and strategies (including community partnerships)

We asked about practices specific to students experiencing homelessness, as well as practices used with the general student population (including students experiencing homelessness), when applicable. A copy of the interview questions is provided in Appendix B.

To analyze the interview responses, we used a combination of inductive and deductive approaches in which we examined the interview data for strategies mentioned in the best practices literature while also allowing practices to emerge organically from the data. We then grouped items that were conceptually or practically related into larger categories and themes and analyzed the data again in an iterative process.^{13,14}

We used a combination of approaches to analyze practices and strategies within each school or district. These included examining the frequency of specific, well-defined practices using a binary coding scheme, noting whether practices were mentioned or not, and assessing the relative intensity and detail of the strategies described by respondents. Finally, we compared the identified categories and themes between higher- and lower-than-predicted schools and districts to examine how practices and strategies differed.

The results of our analysis are presented below. Additional details on our methods are provided in Appendix A.

Results

In the following subsections, we discuss the findings from our analysis of interview data gathered from 72 staff members in 52 schools and districts across the state. We begin by describing general themes. We then discuss specific categories of practices and strategies that were more likely to be used in schools and districts with higher-than-predicted outcomes for students experiencing homelessness.

¹¹ Ryan, F., Coughlan, M., & Cronin, P. (2009). Interviewing in qualitative research: The one-to-one interview. *International Journal of Therapy and Rehabilitation*, 16(6). <https://doi.org/10.12968/ijtr.2009.16.6.42433>.

¹² Harrell, M.C., & Bradley, M.A. (2009). *Data collection methods: Semi-structured interviews and focus groups*. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation. https://www.rand.org/pubs/technical_reports/TR718.html

¹³ Elo, S., & Kyngas, H. (2008). The qualitative content analysis process. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 62(1), 107–115.

¹⁴ Hsieh, H.F., & Shannon, S.E. (2005). Three approaches to qualitative content analysis. *Qualitative Health Research*, 15(9), 1277–1288.

General Themes

A variety of practices are in use across all types of schools and no single strategy explains differences in outcomes.

One of the major themes that emerged from our analysis is that few practices and strategies were unique to higher-than-predicted schools. The interviews showed that staff members from all types of schools worked hard each day to provide support for students experiencing homelessness, often with limited resources, and used many different approaches, including conducting training, offering tutoring, assisting with basic needs like food and clothing, providing referrals to community-based services, and more.

While some practices were used more frequently in higher-than-predicted schools (as discussed below), most were also used in many lower-than-predicted schools, to varying degrees. This implies there is no quick fix and schools cannot simply implement a single strategy to support all students. Instead, supporting students experiencing homelessness may require a more comprehensive approach commensurate to their complex needs, as discussed in our next theme.

Systems matter. Practices and strategies are not enough in and of themselves, but instead seem to work best as part of a self-reinforcing, structured approach.

While we did not find strategies unique to higher-than-predicted schools, those with better outcomes did tend to have more consistent and focused strategies in place across multiple categories and domains.

For example, higher- and lower-than-predicted schools and districts were about equally likely to distribute a housing status questionnaire multiple times per year to help identify students experiencing homelessness. However, higher-than-predicted districts were more likely to pair that practice with additional identification strategies (like checking in with families over the summer break to assess need for continued services and engaging with local shelters to facilitate referrals) and, crucially, with practices in other domains, like training on trauma-informed care and the use of mentoring programs.

This multifaceted approach suggests that higher-than-predicted schools and districts are more likely to apply a systems-thinking approach that considers how the various departments and supports in schools can work together in mutually reinforcing patterns. That is, those schools and districts may be operating in ways that adjust systems to meet the needs of students experiencing homelessness rather than figuring out ways to accommodate students' needs within predetermined systems.

Few academic support strategies are specifically tailored to the needs of students experiencing homelessness.

In most schools and districts we studied, students experiencing homelessness received the same academic supports as housed students. These supports almost always included tutoring, which was mentioned as a strategy in nearly 95% of interviews. Additional supports available to both housed students and students experiencing homelessness included multi-tiered systems of support, specific class periods designated for intervention or acceleration, and credit retrieval opportunities.

Only a small number of schools and districts discussed academic supports specifically for students experiencing homelessness. Of those that did, the majority described ensuring access to tutoring, often

using Title I funds, while a handful described programs in which tutors worked directly with students and their families to set up convenient times and arrange for transportation.

A few schools and districts provided additional supports, such as engaging directly with local shelters to provide on-site tutoring and study materials. Others described dedicated staff who monitored academic performance for students experiencing homelessness and connected students to supports as needed.

The lower overall outcomes for students experiencing homelessness indicates that the widespread reliance on supports designed with housed students in mind may be insufficient to help close the gap.

School-level practices matter.

The federal McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act outlines rights for students experiencing homelessness and sets forth requirements that education agencies must follow.¹⁵ While there are some requirements for state education agencies, many of the provisions in the Act center on those for school districts, including designating a staff member to serve as a liaison for homeless children and youth, ensuring immediate enrollment, and coordinating services.

Perhaps due in part to these requirements, support programs for students experiencing homelessness are viewed by many as primarily a district-level responsibility. While the importance of strong district-level supports cannot be overstated, our analysis found that school-level practices are important as well.

For example, we identified several districts that contained both higher- and lower-than-predicted schools (as detailed above), indicating that school-level variation in practices and contexts can have a substantial effect on student outcomes.

Our analysis of the interview data also revealed the importance of school-level practices. Higher-than-predicted schools on average described more varied supports for students experiencing homelessness than lower-than-predicted schools. For example, higher-than-predicted schools described more robust identification practices (such as systematically using data points like attendance to help identify students for services); had more knowledge of and connection with housing supports in their community; and were more likely to report that most staff received at least some annual training on students experiencing homelessness.

Taken together, this indicates that support for students experiencing homelessness may work best when all staff, at both the school and district levels, have the necessary knowledge, skills, resources, and processes in place.

Training and professional development may help, but could be improved overall.

Some training practices were more likely to be used in higher-than-predicted schools. Based on responses from school staff, higher-than-predicted schools were more likely than lower-than-predicted schools to provide some annual staff training on students experiencing homelessness and related topics, like trauma-informed care and adverse childhood experiences. However, higher- and lower-than-predicted districts did not report the same differences.

¹⁵ 42 USC Chapter 119, Subchapter VI, Part B: Education for Homeless Children and Youths.
<https://uscode.house.gov/view.xhtml?path=/prelim@title42/chapter119/subchapter6/partB&edition=prelim>.

While participants described relatively substantial amounts of training for district liaisons (including annual trainings required by OSPI, access to webinars, and attendance at conferences and training events provided by local community-based organizations), most of the training for school staff and others was often described as brief and focused on basic awareness and rights under McKinney-Vento, rather than on specific support strategies or practices. For example, the training described by several schools and districts consisted of a short (about 15 minutes) presentation during staff meetings prior to the start of the year, while others used various online learning modules.

Several recommended best practices for training were not widely mentioned. For example, only about one-quarter of respondents specifically mentioned providing training to staff working in support roles, like bus drivers or food service workers, while less than 6% of respondents mentioned providing specific training for teachers on methods to adapt instruction and assignments in equitable ways for students experiencing homelessness.

Several respondents noted that adequate training can be difficult given constraints such as lack of resources, difficulty scheduling sufficient time given the plethora of other topics that must be covered each year, and the large number of schools and staff relative to the small number of liaisons available to conduct training in many districts. However, it appears that providing more in-depth training to a wide variety of staff may lead to more consistent overall support for students experiencing homelessness, particularly when there are processes in place to reinforce and systematize the content.

Partnerships between schools, districts, and community-based agencies present both challenges and opportunities.

Students experiencing homelessness and their families often have diverse and complex needs. While schools can and do provide many types of supports, they are not always able to meet every need. Many students and families may thus benefit from supports provided by other agencies or organizations in the community. Schools and districts can play an important role in linking students to these supports by identifying and establishing partnerships with community-based agencies.

Many of the schools and districts with which we spoke had a variety of partnerships in place to support students. For example, nearly all respondents worked with local organizations to assist with some basic needs, such as providing bags of food each week and school supplies like backpacks and pencils. A few schools and districts also described partnerships to connect students and families with other types of supports, including health services (mental, behavioral, and physical health), childcare, employment support, and assistance applying for benefits.

While there were a variety of partnerships in place, many schools and districts also described challenges. For example, several respondents reported there were no shelters or housing support agencies in their area. Others noted that establishing and maintaining effective partnerships required resources and staff time that were not always available.

Despite these and other challenges, respondents consistently emphasized the importance of robust partnerships. While many had found creative ways to partner with a broad array of organizations (including housing agencies, social services agencies, the business community, and faith-based organizations), there is substantial opportunity to expand the number, scope, and depth of partnerships to help ensure that students and their families have access to services that can help them thrive.

Specific Practices and Strategies

Table 5 on the next page provides brief definitions of the eight specific categories of practices and strategies that were more likely to be used in schools and districts with higher-than-predicted outcomes for students experiencing homelessness, and additional details and examples follow. It is important to note that many of these practices and strategies were not necessarily applied only with students experiencing homelessness; both school and district respondents reported using many of them with all students (including students experiencing homelessness).

*Table 5:
Practices and Strategies Used More Often in Higher-than-Predicted Schools and Districts*

Practice/Strategy	Brief Definition
Intentional focus on equity	Embedded and systematic practices designed to monitor and address the opportunity gap.
Out-of-school time opportunities	Programs offered outside of school hours, such as before school, after school, and/or over summer break.
Relationship-building	Formal approaches focused on building consistent, meaningful relationships with adults in the school or community.
Structured social-emotional and behavioral programs	Systematic approaches to help students develop knowledge and skills related to behavior, self-awareness, decision-making, empathy, and similar attributes.
Data-informed programs	Frequent use of targeted data to assist in planning, developing, delivering, and monitoring student supports.
Population-specific outreach	Tailored strategies to connect with populations disproportionately affected by homelessness and provide information on available services.
Parent involvement in academic support plans	Collaborative engagement between school staff and parents/guardians to develop and implement relevant academic interventions.
Flexible funding for housing stability	Funds that can be used to assist with housing stabilization, like move-in costs or hotel vouchers.

An intentional focus on equity makes a difference.

Students of color are overrepresented among students experiencing homelessness. In Washington State, nearly two-thirds (62%) of students experiencing homelessness are students of color, compared to 46% of all K-12 public school students.¹⁶ This disproportionality paired with the disparity in outcomes for students of color overall points to the need for school systems to have practices and strategies in place squarely aimed at achieving equity.

In general, practices that demonstrate an intentional focus on equity were relatively limited in our sample. The schools and districts with which we spoke universally used at least some practices related to equity, often involving translated materials and other strategies to address language access. In addition, several of the participants described equality-related practices, like ensuring all students had access to the same opportunities and services or using an individualized approach to student support.

¹⁶ Lemon, M. (2019). *Students experiencing homelessness in Washington's K-12 public schools: 2015-2018 trends, characteristics and academic outcomes*. Seattle, WA: Schoolhouse Washington, a project of Building Changes. https://www.schoolhousewa.org/wp-content/uploads/SchoolhouseWA_OutcomesReport_2019.pdf.

These efforts to ensure language access and equality are essential. Here, however, we define an intentional focus on equity as practices and strategies intended to affirmatively address the causes and effects of systemic discrimination. We found that schools and districts with higher-than-predicted outcomes were more likely to employ intentional strategies to promote equity and reduce the opportunity gap, with a particular focus on race and ethnicity.

Examples of intentional strategies used in schools and districts include, but are not limited to, the following:

- Establishing partnerships with culturally specific organizations to provide tailored support such as wraparound services (e.g., behavioral health, wellness), mentoring programs, or case management.
- Explicitly including equity work in district and building planning processes, such as strategic plans and improvement plans.
- Operating district- and school-level equity departments, teams, or committees that meet frequently and, in some cases, include input from students and parents.
- Providing training for and implementing equitable education practices, such as culturally responsive pedagogy.
- Frequent and systematic review of disaggregated data in order to identify disparities.

Offering a variety of out-of-school time opportunities, with specific supports to ensure access for students experiencing homelessness, may have a positive effect.

A substantial majority of schools and districts with which we spoke mentioned some type of out-of-school time opportunities, typically after school tutoring programs. While these opportunities were relatively common, practices in higher-than-predicted schools and districts were, on average, distinct in two ways:

1. Higher-than-predicted schools were more likely to have multiple types of out-of-school time programs available to students, including after school tutoring, homework clubs, comprehensive after school programs, summer programs, and before school programs.
2. Higher-than-predicted schools and districts were more likely to emphasize and describe adaptations and components to address the specific needs of students experiencing homelessness, including methods to provide flexible transportation, adjusting the location of after school programs to make them more accessible, and providing meals.

An emphasis on building consistent relationships seems to be beneficial.

Several participants noted the central and foundational importance of building strong relationships. Relationship-building efforts were seen as important in a variety of ways, including helping to identify families' needs, facilitating cross-departmental work, and helping to establish and maintain partnerships with community-based organizations, and, especially, with students.

Several also noted the powerful impact positive relationships with caring adults in schools can have on students. One liaison we interviewed reported that consistent relationships can help students experiencing homelessness deal with trauma or hardship in their life. Another interviewee said that knowing someone in school cares for and supports them can be a transformative experience for some students and can help them to realize their dreams and aspirations.

While many participants spoke about the importance of building relationships, higher-than-predicted schools and districts were more likely to operationalize those efforts and have specific programs and approaches in place. These included professional development in relationship-building, a variety of mentoring programs (including community based and peer mentors), and check-in programs (such as Check & Connect or Check-in/Check-Out). Although higher-than-predicted schools and districts were more likely to have relationship-building programs in place; overall, the strategy was not used frequently: about one-quarter of higher-than-predicted schools and only one lower-than-predicted school specifically mentioned employing the practice.

Structured approaches to social-emotional development and behavior may help students thrive.

The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning defines social-emotional learning as “the process through which children and adults understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions.”¹⁷ Recently, there has been an increased focus on incorporating social-emotional development and behavioral supports into schools, including the Social-Emotional Learning Benchmarks Workgroup led by OSPI and a variety of other efforts.¹⁸

Our analysis found that these types of practices may be beneficial for students experiencing homelessness—schools and districts with higher-than-predicted outcomes were more likely to use a variety of structured approaches related to social-emotional development and behavior. For example, more than half of higher-than-predicted schools and districts used Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports or other multi-tiered systems of behavioral support, compared to about one-third of lower-than-predicted schools and districts. Similarly, higher-than-predicted schools were more likely to discuss using trauma-informed practices and the importance of recognizing and responding to students with adverse childhood experiences.

Robust and frequent use of targeted data for students experiencing homelessness can help to ensure supports are in place and effective.

Schools and districts collect a variety of data, including on attendance, test scores, grades, discipline, and much more. Nearly all of the schools and districts we interviewed described using data to some extent. For example, most reported using a system of interventions to address chronic absenteeism and truancy based on attendance data.

While all schools use data in some way, our analysis found that higher-than-predicted schools and districts were more likely to use data in an embedded, frequent, and systematic way, with a focus on using data to drive decision-making. They were also more likely to use targeted data specifically for students experiencing homelessness and to have processes in place to support data-sharing with community-based partners.

Examples of practices and strategies used in schools and districts include, but are not limited to, the following:

¹⁷ See <https://casel.org/> for more information.

¹⁸ See <https://www.k12.wa.us/student-success/health-safety/mental-social-behavioral-health/social-and-emotional-learning-sel> for more information.

- Data-based goal setting and inclusion of students experiencing homelessness as a tracked subgroup in key performance indicators and other analyses.
- Systematic use of a variety of data points to facilitate identification of students experiencing homelessness, including attendance, behavioral referrals, and changes in grades.
- Use of early warning systems to identify students who need additional support through prevention and intervention activities.
- Frequent and systematic use of formative assessments to measure progress and reassess needs for academic supports.
- Use of centralized methods and designated staff to monitor data specifically for students experiencing homelessness (as opposed to tracking student data separately based on class groupings or other distributed methods), including, in some cases, tracking changes in housing status.
- Application of reciprocal data-sharing methods to facilitate and monitor interventions and supports with housing providers and community-based organizations using releases of information and other procedures to protect student privacy.

Dedicated outreach to populations disproportionately affected by homelessness may help identify students and build trust.

Most of the schools and districts with which we spoke conducted some type of outreach to inform students and families about available services and rights under McKinney-Vento. In most cases, the outreach method was passive, such as placing posters in schools or community locations, and sending letters, flyers, or other documents to all students, often as part of enrollment packets.

These efforts may work for some students and families, but additional targeted strategies may be needed to effectively reach out to other students and families, particularly in communities disproportionately impacted by homelessness.

While these targeted methods were not widely applied overall—only about one-third of districts and schools described using specific strategies—our analysis found that higher-than-predicted schools and districts were more likely to use active, intentional strategies to conduct outreach to those communities. These methods can not only help to identify additional students who may not otherwise have received services, but may also help to build trust and engagement with individuals and communities that historically have been underserved by the education system.

A few examples of the practices and strategies that schools and districts described include the following:

- Working collaboratively and conducting cross-training with English language learner support staff and similar departments in order to coordinate and enhance outreach efforts.
- Partnering with culturally specific organizations to lead or assist with outreach in the communities they serve and for training on effective outreach and engagement methods.
- Conducting mobile outreach efforts at various community locations that include information on services.
- Holding community nights in schools to celebrate cultural groups or similar types of events that include information on services and rights.

Including parents/guardians in academic support plans may help to build ownership and deepen relationships.

Schools and districts are increasingly focused on parent and family engagement, and use a variety of approaches, including hiring specific family engagement and support staff, operating home visiting programs, and much more.

Most of the schools with which we spoke employed some form of parent engagement. Often, McKinney-Vento liaisons met with parents and guardians once students were identified as experiencing homelessness in order to help determine specific needs. In addition, schools described reaching out to parents via phone calls and in-person meetings when students were at risk of truancy.

We found that one practice in particular was more likely to be used in higher-than-predicted schools and districts. About one-third of higher-than-predicted schools and districts (and one lower-than-predicted school) described specifically including parents in developing academic support plans for students who were struggling. Typically, this involved a team approach in which parents, teachers, counselors, and students themselves met to discuss academic needs, determine what interventions to pursue, and set goals.

This practice may help to gain buy-in and engagement from students and their families because it starts from a premise that they are the experts on their own lives and needs, rather than using a one-size-fits-all approach to academic supports.

Timely access to flexible funding for housing-related supports can help stabilize students and families in crisis.

The schools and districts we interviewed typically addressed housing supports for students and families by making referrals to community-based organizations such as shelters or agencies responsible for administering the local Coordinated Entry process. These types of referrals were used frequently; more than 80% of interviewees across both higher- and lower-than-predicted schools and districts cited this practice.

While referrals may help students and families get connected to services and potentially access stable housing, the process can take a considerable amount of time and many students and families may not meet program eligibility requirements, particularly when they are living in doubled-up situations. Many schools and districts recognize these constraints, and some provide other types of services to address the gap, such as landlord engagement and housing search assistance.

One strategy cited more often by higher-than-predicted schools and districts was using targeted funding to help stabilize immediate housing needs, such as providing hotel vouchers for students and families in transition or assistance with rental application fees and move-in costs (e.g., first/last month's rent and deposit). Typically, these programs either worked closely with a community partner to provide support or leveraged external sources like grants from district and community foundations or funds raised by the local parent-teacher association or other groups.

While this strategy was used more often in higher-than-predicted schools and districts, it was relatively limited in both scope and scale. Only about one-third of higher-than-predicted schools and districts cited this practice, compared to less than 10% in lower-than-predicted schools. In addition, many respondents

noted that the amount of available funding was typically modest and could not support the overall level of need.

Summary

Students experiencing homelessness have, on average, academic outcomes well below those of their housed peers. Schools and districts can play a key role in addressing these outcomes by implementing effective practices and strategies tailored to the specific needs of students experiencing homelessness.

Relatively little research exists that empirically links effective practices to improved outcomes. To help fill this gap, we conducted a systematic study to identify schools with better outcomes for students experiencing homelessness and conducted 52 interviews with staff from schools and districts across the state to learn about what practices and strategies they used to support students.

Through this process, we found that staff in all types of schools worked hard each day implementing a variety of practices and strategies to support students, typically with limited resources. We also learned that supporting students experiencing homelessness is a complex process, and thus, perhaps unsurprisingly, there is no single, simple strategy to improve outcomes. Instead, we found that better outcomes were associated with implementing consistent, focused, and intentional strategies across a variety of domains.

We also learned about several specific practices and strategies associated with better outcomes for students experiencing homelessness, including focusing on equity, providing out-of-school time opportunities, building relationships, using structured approaches to promote social-emotional development, effectively using data, conducting population-specific outreach, involving parents in academic support, and offering flexible housing stability supports.

Finally, we learned about several opportunities to improve supports for students experiencing homelessness, including improving training, increasing school-level capacity (in addition to district-level capacity), expanding and strengthening partnerships with community-based agencies, and developing tailored academic supports.

We hope that schools, districts, and community partners will use these findings to continue building a system that fully meets the needs of students experiencing homelessness and their families.

Appendix A: Additional Detail on Study Methods and Results

This appendix provides additional detail on the methods, results, and limitations of the analytical approach we used to identify schools with higher- and lower-than-predicted outcomes for students experiencing homelessness, and to conduct interviews with school and district staff to learn about the practices and strategies used to support these students.

Identifying Schools with Higher- and Lower-than-Predicted Outcomes for Students Experiencing Homelessness

This section describes the methods we used to identify schools with outcomes that were higher- and lower-than-predicted, the results from our regression models, and the characteristics of the schools in our interview sample.

Methods

We used a school-level dataset covering the 2014-15 to 2016-17 school years, obtained from Washington’s Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, to identify schools with higher- and lower-than-predicted outcomes for students experiencing homelessness.¹⁹ Our initial dataset included information on 2,313 public schools and programs from 294 of the standard 295 districts²⁰ in the state (i.e., schools in charter districts, educational service districts, and other types of districts were excluded).

Due to small numbers of students experiencing homelessness in many schools, we pooled data across years in all analyses to generate a more inclusive sample of schools of various sizes across the state. We restricted our sample to schools with a minimum of ten students experiencing homelessness in each relevant outcome pooled across the three years and at least one student in the most recent year of our dataset (2016-17).

Once we formed our initial pool, we determined which schools were “beating the odds” (achieving higher-than-predicted outcomes) by building statistical models that predicted each school’s outcomes after controlling statistically for other factors that could have influenced those outcomes.

We used a multiple regression approach similar to several previous beating-the-odds studies and controlled for school-level characteristics of students experiencing homelessness, including race/ethnicity, special education status, English language learner status, and grade level.²¹ We did not control for low-income status, since nearly all students identified as experiencing homelessness were

¹⁹ The school-level dataset was obtained from the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) via data-sharing agreement in spring 2018. All analyses and interpretations are the author’s and do not necessarily reflect the views of OSPI.

²⁰ Our dataset did not include valid counts in 2016-17 for one district, which was thus excluded from the analysis.

²¹ Previous beating-the-odds studies include the following: Abe, Y., Weinstock, P., Chan, V., Meyers, C., Gerdeman, R.D., & Brandt, W.C. (2015). *How methodology decisions affect the variability of schools identified as beating the odds* (REL 2015-071). Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education, Institute for Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Regional Education Laboratory Midwest; Cole, W. (2008). *“Beating the Odds” on the WASL, revisited: Identifying consistently successful—and struggling—schools* (Document No. 08-05-2201). Olympia, WA: Washington State Institute for Public Policy; and Koon, S., Petscher, Y., & Foorman, B.R. (2014). *Beating the odds: Finding schools exceeding achievement expectations with high-risk students* (REL 2014-032). Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education, Institute for Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Regional Education Laboratory Southeast.

also eligible for free or reduced-price lunch. Models were weighted using the pooled number of students in each outcome by school and standard errors were clustered by school district.

We built separate models for each of the following outcomes:

- Regular attendance rates, defined as the percentage of students attending school at least 90% of days enrolled.
- English language arts (ELA) proficiency, defined as the percentage of students meeting standard on the annual state assessment.
- Mathematics proficiency, defined as the percentage of students meeting standard on the annual state assessment.
- On-time high school graduation rates, defined as the percentage of students graduating within four years of entering grade 9.
- Extended high school graduation rates, defined as the percentage of students graduating within five years of entering grade 9.

We ran separate regressions by grade span since students are only tested in certain grades and many schools do not serve high school students and thus do not have valid graduation rates. For schools serving students in grades K-8, we analyzed regular attendance rates, ELA proficiency, and mathematics proficiency. For schools serving grade 12 students, we analyzed regular attendance rates, on-time graduation, and extended graduation. Finally, we ran separate regressions for both traditional and alternative schools serving grade 12 students.

Schools were classified as higher- or lower-than-predicted in each outcome if their actual performance was at least one standard deviation above or below their predicted performance.

We applied one final criterion to identify the schools to include in our interview sample: they had to be identified as higher- or lower-than-predicted in regular attendance plus at least one other outcome. This two-outcome selection method helped to identify schools with consistently higher or lower performance across outcomes and ensured the outcomes considered captured broader measures of performance than just test scores or graduation.

Schools serving students in grades K-8 had higher- or lower-than-predicted outcomes in regular attendance and either ELA or mathematics proficiency (or both). Schools serving grade 12 students had higher- or lower-than-predicted outcomes in regular attendance and either on-time or extended graduation.

Limitations

While our approach was based on prior research in the field, it had several limitations and was sensitive to modeling decisions. For example, we focused on the subpopulation of students experiencing homelessness, rather than including all students. In addition, we examined a wider variety of outcomes (such as regular attendance) and aggregated outcomes across grades, compared to previous studies which typically focused on test score performance within a single grade. We were unaware of prior studies with similar levels of analysis and there is a dearth of rigorous research on the predictors of performance among this student population.

Further, the nature of our dataset presented several limitations. We were unable to control for a variety of unobservable factors that could have influenced outcomes, including student characteristics like

exposure to trauma or local characteristics like school culture. In addition, in this analysis we did not control for characteristics of housed students, district-level characteristics like per-pupil expenditures, or other factors that also could have had an effect on outcomes.

We used school-level rather than individual-level student data and thus did not use other analytical approaches, such as growth or value-added models, which could have provided additional detail on contributions by schools to the individual learning trajectories of the students. Finally, we were unable to observe individual mobility between schools and thus the pooled outcomes and characteristics may have included the same student(s) across years.

Regression Results

The results of our regression models for each outcome are presented in Tables A1 and A2 (next page). A number of variables were correlated with outcomes, as explained below.

The number of schools serving students in grades K-8 included in each model ranged from 932 for math proficiency to 1,266 for regular attendance. For schools serving grade 12 students, the number in models for traditional schools ranged from 231 to 283 and the number for alternative schools ranged from 94 to 104.

The racial/ethnic composition of students experiencing homelessness was significantly related to outcomes in most models (particularly those examining outcomes for schools serving K-8 students) but was not significantly related to on-time graduation rates among traditional schools serving grade 12 students.

The percentage of students experiencing homelessness who were eligible for special education showed a significant negative relationship to all outcomes among schools serving K-8 students and to graduation rates in traditional schools, but was not significant for regular attendance in schools serving grade 12 students or for any models for alternative schools.

The percentage of students experiencing homelessness who were English language learners showed a significant positive relationship to regular attendance rates and a significant negative relationship to ELA and math proficiency rates among schools serving K-8 students. Similarly, English language learner rates among traditional schools serving grade 12 students showed a significant positive relationship to regular attendance and a significant negative relationship to on-time graduation.

Finally, the grade-level composition of students experiencing homelessness among schools serving K-8 students showed a significant positive relationship to regular attendance rates for a few earlier grades and a significant negative relationship to proficiency in mathematics in grades 6-8. Grade level did not have a significant relationship to ELA rates or to regular attendance rates in schools serving grade 12 students.

The percentage of variation in school-level outcome rates accounted for by the models ranged from a low of 7% for on-time and extended graduation to a high of 34% for regular attendance among schools serving K-8 students. The relatively low proportion of variance explained (particularly in graduation rates) indicates that unmeasured characteristics of schools and students (and other contextual factors) were substantially related to student outcomes. In particular, some of the variation in outcomes may be related to community context and/or the particular practices and strategies employed by the schools.

*Table A1:
Regression Results for Schools Serving K-8 students*

	Regular Attendance	English Language Arts	Math
Percent American Indian/Alaska Native	-0.20 **	-0.33 ***	-0.25 ***
Percent Asian	0.42 ***	0.60 ***	0.75 ***
Percent Black/African American	-0.13	-0.20 ***	-0.13 ***
Percent Hispanic/Latino of any race(s)	-0.06	-0.14 ***	-0.05
Percent Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander	-0.58 ***	-0.23 *	-0.20 *
Percent two or more races	-0.22 ***	-0.06	-0.09
Percent English language learners	0.19 ***	-0.21 ***	-0.22 ***
Percent special education	-0.09 *	-0.20 ***	-0.16 ***
Percent grade 1	0.03	-	-
Percent grade 2	0.15 *	-	-
Percent grade 3	0.14 *	-	-
Percent grade 4	0.11	0.07	-0.08
Percent grade 5	0.16 *	0.10	-0.07
Percent grade 6	0.05	0.02	-0.13 **
Percent grade 7	0.01	0.09	-0.11 *
Percent grade 8	-0.07	0.03	-0.15 ***
Constant	0.68 ***	0.41 ***	0.46 ***
R-squared	0.34	0.29	0.25
Number of schools	1,266	933	932

* p < 0.05 ** p < 0.01 *** p < 0.001

Table A2:
Regression Results for Schools Serving Grade 12 Students

	Traditional Schools			Alternative Schools		
	Reg. Attend	On-Time Grad ¹	Ext. Grad ¹	Reg. Attend	On-Time Grad ¹	Ext. Grad ¹
Percent American Indian/Alaska Native	-0.28 ***	-0.15	-0.20 *	-0.45	0.00	0.07
Percent Asian	0.26	0.14	0.18	3.44	0.23	0.87
Percent Black/African American	-0.12	0.05	0.03	-0.93 ***	-0.35 **	-0.61 **
Percent Hispanic/Latino of any race(s)	-0.11	0.04	-0.01	-0.32	0.01	0.02
Percent Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander	-1.03 **	0.09	0.00	-1.95	-1.83 **	0.80
Percent two or more races	-0.12	0.13	-0.10	0.80	-0.08	-0.20
Percent English language learners	0.45 *	-0.25 *	-0.18	0.38	0.00	-0.14
Percent special education	-0.18	-0.29 *	-0.25 *	-0.30	0.32	0.31
Percent grade 10	-0.03	-	-	-0.84	-	-
Percent grade 11	0.19	-	-	-0.71	-	-
Percent grade 12	0.05	-	-	-0.35	-	-
Constant	0.52 ***	0.73 ***	0.82 ***	1.08	0.22 **	0.31 ***
R-squared	0.17	0.07	0.07	0.24	0.19	0.14
Number of schools	283	246	231	104	97	94

* p < 0.05 ** p < 0.01 *** p < 0.001

¹ The high school graduation sample includes students who experienced homelessness at least one time in grades 9-12, rather than only those students who experienced homelessness during their graduation year.

Higher- and Lower-than-Predicted Schools

The regression models described above were used to predict the outcome rates for each school. That is, we identified an expected score for each school after accounting for the school's mix of student characteristics. Schools were identified as higher- or lower-than-predicted if their observed outcome rates were one standard deviation above or below their predicted performance. Figure A1 shows an example using regular attendance in schools serving K-8 students.

Figure A1:
Regular Attendance Rates in Higher- and Lower-than-Predicted Schools Serving K-8 Students

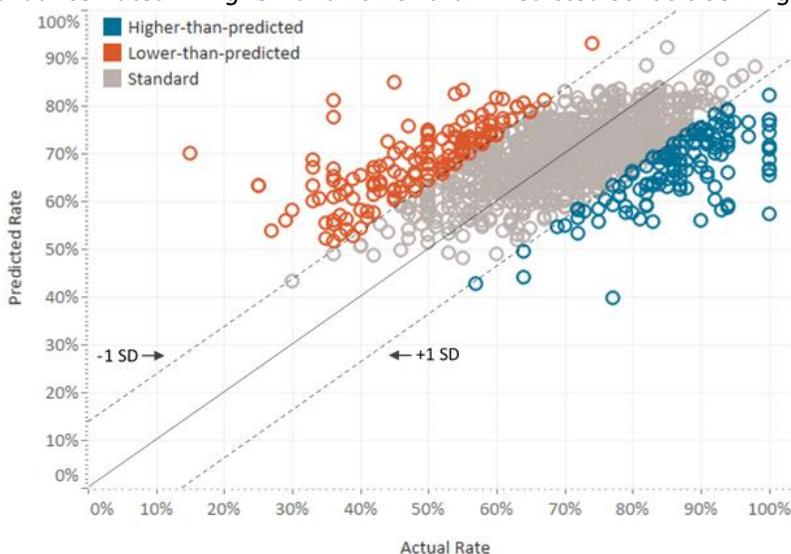


Table A3 summarizes the number of identified schools by outcome, grade span, and school type. The percentage of schools identified as higher- and lower-than-predicted was between 10% and 15% for most outcomes. In order to protect student privacy and to ensure confidentiality of interview respondents, we do not list the names of the identified schools (or districts) in our sample.

Table A3:
Number and Percentage of Schools by Identification Status, Outcome, Grade Span, and School Type

	Number Higher-than-Predicted (%)	Number Lower-than-Predicted (%)	Total Schools in Model
<i>Schools serving K-8 students</i>			
Regular attendance	135 (11%)	151 (12%)	1,266
English language arts proficiency	125 (13%)	92 (10%)	933
Mathematics proficiency	135 (14%)	105 (11%)	932
<i>Schools serving grade 12 students (traditional)</i>			
Regular attendance	36 (13%)	33 (12%)	283
On-time graduation	34 (14%)	27 (11%)	246
Extended graduation	35 (15%)	29 (13%)	231
<i>Schools serving grade 12 students (alternative)</i>			
Regular attendance	26 (25%)	13 (13%)	104
On-time graduation	10 (10%)	12 (12%)	97
Extended graduation	17 (18%)	17 (18%)	94

Outcome rates in schools identified as higher-than-predicted were substantially better than those for lower-than-predicted schools (Tables A4 and A5). For example, ELA and mathematics proficiency rates for students experiencing homelessness in higher-than-predicted schools were 56% and 52% respectively, compared to 13% and 10% in lower-than-predicted schools.

Other sample characteristics of students experiencing homelessness were relatively similar across the sets of schools (Tables A4 and A5). Schools identified as lower-than-predicted had more students in all outcomes except ELA proficiency, with models for alternative schools showing the largest difference.

Higher-than-predicted schools serving K-8 students had a smaller share of Hispanic/Latino students in models for math proficiency and English language learner students in all outcomes. The shares of students in grades 3-5 were also somewhat higher in lower-than-predicted schools for ELA and mathematics proficiency (Table A4).

For traditional schools serving grade 12 students, higher-than-predicted schools had a larger percentage of Hispanic/Latino students across all outcomes, smaller proportions of American Indian/Alaska Native and Black/African American students in regular attendance, and a slightly larger percentage of American Indian/Alaska Native in on-time graduation. Alternative schools had a relatively low proportion of English language learners across all models (Table A5, next page).

*Table A4:
Characteristics of Schools Serving K-8 Students by Identification Status and Outcome*

	Regular Attendance		English Language Arts Proficiency		Mathematics Proficiency	
	Higher	Lower	Higher	Lower	Higher	Lower
Number of schools	135	151	125	92	135	105
Average students eligible/tested per school	34	40	20	20	20	23
Regular attendance rate	87%	48%	-	-	-	-
English language arts proficiency rate	-	-	56%	13%	-	-
Mathematics proficiency rate	-	-	-	-	52%	10%
Percent American Indian/Alaska Native	4%	5%	3%	2%	3%	3%
Percent Asian	1%	1%	1%	2%	2%	3%
Percent Black/African American	9%	9%	9%	7%	10%	9%
Percent Hispanic/Latino	23%	24%	25%	27%	23%	28%
Percent Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander	3%	2%	2%	2%	2%	2%
Percent two or more races	13%	12%	11%	10%	11%	11%
Percent white	47%	47%	48%	49%	49%	45%
Percent English language learners	10%	13%	9%	12%	10%	12%
Percent special education	23%	23%	24%	23%	23%	23%
Percent grade K	12%	12%	-	-	-	-
Percent grade 1	12%	12%	-	-	-	-
Percent grade 2	12%	12%	-	-	-	-
Percent grade 3	10%	10%	21%	25%	23%	24%
Percent grade 4	12%	11%	22%	27%	23%	26%
Percent grade 5	10%	11%	20%	25%	21%	24%
Percent grade 6	10%	11%	14%	11%	12%	11%
Percent grade 7	12%	11%	12%	6%	11%	7%
Percent grade 8	11%	10%	11%	6%	11%	8%

Note: Percentages may not add to 100 due to rounding.

Table A5:
Characteristics of Schools Serving Grade 12 Students by Identification Status and Outcome

	Regular Attendance		On-Time Graduation ¹		Extended Graduation ¹	
	Higher	Lower	Higher	Lower	Higher	Lower
<i>Traditional schools</i>						
Number of schools	36	33	34	27	35	29
Average students eligible per school	48	54	21	31	28	30
Regular attendance rate	77%	26%	-	-	-	-
On-time graduation rate	-	-	89%	37%	-	-
Extended graduation rate	-	-	-	-	92%	47%
Percent American Indian/Alaska Native	3%	7%	7%	4%	7%	6%
Percent Asian	2%	2%	1%	2%	2%	2%
Percent Black/African American	3%	9%	7%	7%	6%	7%
Percent Hispanic/Latino	28%	22%	28%	26%	30%	26%
Percent Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander	2%	1%	1%	1%	1%	1%
Percent two or more races	8%	8%	6%	8%	6%	8%
Percent white	55%	51%	50%	52%	48%	51%
Percent English language learners	7%	8%	10%	10%	11%	10%
Percent special education	19%	20%	24%	23%	22%	23%
Percent grade 9	18%	19%	-	-	-	-
Percent grade 10	22%	19%	-	-	-	-
Percent grade 11	24%	26%	-	-	-	-
Percent grade 12	36%	36%	-	-	-	-
<i>Alternative schools</i>						
Number of schools	26	13	10	12	17	17
Students eligible	30	57	23	31	21	29
Regular attendance rate	> 95%	13%	-	-	-	-
On-time graduation rate	-	-	62%	< 5%	-	-
Extended graduation rate	-	-	-	-	68%	< 5%
Percent American Indian/Alaska Native	4%	3%	2%	4%	2%	3%
Percent Asian	1%	1%	1%	0%	1%	2%
Percent Black/African American	9%	6%	6%	3%	10%	8%
Percent Hispanic/Latino	20%	12%	28%	28%	26%	26%
Percent Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander	3%	2%	1%	0%	4%	2%
Percent two or more races	9%	11%	8%	10%	8%	9%
Percent white	56%	65%	54%	56%	51%	50%
Percent English language learners	4%	2%	5%	6%	5%	7%
Percent special education	21%	16%	15%	16%	19%	24%
Percent grade 9	6%	7%	-	-	-	-
Percent grade 10	12%	10%	-	-	-	-
Percent grade 11	28%	26%	-	-	-	-
Percent grade 12	54%	58%	-	-	-	-

Note: Percentages may not add to 100 due to rounding.

¹ The high school graduation sample includes students who experienced homelessness at least one time in grades 9-12, rather than only those students who experienced homelessness during their graduation year.

As mentioned previously, schools had to be identified as higher- or lower-than-predicted based on two or more outcomes to be included in the interview sample. Attendance was a required criterion for all school types, as well as either ELA or mathematics proficiency for schools serving K-8 students and either on-time or extended graduation for schools serving grade 12 students.

In all, 75 schools were identified for the interview sample, including 44 schools identified as higher-than-predicted and 31 identified as lower-than-predicted (Table A6). This represented just greater than 3% of the total number of schools in our initial dataset.

*Table A6:
Number of Schools Meeting Interview Sample Selection Criteria by Grade Span and School Type*

	Higher-than-Predicted	Lower-than-Predicted	Total
Schools serving K-8 students	31	25	56
Schools serving grade 12 students (traditional)	11	6	17
Schools serving grade 12 students (alternative)	2	0	2
Total	44	31	75

The schools were part of 52 districts across the state. The number of selected schools per district ranged from one to five. In addition, some districts included both higher- and lower-than-predicted schools (Table A7).

*Table A7:
District and School Counts by Identification Status*

	Number of Districts	Number of Schools
Higher-than-predicted only	27	34
Lower-than-predicted only	18	23
Both higher- and lower-than-predicted	7	18
Total	52	75

While the sample characteristics are relatively similar within each outcome model described above, differences between the sets of schools emerged after filtering to those identified as higher- or lower-than-predicted with regard to at least two outcomes (Table A8, next page).

Higher-than-predicted schools serving students in grades K-8 had fewer students experiencing homelessness, on average, and lower rates of homelessness. They were also more likely to be located in a suburb and less likely to be in a city. Students experiencing homelessness in higher-than-predicted schools were more likely to be doubled-up and less likely to be in shelters or other living situations. Higher-than-predicted schools also had smaller proportions of Hispanic/Latino students and English language learners. Finally, higher-than-predicted schools had a substantially lower percentage of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunches.

Higher-than-predicted schools serving grade 12 students also had fewer students experiencing homelessness, a lower homelessness rate, and a larger share of students living doubled-up. They were also less likely to be in a city but were more likely to be in a rural area. Higher-than-predicted schools serving grade 12 had larger proportions of Hispanic/Latino students and smaller proportions of American Indian/Alaska Native and Black/African American students. Finally, rates of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunches were similar and higher-than-predicted schools were in districts with slightly lower per-pupil expenditures.

Table A8:
Characteristics of Schools in Interview Sample

	Schools Serving K-8 Students		Schools Serving Grade 12 students (Traditional)	
	Higher-than-Predicted	Lower-than-Predicted	Higher-than-Predicted	Lower-than-Predicted
Number of schools	31	25	11	6
<i>General characteristics</i>				
Total enrollment (annual average)	557	566	609	601
Total students experiencing homelessness (annual average)	13	24	24	42
Homelessness rate (annual average)	2.7%	4.9%	5.3%	10.9%
District per-pupil expenditures (annual average)	\$11,492	\$11,498	\$11,224	\$11,945
Percent city	19%	52%	9%	50
Percent rural	10%	8%	55%	-
Percent suburb	58%	28%	9%	33
Percent town	13%	12%	27%	17
<i>Characteristics of students experiencing homelessness</i>				
Percent doubled-up	79%	64%	86%	80%
Percent hotels/motels	6%	11%	3%	6%
Percent shelters	12%	20%	7%	12%
Percent unsheltered	2%	5%	5%	2%
Percent American Indian/Alaska Native	2%	2%	4%	11%
Percent Asian	2%	2%	0%	3%
Percent Black/African American	10%	10%	3%	11%
Percent Hispanic/Latino	22%	29%	35%	22%
Percent Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander	3%	4%	0%	2%
Percent two or more races	13%	14%	5%	11%
Percent white	48%	40%	54%	41%
Percent English language learners	9%	14%	10%	7%
Percent special education	24%	19%	21%	18%
<i>Characteristics of housed students</i>				
Percent American Indian/Alaska Native	1%	1%	2%	12%
Percent Asian	7%	7%	2%	5%
Percent Black/African American	4%	7%	1%	6%
Percent Hispanic/Latino	16%	25%	30%	19%
Percent Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander	1%	2%	0%	1%
Percent two or more races	10%	9%	4%	9%
Percent white	62%	49%	61%	47%
Percent English language learners	8%	16%	6%	7%
Percent special education	12%	15%	12%	17%
Percent free/reduced-price lunches	36%	66%	54%	58%

Note: The two alternative schools serving grade 12 students identified as higher-than-predicted are not shown here due to the limited sample size and lack of comparison schools.

While the observed disparity in outcomes may be related in part to the differences in the school-level characteristics described above, the practices and strategies used in each set of schools may also play an important role. In the next section, we discuss the interview process we conducted to learn about these practices and strategies.

Learning from Schools that Beat the Odds

This section describes the methods we used to gather and analyze information about the practices and strategies used to support students experiencing homelessness in both higher- and lower-than-predicted schools and districts and presents the results of our analysis.

Outreach and Response

As described in the previous section, we identified a sample of 75 schools in 52 districts across the state that either beat the odds with higher-than-predicted outcomes for students experiencing homelessness or that had lower-than-predicted outcomes.

To learn more about what schools were doing to support students, we reached out to staff of each school and district to set up interviews. We included district staff because of their central role in implementing services and supports under the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act. Responses from both schools and districts are included in our analysis.

We contacted staff members from each school and district beginning in April 2019 and continuing through June 2019. We first reached out to the McKinney-Vento liaison(s) in each district and then to principals or other relevant contacts at each school. In some cases, liaisons assisted with making school-level connections.

In our initial outreach, we described the goal of our study, the topics we were interested in learning about, the estimated length and format of the interview, and the intended product of the work. We also noted that all interview responses would remain confidential and the names of schools and districts would not be published in the report. All initial outreach was conducted via email. We made multiple attempts to contact each school and district, including following up via both email and phone.

The overall response rate was 42%. We conducted a total of 52 interviews with staff members from 23 schools and 31 districts (two interviews combined staff from both the district and school). Of the 31 districts we interviewed, we conducted interviews with staff from one or more identified schools in 14 districts. In the remaining 17 districts, we conducted interviews with district staff only and were unable to interview staff at any of the identified schools. In addition, we interviewed staff from five schools in which we were not able to interview staff from their corresponding districts. Almost half of the completed interviews (48%) were with higher-than-predicted schools and districts (Table A9, next page).

*Table A9:
Number of Interviews and Response Rates by Identification Status, Grade Span, and Type*

	Number Interviewed (% of interviews)	Number Contacted	Response Rate
<i>Schools serving K-8 students</i>			
Higher-than-predicted	6 (38%)	31	19%
Lower-than-predicted	10 (63%)	25	40%
Total	16 (100%)	56	29%
<i>Schools serving grade 12 students</i>			
Higher-than-predicted	6 (86%)	13	46%
Lower-than-predicted	1 (14%)	6	17%
Total	7 (100%)	19	37%
<i>Schools overall</i>			
Higher-than-predicted	12 (52%)	44	27%
Lower-than-predicted	11 (48%)	31	35%
Total	23 (100%)	75	31%
<i>Districts</i>			
Higher-than-predicted schools only	15 (48%)	27	56%
Lower-than-predicted schools only	10 (32%)	18	56%
Both higher- and lower-than-predicted schools	6 (19%)	7	86%
Total	31(100%)	52	60%
<i>All interviews</i>			
Higher-than-predicted schools/districts only ¹	25 (48%)	69	36%
Lower-than-predicted schools/districts only	21 (40%)	49	43%
Districts with both higher- and lower-than-predicted schools	6 (12%)	7	86%
Total	52 (100%)	125	42%

Note: Totals may not add to 100 due to rounding.

¹ Two interviews included staff from both the only identified school within the district and the district itself and are thus counted only once in the total.

A total of 72 individuals representing various staff roles participated in the interviews (Table A10). Nearly half of participants were McKinney-Vento liaisons and nearly one-third were school or district leadership, including principals and directors. The remaining participants worked in various types of student and family support.

*Table A10:
Interview Participants by Job Title/Role*

Primary Job Title/Role	Count (%)
McKinney-Vento liaison	33 (46%)
Principal/assistant principal	15 (21%)
Department director (e.g., director of categorical programs)	8 (11%)
Counselor	6 (8%)
Family resource and support	6 (8%)
Other (e.g., social worker, graduation specialist)	4 (6%)
Total	72 (100%)

Interview and Analysis Methods

All interviews were completed between April and July 2019. All respondents completed and submitted a consent form that outlined the project's purpose, procedures, benefits/risks, confidentiality, and other components. Forms were submitted electronically or via paper copy.

We employed a semi-structured interview approach in which specific, predetermined questions and topics were covered while also allowing flexibility to adjust question order or wording and to follow up on topics as needed based on each respondent's answers.^{22,23}

An interview guide was developed and included 15 questions organized under the following four topics:

1. Staffing and professional development/training
2. Identification practices and strategies
3. Academic support practices and strategies
4. Housing and other non-academic support practices and strategies (including community partnerships)

Questions were open ended and participants were encouraged to describe practices and strategies in their own words. Interview probes were used to encourage elaboration and to ask about specific practices when needed. We asked about practices specific to students experiencing homelessness, as well as practices used with the general student population (including students experiencing homelessness) when applicable. A copy of the interview questions is provided in Appendix B.

Most interviews lasted approximately one hour and were conducted via conference call. In almost all cases, two members of the research team conducted each interview, with one person leading the interview and one taking detailed notes.²⁴ Interviews were recorded (with participant permission) and an automatic transcript was produced using GoToMeeting software. After interviews were complete, the research team reviewed and revised the initial set of notes and manually corrected the generated transcripts.

Analysis of the interview data was conducted in fall 2019. All detailed notes of the interviews were read multiple times (with reference to the transcripts for clarification or elaboration when needed), and an open coding approach was used to identify content related to practices and strategies to support students.

We noted relevant content using a combination of inductive and deductive approaches in which we examined the interview data for strategies mentioned in the best practices literature while also allowing practices to emerge organically from the data. We then grouped items that were conceptually or practically related into larger categories and themes and analyzed the data again in an iterative process.^{25,26}

²² Ryan, F., Coughlan, M., & Cronin, P. (2009). Interviewing in qualitative research: The one-to-one interview. *International Journal of Therapy and Rehabilitation*, 16(6). <https://doi.org/10.12968/ijtr.2009.16.6.42433>.

²³ Harrell, M.C., & Bradley, M.A. (2009). *Data collection methods: Semi-structured interviews and focus groups*. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation. https://www.rand.org/pubs/technical_reports/TR718.html

²⁴ Two interviews were conducted in person and one interview was conducted by a single member of the research team.

²⁵ Elo, S., & Kyngas, H. (2008). The qualitative content analysis process. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 62(1), 107–115.

²⁶ Hsieh, H.F., & Shannon, S.E. (2005). Three approaches to qualitative content analysis. *Qualitative Health Research*, 15(9), 1277–1288.

We used a combination of approaches to analyze practices and strategies within each school or district. These included examining the frequency of specific, well-defined practices using a binary coding scheme, noting whether practices were mentioned or not, and assessing the relative intensity and detail of the strategies described by respondents. Finally, we compared the identified categories and themes between higher- and lower-than-predicted schools and districts to examine how practices and strategies differed.

Limitations

The interview process generated a rich, detailed amount of data on practices and strategies used in schools and districts across the state. However, the approach did have some limitations. As mentioned, the interviews typically lasted for about one hour and covered a variety of topics, thus limiting the amount detail we could learn about specific practices. Due to the nature of the interview process itself, all data were self-reported. We do not have documentation or direct observational data to complement and expand the information provided by respondents.

In addition, response rates varied and thus the final interview pool may not fully represent the practices and strategies used at all identified schools. Similarly, respondents occupied a variety of roles that may have affected the scope of their knowledge regarding whether and how particular practices were used. For example, district liaisons may not have known all the details of how academic interventions were implemented in particular schools, while counselors at the school level may not have had specific knowledge of how the district formed and supported relationships with community partners.

Finally, the historical perspective of the study presented some limitations. The data we used to identify higher- and lower-than-predicted schools covered the 2014-15 to 2016-17 school years, while interviews were conducted during the 2018-19 school year. In addition, several of the staff members with whom we spoke were relatively new to their positions and thus may have had less institutional knowledge of how practices had changed over time.

Appendix B: Semi-structured Interview Questions

Topic 1: Staffing and professional development/training

1. Please introduce yourself and describe your role in supporting students experiencing homelessness.
2. Who else in your school or district provides support and services to students experiencing homelessness?
3. Can you describe the professional development or training opportunities related to students experiencing homelessness that your school or district provides/requires, if any?

Topic 2: Identification practices and strategies

4. Can you describe the process to identify students experiencing homelessness in your school/district?
5. Can you tell me about how your school/district conducts outreach to students and families regarding available services and rights under McKinney-Vento?
6. Does your school/district work with any community partners to assist in identifying students? If so, please describe.

Topic 3: Academic support practices and strategies

7. Please briefly describe the methods your school/district uses to provide transportation to students experiencing homelessness.
8. Apart from transportation, what approaches does your school/district use to promote regular attendance?
9. Can you describe the practices and strategies your school/district uses to support students who are struggling academically?
10. Do teachers adapt classroom instruction to the needs of students experiencing homelessness? If so, how?
11. What practices and strategies does your school/district use to support students' social-emotional learning and/or behavior?

Topic 4: Housing and other non-academic support practices and strategies (including community partnerships)

12. Does your school/district use any practices and strategies to help students and families experiencing homelessness obtain stable housing? If so, please describe.
13. What other types of services and supports are available to students and families experiencing homelessness?
14. Does your school/district work with community partners to provide support for students experiencing homelessness? If so, can you describe any strategies to facilitate that work, including practices related to outreach, recruitment, and coordination?
15. Do you or other staff in your school/district participate in any larger community coordination efforts around student, youth, or family homelessness? If so, please describe.