



SOLANO COUNTY GRAND JURY
2016-2017

Educational Rights of Solano County
Homeless Children and Youth

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2016-2017 Solano County Grand Jury

I. SUMMARY

Dealing with the needs of the homeless population is a challenge that the whole community is struggling to address. Of particular concern is how the necessities of homeless children and unaccompanied youth¹ are undertaken. Paramount in the issue is education. Without a decent education, the youth and children of homeless families will be destined to continue the cycle. In the fall of 2016, Solano County residents voted on two measures (Measure A and B) that related directly to funding programs for the welfare of homeless youth and children within the county. However, voters rejected the sales tax increase that was the focus of the measures. This left Local Education Agencies (county and district schools) with the task of providing all the services mandated by the federal McKinney-Vento Act² (which outlines the services that must be provided); as well as, looking beyond the limited federal and state funding to fulfill the needs of the homeless children and youth.

The 2016-2017 Solano County Grand Jury found that the local education agencies did make efforts to provide services (even beyond educational needs) for the homeless children/youth. To provide those services, they need to find a better way of accurately gathering and reporting statistics concerning these students. In addition, training staff members, especially teachers, is not as intensive as it could be. Perhaps the greatest failing was the lack of collaboration of best practices i.e. ways of providing affordable transportation for the children/youth to get to school.

II. INTRODUCTION

As homelessness numbers increase throughout our country, communities have struggled to find creative, effective ways of addressing the national homeless crisis. A vulnerable portion of this population is the children/youth. In an effort to address the roadblocks children face, the federal government enacted the McKinney-Vento Act. Homeless youth include unaccompanied young people twelve years of age or older who are compelled to leave their homes with no other permanent place to stay. McKinney-Vento Act is designed to ensure that the educational rights of these children/youth are protected. It calls for educational stability for homeless children/youth, as well as immediate school enrollment, by:

- enrolling homeless children and youth immediately, even if they lack normally required documents, such as immunization records or proof of residence.
- providing transportation to and from their school of origin if it is in the child's best interest.

¹ An unaccompanied youth is a student who is not in the physical custody of a parent or guardian; this includes youth who have run away from home, been kicked out of their homes, or been abandoned by parents.

² The McKinney-Vento Education of Homeless Children and Youth Assistance Act was enacted on July 22, 1987 and the last amendment went into effect in October 2016. (42 U.S.C § 11431-11435) McKinney-Vento Act outlines the services that must be provided to homeless youth and children.

- working together to ensure children can stay at their home schools, even if that means providing transportation from another school district.

The last amendment to the McKinney-Vento Act expanded its definition of homeless from the generally accepted one of living in a car or a tent to "individuals who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence." Under this extended definition, homeless children/youth would include those who:

- share housing due to loss of housing, economic hardship or a similar reason
- live in motels, hotels, trailer parks, or camp grounds due to lack of alternative accommodations
- live in emergency or transitional shelters
- are abandoned in hospitals
- have a primary nighttime residence that is not ordinarily used as a regular sleeping accommodation (e.g. park benches, etc.)
- live in cars, parks, public spaces, abandoned buildings, substandard housing, bus or train stations
- are migratory and live in any of the above situations

Unaccompanied youth generally become homeless in an attempt to escape violence or physical and/or sexual abuse and neglect. These same youths may end up trading work or sex for a place to stay or to earn other necessities. They face various systemic, family and economic issues.

Recent California legislation addresses some of the needs of the homeless children/youth population. For example, SB 177: Homeless Youth Education Success Act affirms the educational rights of California's homeless students by considering them eligible to participate in extra-curricular activities including afterschool sports, even if they don't meet school-residency requirements. It also provides that the State Department of Education and the Department of Social Services:

- organize a workgroup to develop policies and practices to support homeless children/youth
- ensure that child abuse and neglect reporting requirements do not create barriers to school enrollment and attendance
- provide for local educational liaisons for homeless children and youth
- ensure public notice of the educational rights of homeless children and youth are distributed in schools

Local Education Agencies (LEAs) must ensure that these children/youth have the same access to free, appropriate public education as other children. LEAs are public school districts: "directly-funded and locally funded charter schools and county offices of education".

The 2016-2017 Solano County Grand Jury chose to investigate the funding, identification, and educational support services provided for homeless children/youth in the community.

III. METHODOLOGY

Interviewed:

- Solano County Office of Education Administrators
- School District Office Administrators
- School District Homeless Student Liaisons
- Campus Administrators and Homeless Student Liaisons
- Additional campus staff

Site visits:

- Grange Middle School (Fairfield)
- Jesse Bethel High School (Vallejo)
- Suisun Elementary School (City of Suisun City)
- Will C. Wood High School (Vacaville)
- Family Resource Centers (various locations)

Reviewed:

- McKinney-Vento Act Legislation
- Newspaper articles
- District Documents
- Internet data searches (see bibliography)

IV. STATEMENT OF FACTS

Every two years, during the last ten days of January, communities across the country conduct comprehensive counts of their homeless populations to measure the incidence of homelessness in each community. This study is referred to as The-Point-In-Time Survey. The 2015 Solano County study reported the total homeless population count was 1,082. Families with children represent about 11% of the count population. The federal McKinney-Vento Act uses a broader definition of homeless and more children/youth are identified for public education under that legislation.

The McKinney-Vento Act offers homeless students certain rights and resources including:

- immediate enrollment in school, even if they lack documents typically required for enrollment.
- the right to remain stable in one school, even if homelessness forces them to move across school district boundaries.
- access to educational services for which all students are eligible, including free school meals, transportation, and dispute resolution procedures (regarding enrollment disputes).
- access to a homeless liaison at the student's LEA (Local Education Agency, usually a school district).

The McKinney-Vento Act also created the position of liaison with the mandate of serving homeless students and recording student information in data management systems. Through these liaisons, every LEA is required to identify and report homeless students; however, there is no standard process between the districts:

- Many identify students as they register for classes.

- Others run queries in their data systems for nighttime residency.
- Care-giver affidavits are used to verify doubled-up situations.
- Outreach providers conduct home visits.

There are two layers of liaisons; i.e., representatives at the district level (one per district) and personnel at the site level. None of the site positions is designated strictly for homeless children/youth but tend to be in place to serve all students with a particular focus on “at-risk” students. In addition, district liaisons have other duties within the district, leaving them limited time devoted to the issue of homeless children/youth.

Site liaisons do not identify the children who are considered homeless. That task is assigned to registrars and clerks who help enroll students. The identification process leans heavily on self-reporting by the children and their parents or guardians. Some schools also use a crisis line that students can call to report friends whom they suspect may be homeless. Although there is no across-the-board system for identifying homeless children/youth, all the sites that the 2016-2017 Solano County Grand Jury toured tended to use the same processes of using proof of residency documents during registration, anecdotal information and home visits. The United States Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) acknowledges that youth homelessness is often underreported and extremely difficult to track; therefore, data on unaccompanied homeless children and youth is limited.

The 2016-2017 Solano County Grand Jury researched the identification of homeless children/youth in the community; the numbers and statistics attached to the local problem proved to be confusing and contradictory. When the Grand Jury requested clarification, the explanations for the discrepancies were inconsistent making it difficult to understand the scope of the issues confronting this vulnerable population.

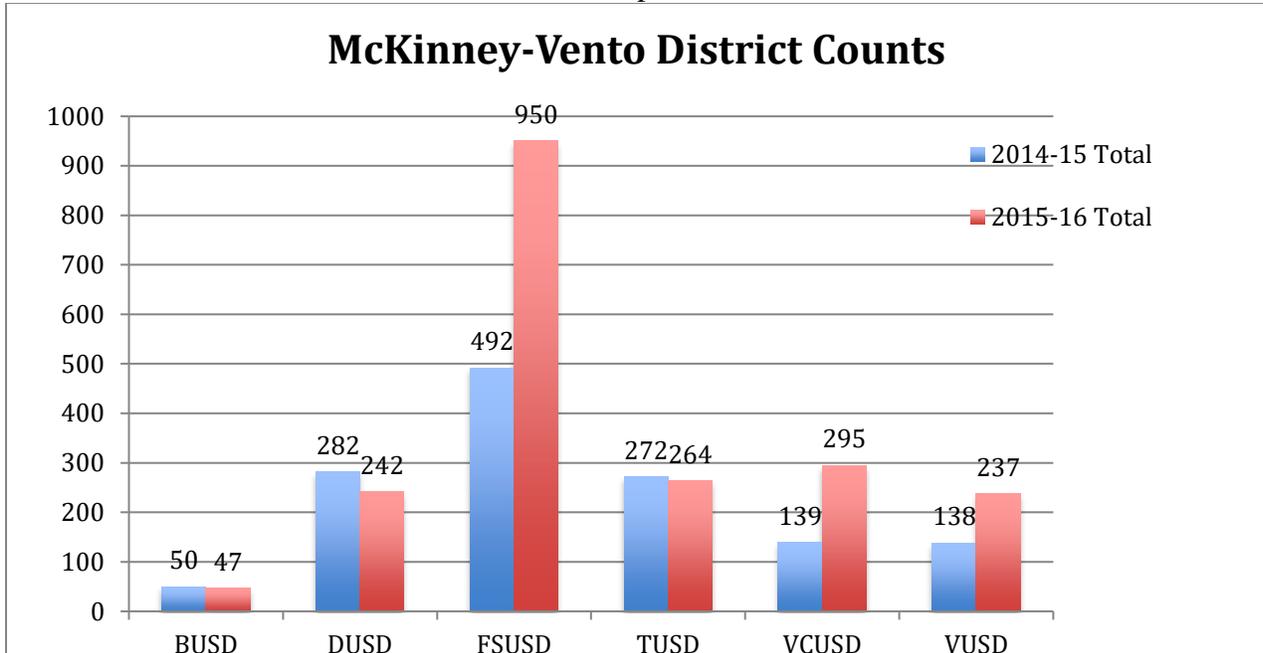
Since identification of homeless children and youth is critical in delivering needed services, the strongest emphasis needs to be placed on that process; yet, training is limited. The emphasis is on training clerks and administrators and is often combined with other training. The training given to teachers, the staff members who have the most contact with children, is very limited.

LEAs report their numbers through data systems that align to the California Longitudinal Pupil Achievement Data System (CALPADS). Ultimately the information is submitted to the U.S. Department of Education. It understates the problem because it does not include homeless children/youth who are not in school or whose homelessness has not been reported to the schools. Furthermore, there may be parents or guardians who do not want to report their status to the schools. In addition, some of the older children may not self-identify because they are afraid of law enforcement, child protective services, or their parents/guardians. Further, without specific funding sources tied to the homeless count, reporting entities are not motivated to capture exact numbers.

The 2016-2017 Solano County Grand Jury obtained data for analysis regarding the McKinney-Vento Act student counts for year-end 2014-2015 and 2015-2016. Data included Benicia (BUSD), Dixon (DUSD), Fairfield/Suisun (FSUSD), Travis (TUSD), Vallejo City (VCUSD), and Vacaville (VUSD). Counts for Rio Vista were noted but were segregated from the

countywide totals because these students fall under the River Delta Unified School District³. The overall Countywide total in 2014-2015 was 1,373 and 2,035 in 2015-2016, an increase of 662.

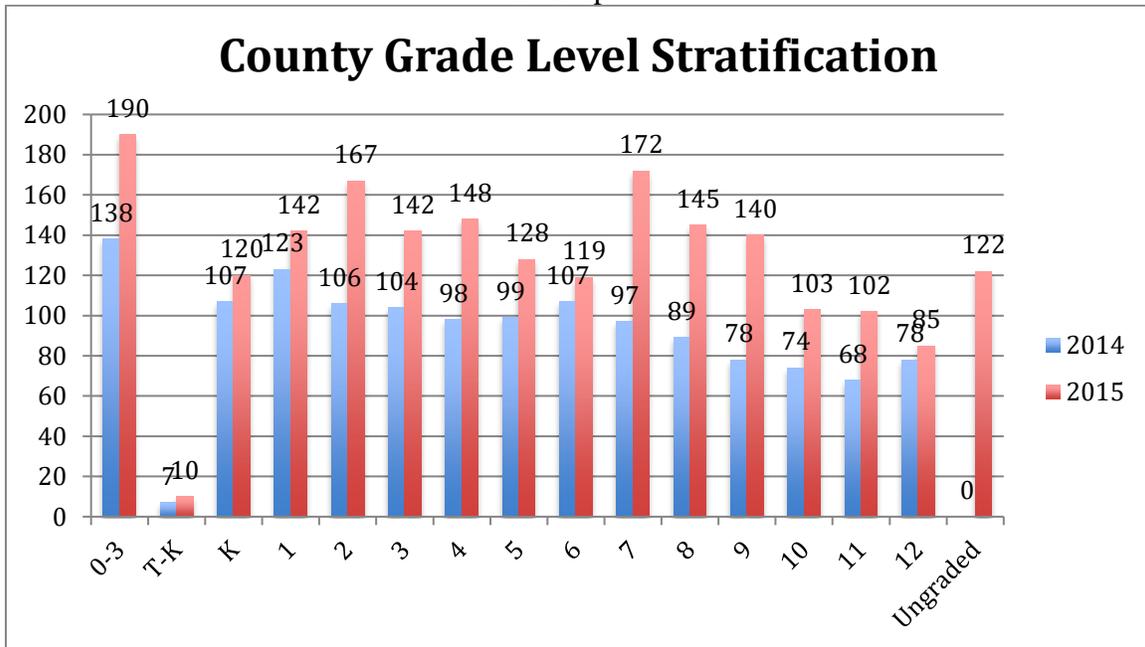
Bar Graph # 1



* Statistics provided by Solano County Office of Education (SCOE). Rio Vista data not included.

³ The River Delta USD is located along the Sacramento River within three counties – Sacramento, Solano, and Yolo. Although the District is a tri-county district, it is managed by and is part of the Sacramento County Office of Education.

Bar Graph #2



* Statistics provided by Solano County Office of Education (SCOE). Rio Vista data not included.

**Report includes identified homeless individuals 0-3 and parents are not identified through school enrollment

The total 662 increase in Bar Graph #1 was primarily attributed to FSUSD. The Solano County Office of Education considered this to be the result of a questionnaire in the Fairfield/Suisun District enrollment packet containing specific questions that could lead to further investigation as to a child’s needs and status. The 2016-2017 Solano County Grand Jury could not substantiate this and, in fact, found the numbers provided were materially higher because Fairfield/Suisun captures counts of ages zero to three better since it has Family Resource Centers at some school sites (this age range is not included in the McKinney-Vento Act). Information received from the Fairfield/Suisun District for the three academic years ending 2014-2016 came from the AERIES school data system. When reported by the district to the California Longitudinal Pupil Achievement Data System (CALPADS), categories “0-3” and “Ungraded” were excluded. However, it was noted that the figures for academic year 2013-2014 had to be corrected for reporting as a result of tally errors in administering the homeless flagging within the system.

The variances in the numbers may also be attributed to the quality of the training for identifying homeless students. The effectiveness of training varies by district and is mainly for principals and registrars/clerks. Their success in identifying homeless children/youth lies in their questioning skills and identifying addresses that should send up red flags (i.e. hotels, shared lodging). Typical training includes:

- an overview of the McKinney-Vento Act.
- the McKinney-Vento Act definition of homelessness as opposed to the HUD definition.
- an emphasis on the awareness of the stigma of homelessness.
- an emphasis of the importance of not stereotyping the children.
- the distribution of information regarding resources available for addressing the needs of these children.
- information concerning community partners and their resources.

- information about challenges and suggestions on how to address them—including transportation, enrollment, credits for acquiring a diploma and acquiring food.

The McKinney-Vento Act offers homeless students certain rights and resources including access to educational services for which all students are eligible, as well as transportation to their “home school”. In its research, the 2016-2017 Solano County Grand Jury found that the County Office of Education actually lost money in its efforts to provide transportation while the Fairfield/Suisun and Vacaville Districts found that it was not an issue. However at the grassroots level, in the schools, liaisons and administrators indicated that there is no problem in providing bus passes; yet in some districts, those providing the passes informed the Grand Jury that transportation was problematic. In addition, some seemed to worry about misuse of bus passes (i.e. having them used by unauthorized persons for unauthorized purposes) while others felt that providing passes that could be used by parents or used for purposes other than getting to and from school were a necessary part of the provision.

One of the shortcomings as Local Education Agencies work to address this community problem is the lack of shared best practices and effective communication. The County Office of Education holds regularly scheduled meetings to provide a means to share information. By the admission of district and site based personnel, attendance at the meetings averages fifty percent. By not participating in these opportunities for shared communication, the educational entities limit their ability to learn possible best practices. The lack of exchange of information is reflected in the variations of effectiveness in providing transportation services for homeless youth.

The 2016-2017 Solano County Grand Jury found that adequate funding for the homeless children/youth creates an on-going challenge for educators within the county. Much of the information garnered in this investigation indicates that the districts rely on the continuing contributions from the community of additional provisions such as backpacks, school supplies, clothing, food, etc.

The McKinney-Vento Act provides limited federal funding to support homeless student programs. The funding is presented in the form of grants and requires that states must abide by the terms of the act. That funding is minimally augmented by Title I⁴ federal funds. The Solano County Office of Education receives no money from the McKinney-Vento Act since California went to competitive grants for allocation of funds. It previously received \$85,000 per year from the state’s McKinney-Vento funds and used some of that money to reimburse districts for such things as bus passes. The state has a 4-year funding cycle and the Fairfield/Suisun Unified School District’s grant proposal was awarded a state grant as of last year. None of the other districts received funding from this grant.

⁴ Title I Part A (**Title I**) of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, as amended (ESEA) provides financial assistance to local educational agencies (LEAs) and schools with high numbers or high percentages of children from low-income families to help ensure that all children meet challenging state academic standards.

While districts can look elsewhere for additional funds, those sources seem less reliable because of lax tracking requirements. For instance, districts can use Local Control and Accountability Plan (LCAP) funds to augment the McKinney-Vento Act funding shortfall but there is less tracking of homeless services and support numbers compared to foster youth who must be tracked in compliance with new state legislation (AB 854 passed in October, 2015, as urgency legislation). Further, that is aggravated by the California Department of Education requirement that each student can only be counted once for funding. In other words, while some children may be eligible for education funding from various sources (i.e. socio-economic disadvantage, etc.), the children identified as homeless are not. As a result some districts say “why identify” if there is no money attached to the numbers.

Local efforts to augment the county sales tax (Measure A) to address the gaps in prevention-oriented children services for the 98,000 children in Solano County failed in November, 2016. Therefore, to ensure stable funding, Local Education Agencies must find alternate funding sources.

The Solano County Office of Education indicated that staff members are charged with the job of grant writing. There is no designated person to take on the task for applying for grants specifically for aiding homeless youth. They suggested that minimal effort was put into the grant writing process because there was little return on that effort. On the other hand, Fairfield/Suisun has a staff member in place who is an experienced grant writer—subsequently they were successful in acquiring the McKinney-Vento Act funds as well as other funding.

The 2016-2017 Solano County Grand Jury found that emergency housing for unaccompanied homeless teenage students is limited. The last of the emergency shelters for unaccompanied youth, Children In Need Of Hugs (CINOH), partially closed in 2015 leaving a huge gap in accommodations for homeless children/youth in the community. At this time, the facility only provides a safe haven for pregnant teens and teen mothers in Fairfield/Suisun and even that can be considered in jeopardy since the current grant ends September 30, 2017. After 17 years of service, they are seeking new funding sources. At this time, SafeQuest Solano has obtained a grant for a teen shelter, but that facility will not open for several more months.

V. FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Finding 1 – District documentation presented conflicting statistics in reporting the number of homeless children/youth.

Recommendation 1a– All data contained in reporting documents be accurate and verifiable.

Recommendation 1b – Reporting entities find more effective ways of identifying homeless children/youth.

Finding 2 – Teacher training in identifying and reporting homeless students is a low priority.

Recommendation 2 – Districts establish a high priority for teachers to receive intensive training in identifying and reporting homeless students.

Finding 3 – Providing transportation is problematic in serving homeless students.

Recommendation 3a – The Solano County Office of Education and School Districts within the county use established means of communication to share best practice ideas in providing transportation for the homeless students they serve.

Recommendation 3b - The Solano County Office of Education and the School Districts within the county form alliances with local transportation providers to meet the needs of homeless students.

Finding 4 –Funding for homeless students creates an on-going challenge within the county.

Recommendation 4 - The Solano County Office of Education and School Districts establish a grant writing position to acquire funding for homeless student services.

Finding 5 – Emergency housing for unaccompanied youth is limited to pregnant teens.

Recommendation 5 - The The Solano County Office of Education and School Districts work with county, city administrators and local non-profits to provide emergency housing for all unaccompanied homeless teenage students.

COMMENTS

The Solano County Office of Education and local districts have grown in their ability to identify homeless students in the area. In addition, local non-profits and religious organizations have stepped up to help provide needed services for homeless students. Still there is much more to be done and the responsibility for helping these children and youth reach their full potential does not only fall with educators but with the whole community.

REQUIRED RESPONSES

Superintendent

- Solano County Office of Education (all findings)
- Dixon (all findings)
- Fairfield/Suisun (all findings)
- Vacaville (all findings)
- Vallejo (all findings)
- Benicia (all findings)

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Clerk, Solano County Board of Supervisors

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