

# HOMELESSNESS IN AFTERSCHOOL

## Part 2: Helping Students and Families Thrive

NC CCR&R School Age Initiative ● [www.swcdcinc.org](http://www.swcdcinc.org)

### Being the Support Students Need

*Helping one person might not change the world...  
but it can change the world for one person.*

Author, *Unknown*

Take a moment and think about a time when you felt at your lowest. A time when you thought that everything was against you, and all hope was lost. How did you feel? What emotions ran through your head?

Now, as you reflect, who was that one person that helped you through this period of pain? Who stepped in and invested into your success?

Every year in North Carolina, thousands of students face the loneliness and heartache associated with homelessness. According to the National Center of Homelessness Education, over 22,000 students in the state experienced some form of homelessness during the 2020-2021 school year (NCHE, *North Carolina State Homeless Data*, 2022). Further data collected by the Department of Housing and Urban Developments states that 855 North Carolinian families with children reported extensive periods of unsheltered living in 2022 (HUD, *2022 PIT Data*, 2022).

As a school age professional, you have the ability to be that one person who can change the world for a student struggling with homelessness. You have the power to step in and bridge many of the social and situational gaps that homelessness creates. The key to this success, however, is being prepared. Having a professional toolkit of techniques and approaches is fundamental to properly addressing the issues surrounding student homelessness.

This resource guide will help you discover and refine ways to support school age students and families dealing with homelessness. We will focus on specific emotional, physical, social, and academic techniques that are intentional and simple to implement. It is important that you connect the concepts in this guide to the information presented in Part 1 of this series. You can access this guide by visiting the **NC CCR&R Council** website under the Special Projects tab.

It is recommended that you couple the information obtained from this resource series with the NC Division of Child Development and Early Education (DCDEE) **Homelessness Action Plan Guide** and the **DCDEE Homelessness Support Trainings** that can be accessed on the DCDEE Moodle training portal. (<https://www.dcdee.moodle.nc.gov/>)

## GET IN TOUCH WITH THE NC CCR&R SCHOOL AGE INITIATIVE

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# What is Your Homelessness Philosophy?

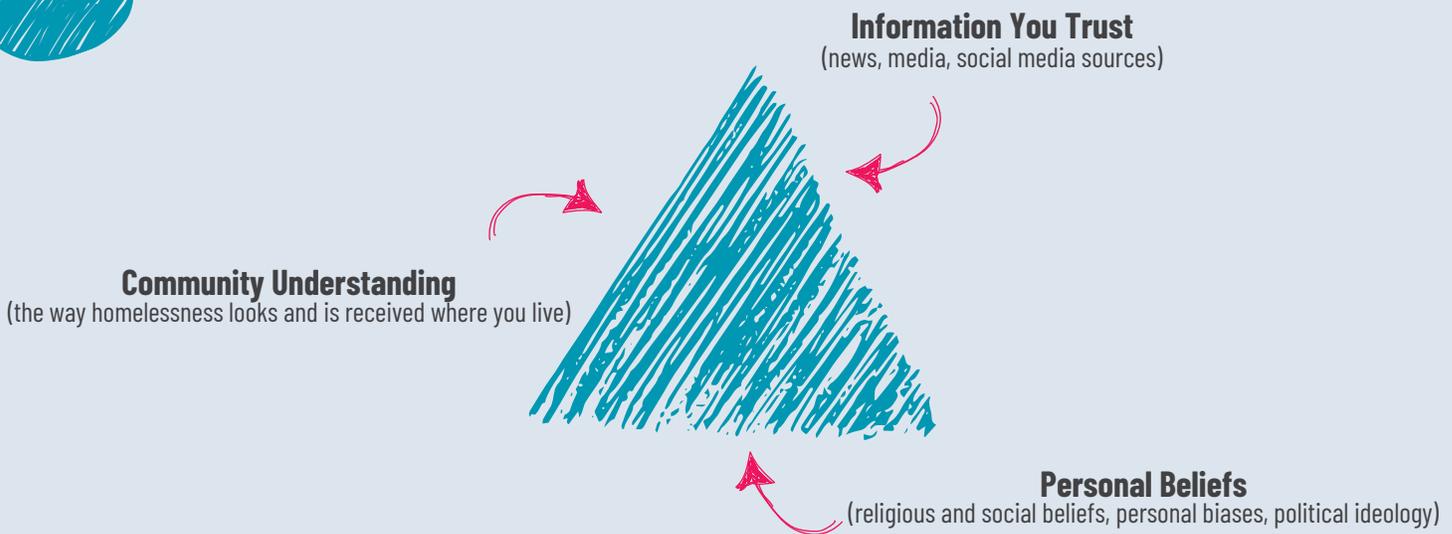
The first step to supporting students dealing with homelessness is to understand your philosophy around the issue. Your homelessness philosophy is simply your personal attitude and belief system surrounding the larger concept of homelessness and unhoused individuals.

Picture your philosophy as a window that you use to look at the outside world. Like a normal window in your house or apartment, the view outside can be altered by many different factors. Maybe there are some smudges on the window that distort the view, or the light presents a glare that changes what you see outside. The same is true about your philosophy related to homelessness. Just like this imaginary window, your approach to homelessness is impacted by outside factors and opinions. Factors like the news and media information you intake, the educational philosophies you adhere to, your religious and social opinions, and the social climate of your local community all create little alterations in how you understand and view homelessness. These alterations are deepened by other factors like your personal experiences with poverty, past traumatic experiences, and the living situations of friends and family members.

Before you can begin the process of developing skills to help student homelessness you **MUST** take time to discover your homelessness philosophy. As you reflect, think about the “smudges” that might exist that distort your view and affect the support you provide.



## Elements that Mold Your Homelessness Philosophy



## Questions to Think About

### Community Understanding

Your homelessness philosophy is deeply controlled by the attitudes and perspectives of the community where you live.

How does your community define homelessness? Is it limited to people who live on the street, or is the definition extended to individuals experiencing other living hardships?

What value does your community give to individuals experiencing homelessness? Are they viewed as members of the community or as a public nuisance?

### Information You Trust

Your understanding of homelessness is impacted by the information you choose to accept. The social media you ingest, and the news sources you trust all contribute to how you view homelessness issues.

What news and social media sources do you look at regularly? How do they present homelessness and people dealing with housing and economic problems?

How do you determine the credibility of the news and social media sources you choose to follow?

### Personal Beliefs

Your personal beliefs are a strong factor in how you develop your homelessness philosophy. Your religious, political, and social views all contribute to the way you approach homelessness. They also contribute to the way you rationalize the root causes of homelessness and poverty.

What are your personal religious, political and social beliefs? What groups or institutions influence how you understand homelessness?

Do you have any personal biases that might affect how you look at homelessness or homeless individuals?

# Direct Student Support - Helping One Student at a Time

Helping students struggling with homelessness is a huge task. If your program has multiple students dealing with housing loss, abuse, and poverty issues, providing effective assistance can quickly become overwhelming. The key to success is taking small steps. Making constant, small changes to your teaching approach will help maximize the support you can provide while still retaining your mental health. Below are some important things to consider to maximize the chances of success for students dealing with homelessness.

## Safety

The most important way to counter the negative effects of student homelessness is providing a safe space where children can let their guard down. Data from The National Health Care for the Homelessness Council highlights that homeless students are more likely to have higher Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) scores and more instances of life altering trauma (NHCHC, *Homelessness and ACEs*, 2019). This heightened level of trauma is directly connected to an increase in unsafe situations contributed to being unhoused.

- Consider your program safety policies. One of the leading causes of temporary homelessness is escaping domestic violence. Make sure that doors remain locked, parent/guardian pick-up routines stay aligned with DCDEE Rules and Regulations, and students understand that staff are dedicated to keeping them safe.
- Focus on inclusion and positive social development. Many students experiencing homelessness change schools multiple times during periods of housing insecurity. It can be difficult for these students to create new friend groups or feel free to open up with peers. Some students dealing with homelessness might not have access to regular hygiene materials or changes of clothes. This can be a topic of bullying from other students who don't understand the situation. Make an effort to foster kindness in your program, include new students into peer development activities, and focus on bringing students together. It is also helpful to have extra hygiene products available to students who might not have access to these supplies outside of your program.
- Remember that you set the attitude of the classroom. If your words and actions are not positive, students will not feel safe. Reflect on your attitude and remember the positive impact a kind adult can have on a struggling student.
- Stay connected with your Local Homelessness Liaison. This individual will keep you up to date on any family changes that might affect the safety of an unhoused student. For more information about Local Homelessness Liaisons in North Carolina visit the **[NC Homelessness Education Project](#)**.

## McKinney-Vento Supports:

Children and families suffering from the effects of homelessness are afforded special educational and social service opportunities funded and protected by the McKinney-Vento Act. Student homelessness status is determined by local homeless liaisons for each Local Education Authority (LEA) or charter school. Additionally, under the McKinney-Vento act and North Carolina legislation, qualifying school age families who either have or are seeking employment are given priority for NC Child Care Subsidy services.

Students are also immediately enrolled into school and school supported programs, and they are given extended time to secure needed documentation, paperwork, and immunization records. Homeless students also have the right to stay in their school of origin if it is in their best interest, even if they move out of their current school district. For more information on McKinney-Vento Rights: **<https://www.dpi.nc.gov/districts-schools/federal-program-monitoring/title-i-part-improving-academic-achievement-disadvantaged/homeless-education-and-mckinney-vento-programs>**.

# Academic Support

Academic success can be difficult for students living with homelessness. Research by the U.S. Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation highlights that children dealing with homelessness are more likely to showcase cognitive delay, and academic regression during the school year (OPRE, *Well-being of Young Children after Experiencing Homelessness*, 2017). Further insight by the School House Connection states that unhoused students have higher school absentee rates and are more likely to experience long periods of chronic nonattendance. For many unhoused students these academic challenges equate to lower reading levels, decreased social skill development, and higher dropout rates (School House Connection, *Supporting the Attendance of Students Experiencing Homelessness*, 2018).

Your school age program is the perfect space to help close the homelessness academic gap and help students remain on track with their studies. While it is important that students have time to play, socialize, and relax outside of regular school day hours, academic support can still remain in the forefront of your program structure. All it takes is a bit of reflection and dedication from program staff.

- Integrate homework support throughout the program day. Homework time doesn't have to be limited to a single point of the day. It can be an ongoing activity that students can choose to do when they are mentally ready. Providing a quiet space in your learning environment for homework is helpful to homeless students who might not have another quiet space to work.
- Be intentional with the activities you plan. Take time to look at your lesson plans and reflect on ways to incorporate new academic ideas. It is important to make learning activities developmentally appropriate, hands-on, and fun so students want to attend your program.
- Incorporate the expertise of tutors and academic support coaches. Many outside tutoring sources can be covered with grant funding and community financial support. You can also tap into local community colleges, universities, and non-profit organization who are dedicated to supporting homeless and underserved populations.
- Make attendance support a key element of your classroom or program policy. If students are chronically absent, make an effort to get in touch with their parent or guardian and check in on the situation. If housing insecurity is a factor in absences, work with your Local Homelessness Liaison to connect the family with social supports and transportation services.
- Include parents into the classroom by creating a parent committee or parent support group. Parents who feel connected to the success of your program are more likely to foster the academic and attendance success of their child. Make an extra effort to encourage the participation of unhoused parents who might feel voiceless and overlooked.
- Does your school age program use any transportation services for students or families? One of the largest academic barriers for student experiencing homelessness is transportation to and from program facilities. Work with your local school system to expand transportation support and bus route locations. Other successful transportation alternatives include:

- Using HopSkipDrive or approved ride-sharing services
- Medical transportation services covered by Medicaid
- Community and faith-based organizations
- Outside grants to support program vans and buses
- Local government funding and support to purchase transportation vehicles
- Providing families experiencing homelessness with gas cards



# Social-Emotional Support

Homelessness is tied to multiple social and emotional consequences. Students dealing with housing insecurity endure a massive amount of internal and external stress that can take months or years to work through. Many times, this stress is coupled with other life altering challenges ranging from poverty, malnutrition, incarceration, physical abuse, and sexual exploitation. Research shows a direct correlation between student homelessness and social-emotional regression. Data collected by the National Health Care for the Homelessness Council shows that students experiencing situational homelessness are more likely to have higher Adverse Childhood Experience (ACE) scores, and exhibit negative behaviors (NHCHC, Homelessness and Adverse Childhood Experiences, 2019)

Below are some easy ways that your school age program can support the social-emotional development of students dealing with the effects of homelessness:

- **Build Trust** - Trust is something that must be earned. For students experiencing homelessness, developing trust with an adult can be difficult and uncomfortable. Reflect on your tone and attitude in the classroom and make sure that you present a warm and inviting demeanor. Students are more likely to feel safe and form a trusting bond with you if you don't seem angry and intimidating.

It's also important that you make time to talk and positively communicate with your students. An important element of trust is being relatable and open to discussion. Spend a portion of the day simply talking with students, checking in on them, and showing interest in their passions. The more relatable and open you are, the easier it is for them to talk about stressors like housing insecurity.

- **Develop a Social-Emotional Centered Classroom Environment** - Homelessness is not inviting. It does not foster quiet spaces or areas for self-regulation. There is no artwork on display or pictures of loved ones on the wall. Knowing this, it is essential that you mold your classroom environment into an inviting and comforting space. Make an effort to showcase student work and art throughout the program. Incorporate plants, decorations, and other visual comforts that invite calmness and inclusion. If your program uses a shared space, like a gym, consider placing multiple rugs on the floor to incorporate color and softness.

Reflect on how your classroom environment meets the basic needs of the students in your care. Do you have a space for students to rest and take a nap if needed. Is there a soft and quiet area for students to self-regulate or do homework? Do you provide an area for students to store belongings without the fear of other children messing with their possessions? Making these additions to your environment will provide a strong and stable social-emotional space for unhoused students.

- **Be Proactive with Challenging Behaviors** - The stress of homelessness is expressed in many different ways. Some students may become angry and quickly agitated, while others might retreat and become stoic. It is important to meet these emotions with calmness and empathy. Be quick to forgive emotional outbursts that do not harm other students or the classroom climate. Make an effort to talk through challenging behaviors and provide behavioral alternatives when necessary. Your role in this process is to help build resiliency and support long-term emotional recovery.

## Resources At-a-Glance

Child Care Services Association (CCSA) is leading the charge in supporting homeless families in North Carolina. CCSA can provide your program with advocacy tools and resources to help the unhoused students you serve. For access to all of the homelessness resources offered by CCSA visit their website at [www.childcareservices.org](http://www.childcareservices.org).

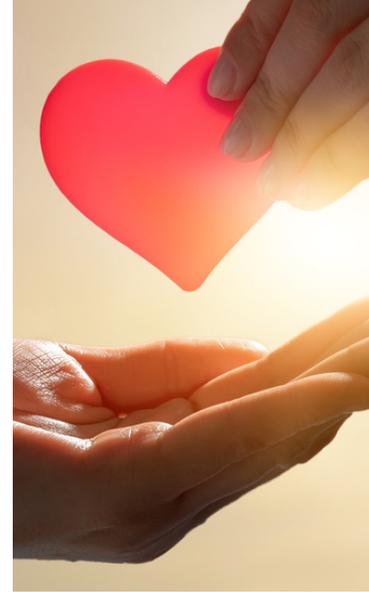
# Providing Support to Families

School age homelessness is often a family-wide problem. The National Center for Afterschool and Summer Enrichment states that a large portion of housing insecurity results from family incarceration, household poverty, domestic violence, and family responses to natural disasters. Rarely is homelessness an issue experienced independently by a student (NCASE, Aligning Out-of-School Time Services for Children Experiencing Homelessness, 2019).

As you develop your homelessness philosophy, it is essential that you incorporate a family-wide understanding. Empowering family members and connecting parents/guardians to available resources is the quickest way to help the students you serve.

Below are some quick tips geared to help family members struggling with homelessness and housing insecurity:

- Incorporate family support group services into your afterschool programming. Your program can lead or host family support groups designed to bring families together with a trained family enrichment specialist who can provide direction and long-term help. Family support programs like **Triple-P** are great for guiding families to available resources and offering behavioral and trauma focused assistance. You can contact your local **Child Care Resource and Referral** (CCR&R) agency to see what services exist in your local community.
- Visit and team up with your local homeless shelters. Many families who use shelters do not know how to access school age services or childcare subsidy support. Having a relationship with your local homeless shelters can help you connect with the families that need your program the most.
- Have a well-stocked parent resource area in your program. Make sure that this area has up-to-date materials from agencies and organizations dedicated to helping those with housing needs. Take time during staff meetings to inform staff about these resources and ways to direct families to the specific assistance they need.
- Homelessness is often connected to malnutrition and hunger. Reach out to local food banks or farmers and set up your program as a host site for food distribution. Many distribution programs bring their own set-up and only need a parking lot and a willing host. Connecting with your local **Feeding America** agency is a great place to start.
- Trauma and toxic stress are common side effects of homelessness. This is even more true for adults escaping physical abuse and domestic violence. Make sure that your staff is properly trained on ways to connect domestic violence victims to the resources they need to thrive. Training on resiliency, Adverse Child Experiences (ACE), and mental health support can be found by connecting with your local CCR&R agency, your local DCDEE Licensing Consultant, or the **Pyramid Model Consortium**.



## DCDEE Subsidized Child Care Assistance (SCCA) Support

Families experiencing homelessness are eligible for special Subsidized Child Care Assistance priority. The DCDEE allocates specific funding dollars for homelessness subsidy support from Child Care Development Block Grant dollars. Approved families receive subsidy support for twelve months before they must reapply. Below are four considerations that must be met to qualify for homelessness SCCA support. For information see the **SCCA Policy Manual**.

1

Be identified as homeless in accordance with the McKinney-Vento Act.

2

Be the parent, guardian, or custodian of the child receiving subsidy.

3

Have active employment or be a full time student...or be an active Work First applicant with referral

4

Provide needed Child Care Subsidy paperwork to subsidy staff within the 30 day grace period.