

Report: Homeless students need help

UCLA research says fed, state aid called for in SDUSD especially

BY JEMMA STEPHENSON

UNION-TRIBUNE

New UCLA research finds schools in San Diego County and statewide need to do more to support homeless students, calling homelessness an educational crisis that requires regional investment, dedicated funding, more federal protections and integrated cross-system support.

The academics' report, released last week, argues that the effects of homelessness on students call for a combination of federal and state remedies that should target racial and achievement gaps in particular.

Such efforts could have a particularly big impact across San Diego County, one of the California counties with the highest numbers of homeless students, and in particular in San Diego Unified School District, which is one of the districts with the most homeless students.

The report by researchers at the UCLA Center for the Transformation of Schools looked at California Department of Education data on homelessness in the 2024-25 school year and compared it with 2019-20. Statewide, homelessness rose about 10% in that time, they found.

"That's about a 30,000 increase," said Grace Kim, the lead researcher.

In San Diego Unified, roughly 10,000 students were experiencing homelessness in 2024-25; around 24,7000 were countywide.

Compared with five years ago, fewer students in San Diego County are now homeless — but the county still has the state's fourth-highest homeless student population. Meanwhile, a growing share of the county's total students are now homeless — 5%, up from 3.9%.

Students experiencing homelessness tend to see wide-ranging impacts on their education. They often lag their peers in graduation rates and English and math scores, where they're often about 20 percentage points behind in proficiency.

Rates of suspensions are also consistently higher for homeless students — though they peaked in 2022–23 and have declined following policy changes that no longer allow suspension for “willful defiance.”

Racial disparities in students’ rates of homelessness have widened over time, too, with homelessness rates up for American Indian and Alaska Native students, the report found.

To help combat the effects of homelessness, Kim recommends that school districts set up “integrated systems of support” for homeless students.

For instance, that might include setting up transportation or automatic school transfers for those who need them, she said — “really just paying attention to and supporting their social, emotional and mental health aspects.”

In San Diego Unified, the district provides tangible items like backpacks and hygiene products to homeless families, along with referrals to services like housing navigation and interpretation, said Kristy Drake, a resource teacher who leads the district’s services for homeless students.

They also provide outreach to help families navigate San Diego Unified itself, such as assistance for special education services.

The Metropolitan Transit System’s youth pass gives free rides to everyone 18 and under. But the school district also gives subsidized monthly transit passes to some families, Drake added.

“Primarily we rely on MTS for students, and we provide an adult pass for families with young children,” she said. “We pay for the pass monthly.”

Students have the right to stay in their original school, and the district believes that’s the best way to keep their education consistent — but it will help a family change schools or districts if they request it.

The biggest need for homeless students’ families, of course, is housing — so the most helpful resources the district can offer are its community relationships to connect them with shelter and housing navigation.

Transportation comes next, and it helps with more than getting to and from school.

“With the MTS assistance, families are also able to run any other errands as an added bonus,” Drake said.

At the federal level, the UCLA report advocates for stronger implementation of the McKinney–Vento Homeless Assistance Act, the federal law that ensures

that homeless students have access to a free and appropriate public education.

The report also suggests aligning that law with the Every Student Succeeds Act — a 2015 federal law that set education expectations and accountability nationwide, in an update to 2002's No Child Left Behind — to improve accountability for districts and to support academics.

At the state level, Kim said her team was encouraged by the state's decision to budget \$116 million investment over three years to identify and support homeless students.

But the report recommends that funding be concentrated in the areas of central and southern California with the highest rates and counts of homeless students.

The report also recommends going beyond that one-time investment to ensure dedicated money on an ongoing basis as part of the funding formula for schools.

"We really do hope that it's a start to bringing attention and to supporting these students," Kim said.