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FY 2025 Testimony for the Hearing Record

SchoolHouse Connection is a national organization working to overcome homelessness through education. We work in partnership with schools and communities to ensure that children and youth experiencing homelessness have full access to quality learning, birth through higher education, so they will never be homeless as adults, and the next generation will never be homeless. This testimony supports a request for \$800 million in FY 2025 funding for the McKinney-Vento Act's Education for Homeless Children and Youth (EHCY) program, administered by the U.S. Department of Education.

Homelessness among children, youth, and families is widespread and growing in rural, suburban, and urban communities. In the 2021-2022 school year, approximately 2.2 percent of all K12 students, or 1.2 million students nationwide, were identified as homeless by public schools. This represents a 10 percent increase over the previous year. More recently, a confluence of crises—an affordable housing crisis, an addiction crisis, and a mental health crisis—is contributing to unprecedented levels of homelessness. Last year, the number of families staying in homeless shelters or visibly unsheltered increased by 16 percent, while the number of unaccompanied youth staying in homeless shelters or visibly unsheltered increased by 15 percent. Even greater numbers of homeless children, youth, and families move between couches, cars, floors, motels, and other unstable situations. Nearly 76 percent of students identified as homeless by public schools in the 2021-2022 school year were sharing the housing of others temporarily due to loss of housing or similar reasons. These living arrangements are unstable and sometimes unsafe, but much more hidden.

Homelessness creates unique barriers to educational access and attainment, including being unable to meet enrollment paperwork requirements; high mobility resulting in lack of continuity and chronic absenteeism; lack of transportation; lack of supplies; hunger, fatigue, and poor health; and emotional crises/mental health issues. As a result of these barriers, homelessness has a negative impact on academic achievement that is over and above poverty: the 2020-2021 national average graduation rate for homeless students was 68 percent, which is 12 percentage points below other economically disadvantaged students, and nearly 18 percentage points below all students. More than half (52%) of students experiencing homelessness in the 2021-2022 school year were chronically absent, a rate that jumped 20% following the pandemic and is now 22 percentage points higher than other students.

Students who experience homelessness also face multiple learning challenges. They are disproportionately students with disabilities (20 percent of all homeless students, compared to 15 percent of the overall student population) and also disproportionately English learners (18 percent of all homeless students, compared to 10 percent of the overall student population).

The EHCY program is the only federal education program that removes barriers caused by homelessness. Under the EHCY program, every school district must designate a liaison to help identify children and youth experiencing homelessness, ensure school access and stability, provide direct services, and coordinate with community agencies to meet basic needs. EHCY subgrants are used for outreach and identification, enrollment assistance, transportation, school records transfer, immunization referrals, tutoring, counseling, school supplies, professional development for educators and community organizations, housing and service navigators, early childhood support, and assistance transitioning to postsecondary education. No other federal program has the responsibility for and expertise in finding, engaging, stabilizing, and serving students who experience homelessness.

Nationally, only 21% of LEAs receive EHCY subgrants due to lack of funding, which limits the ability of schools to identify homeless students, ensure their access to school, and connect them to community supports. The likelihood of underidentification is much higher in schools without dedicated homeless education funding. In addition to under-identification challenges, many children and youth experiencing homelessness attend schools that receive no dedicated support to meet their unique needs. Nationally, 42% of students identified as homeless — 471,134 students — attended a school district in the 2020-2021 school year that did not receive any dedicated funding to support their needs through the EHCY program.

There are some encouraging trends. The number of school districts receiving dedicated homeless education funding more than doubled as a result of a bipartisan amendment to the American Rescue Plan Act that dedicated \$800 million to the identification and support of children and youth experiencing homelessness. This means many schools that have never received specific support to respond to student homelessness are now able to do so. These school districts report many positive impacts of ARP Homeless Children and Youth funding, including increased identification, increased school stability, and reduced absences.

The EHCY program also has a long history of bipartisan support: over the past thirty-six years, it has received varying levels of funding increases regardless of which party controlled one or both chambers of Congress. In a strong demonstration of support, 118 bipartisan Representatives signed onto an appropriations letter supporting our request of \$800 million for EHCY in FY 2025. Nevertheless, the EHCY program also suffers from being extremely small relative to the scale of homelessness, which continues to grow due to the current housing, addiction, and mental health crises.

Despite a surging affordable housing crisis, an immigration crisis, a mental health crisis, and an addiction crisis, the President's FY 2025 budget does not request any additional funding for the EHCY program. Unfortunately, it includes a proposal that would allocate one half of one percent of EHCY funding to be used for a new demonstration program. While we strongly support the goal of cross-population collaboration, we cannot support a proposal that provides no new funding at a time of increasing homelessness and unmet needs. .

Without additional EHCY funding, more than 80 percent of school districts will continue to lack dedicated support to identify and support children and youth experiencing homelessness. This means that many of our nation's most vulnerable students will not have the most basic access to

education. And without such access, these students cannot benefit from any of the other federal, state, or local education investments – leaving them without a true opportunity to thrive. The failure to prioritize many of the most marginalized children and youth jeopardizes our nation’s recovery and pushes those who are furthest from opportunity even further away from the support they need to graduate from high school, transition to career or college, and live healthy lives. \$800 million is less than 2% of the federal K12 education budget, yet provides basic educational access and stability to a population that exceeds 2% of all K12 students – students who otherwise cannot benefit from other local, state, and federal education investments. An appropriation of \$800 million also would allow EHCY subgrants to reach at least half of all school districts nationwide. Ensuring access to EHCY support is an important part of creating a school system that meets the needs of all our nation’s children and youth.