

Best Practices for Building School-Community Partnerships To Support Children, Youth, and Families Experiencing Homelessness

(This resource was created in partnership with Pearl Strategies.)

The Importance of School-Community Partnerships

This resource aims to support schools and community agencies in building mutually-beneficial, stable, and responsive partnerships that benefit partner agencies and the children, youth, and families they serve. This resource is part of the New York State ARP-HCY Technical Assistance Center's school-community partnerships suite of resources.

To view other resources, click [here](#).

Why Partner?

While there are many reasons for schools and community-based organizations (CBOs) to partner—including advantages specific to the local context—several key benefits to developing school-community partnerships in support of children, youth, and families experiencing homelessness include:

- **Better student outcomes through [collective impact](#):** The needs of children, youth, and families span multiple life domains, including [safe and stable housing, education and employment, permanent connections, and well-being](#). By partnering to identify and pursue common goals and engage in mutually reinforcing activities, school and community partners build on each other's strengths, reduce duplication of services, and support their (often mutual) clients more effectively.
- **More effective service delivery through blended, braided, and layered funding:** Related to collective impact is the potential for school and community partners to blend, braid, or layer funding with the goal of advancing shared outcomes. Many partner systems not only have statutory requirements to collaborate with one another but also have allowable usages of funds that overlap with the work of their partners or even encourage contracting with partners on joint work. One example is the U.S. Department of Education's encouragement of school districts to use [American Rescue Plan-Homeless Children and Youth \(ARP-HCY\) funds](#) to [contract with community-based organizations](#) that are well-positioned to identify children and youth experiencing homelessness in historically underserved communities and connect them to services. For an example of a collaborative approach to shared funding implementation, see the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' [Braiding Federal Funding to Expand Access to Quality Early Care and Education and Early Childhood Supports](#)

[and Services: A Tool for States and Local Communities](#). While specific to the early childhood context, this interactive tool may help school-community partner networks consider how they might layer funding in support of shared goals.

State and Federal Statute Requirements It's the Law!

One of the duties of the local liaison in the McKinney-Vento Act is to provide students and families experiencing homelessness with referrals to community partners, including providers of housing, health care, mental health, dental, and other needed services. Connecting with community partners, learning about the supports they provide, and establishing clear, shared referral protocols is a great way to fulfill an important liaison responsibility and support students and families.

In addition, many federal and state statutes require schools and community service providers to partner in specific ways. Examples include the coordination requirements in

- o **The education subtitle of the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act,**
- o **The Child Care and Development Block Grant Act,**
- o **The Head Start Act,**
- o **The Homeless Emergency Assistance and Rapid Transition to Housing (HEARTH) Act,**
- o **The Runaway and Homeless Youth Act, and**
- o **The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act**

For more information on specific statutory requirements, download the California Homeless Education Technical Assistance Center's [Legislative Requirements for Collaboration in Support of Children, Youth, and Families Experiencing Homelessness](#).

5 Key Questions for Building Partnerships

All partnerships have a starting point and grow from there. Consider these five starter questions as a “partnership starter pack” for developing solid school-community partnerships in support of students and families experiencing homelessness.

How can I connect with and get to know my partners?

Reach out and contact your partners “across the aisle”. Share about your work and ask your partners about their work. Get to know one another, including organizational services and areas of strength as well as pain points.

- **For homeless liaisons:** The New York State ARP-HCY Technical Assistance Center has developed a [New York School-Community Partner Inventory](#) to help school and community partners identify one another and connect.

- **For community partners:** The New York State Technical and Educational Assistance Center for Homeless Students (NYS-TEACHS) provides a [Homeless Education Liaison Contact List](#) to help community partners identify and connect with their local school district homeless education liaison.

□ What type of school-community partnership will partner capacity allow?

Tackling the stickiest issues experienced across organizations and the people they serve at the beginning of a partnership may bog down efforts in complexities that are difficult to wade through without a more established, trusting relationship. Instead, it may be more strategic to address “low-hanging fruit” to establish early partner wins and build momentum; then, as trust is built and partners see the benefits of working together, they can take on more complex issues that may require a greater investment of resources but yield larger impact.

It also may be helpful to [consider partnerships along a spectrum](#). Partnerships come in many shapes and sizes, ranging from informal networking to formalized, written collaboration agreements. Choosing to start somewhere and see how the partnership grows over time is a valid way to view the partnership investment. Valuable partnerships can exist all along the partnership spectrum. Considerations for assessing partnership capacity and type include:

- What kind of resources—including staff time and expertise and financial or other organizational resources—does each partner member have? How much of these resources is each partner member reasonably able to contribute to the partnership?
- Will the benefits of the partnership—including the investments into partnership efforts made by other partner organizations—help replenish the contributions each partner member makes to shared work?
- How can partners work together to identify and address an immediate need for students and families experiencing homelessness (like clothing for school, food, or hygiene products)? How will partners know when they’re ready to address longer-term needs (like student academic outcomes and family housing stability?)
- As partner capacity and needs change over time, how will partners come together to consider a shift in approach to the partnership?

□ What will progress look like?

For partnerships to be sustainable and effective, they need to address the needs of all partners and demonstrate, over time, that the benefits of the partnership are worthy of the organizational resources directed there. Relatedly, it is important to steward the partnership from early general conversations toward concrete action. While exploring “the lay of the land” among partners in early conversations is important for learning and context-setting, many partnerships lose momentum if conversations remain abstract and don’t evolve into action steps that address some of the challenges the partners and the people they serve are experiencing. Considerations for assessing progress include:

- What do school and community partner data show about the most urgent needs of students and families experiencing homelessness?
- What are measurable and achievable goals for each partner to set individually and the partner network to set jointly that will show progress towards addressing organizational needs and the needs of students and families experiencing homelessness?

How can partners be savvy and strategic in messaging and engagements?

Human services systems often have overlapping goals and people in common that they both serve; but they also may approach their work from different angles and with a focus on different priorities. For example, the homeless response system uses the [U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's definition of homeless](#) and focuses primarily on housing, whereas the school system uses the [U.S. Department of Education's definition of homeless](#) and focuses primarily on education, while both serving overlapping populations. The “how would my partner view this?” mindset should be infused into all things from a simple email message to how meetings are designed and what topics are covered. Considerations for engaging your partners strategically include:

- When inviting a school or community organization to collaborate, how can I present the partnership in a way that demonstrates awareness of and attention to the needs of the partner's organization and the people they serve?
- When hosting partner engagements, how can I plan the engagement in a way that addresses my partner's interests and needs and helps them see themselves clearly in the shared work?

How will the partnership continue?

As with any relationship, school and community partnerships evolve over time. A one-time conversation will be insufficient to bring about the change and growth that is most likely needed for greatest organizational effectiveness and positive outcomes among the children, youth, and families receiving services. With this in mind, partners should establish ongoing, regular communication where they can explore emerging issues and consider additional needed action in response. Partnership growth considerations include:

- How often will partners meet to discuss needs, resources, and plans for taking action?
- If the partnership evolves from early, informal efforts to more integrated, formal work, will a memorandum of understanding (MOU) be helpful or needed to formalize a shared understanding of the partnership across its members?

Navigating Different Definitions of Homelessness in Partnership

A discussion of partnership between schools and community organizations that work with students and families experiencing homelessness would be incomplete without acknowledging the different definitions of homelessness the education and homeless response systems use and how these differences affect how these systems work together. Schools in comparison to Continuums of Care. Schools use the [“education definition” of homeless](#) and focus primarily on educational access and success for students. [Continuums of Care](#) (state or regional homeless response planning and administrative bodies) use the [U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development’s definition of homeless](#) and focus primarily on providing shelter and addressing housing instability. While there is some definitional overlap and common ground across systems to explore and leverage, partners using different definitions of homelessness will need to communicate and engage intentionally and strategically to generate good will and a return on investment for all partners and their clients.

For more information, download download the California Homeless Education Technical Assistance Center’s [Navigating Different Definitions of Homelessness in Partnership Work](#).