

Homework Starts with Home: Effects of Minnesota's Initiative to Address Student Homelessness

Translating research to practice may be difficult, yet a better understanding of current research is necessary to ensure child welfare workers, educators, and other professionals engage in best practices when working with children and families. The Minn-LInK Discussion Guide is designed to help facilitate thoughtful dialogue about the information presented in the research brief in order to inform practice and enhance discussion surrounding meaningful issues.

In this brief, we summarize our evaluation of the Minnesota Homework Starts with Home (HSWH) pilot rental assistance program for families with school age students. We studied who was served by the program as well as program effects on shelter usage, school mobility, and school attendance. Findings indicate that the HSWH program reached students with very high levels of risk, as illustrated by elevated rates of homelessness, poverty, and school problems compared to a matched comparison group. Shelter stays decreased for families in the program, but school mobility and attendance did not show effects. We also observed greater change in the second cohort of families as compared to the first, suggesting improvements to the effectiveness of the program over time.

Discussion on Practice Implications

1. This study found that students in the Homework Starts with Home pilot program spent fewer nights in shelter over time, and fewer nights in shelter overall compared to students matched on risk who were not enrolled in the program. In your own work, what challenges have you observed for youth who spend time in shelters? Based on your experience, how do you think it could benefit young people to spend less time in shelters?
2. This study found that students in the Homework Starts with Home pilot program reached students with very high levels of risk, but the program did not have a positive effect on attendance in the short-term. Why might positive effects of the program on school outcomes take more time to emerge? What additional sources of support may be necessary to promote positive school outcomes for these youth over time?
3. One goal of the Homework Starts with Home pilot program is to reduce the number of school moves during the year for families at high-risk of experiencing homelessness. What factors do you think might lead families who are receiving rental assistance to switch schools? Is all school mobility negative, particularly if parents are voluntarily moving to neighborhoods with schools that they perceive as higher quality or a better fit for their family?

Discussion on Agency- & System-Level Changes

1. This study focused on the Homework Starts with Home pilot rental assistance program, which funds community programs to provide rental assistance and other sources of support to families with school-aged children at high risk of homelessness. How can you see a program such as this benefiting the families that you serve in your work? What additional resources do you think would be beneficial? What supports currently exist in the system you work in, and where are the gaps?
2. As the cost of housing continues to increase, supporting families at risk of experiencing homelessness is as important as ever. How can you advocate for resources such as rental assistance and affordable housing to be accessible to the families you serve in your work?