Students Experiencing Homelessness in Pennsylvania: A 2024 Update

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SEPTEMBER 2024

Introduction

In Research for Action's (RFA) 2018 and 2021 PACER reports, we highlighted evidence that Pennsylvania schools had among the nation's lowest rates of identification of students experiencing homelessness (SEHs).[1] We underscored the educational need and the legal mandate under the federal McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act for schools to accurately identify and support SEHs who face significant challenges due to housing instability. We also emphasized the disproportionate impact of homelessness on marginalized students, including students of color, LGBTQ+ students, and expectant or parenting students.

Since our last report, Congress passed the American Rescue Plan (ARP) Act of 2021, which included new resources to alleviate the impact of the (COVID-19) pandemic on children and youth experiencing homelessness. The Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE) was charged with allocating more than $24 million to school districts and charter schools by September 2024 to help:

- Identify SEHs,
- Ensure SEHs can attend and participate fully in school activities, and
- Provide wraparound services to SEHs that address the multiple effects of COVID-19.[2]

In this brief, we examine the most recent data to update understanding of student homelessness in Pennsylvania.[3] We find evidence that moderate progress has been made, but that critical gaps and disparities remain in identifying and supporting SEHs across the state. Pennsylvania still ranks below the national average in identifying SEHs relative to the number of school-aged children in poverty. We also discuss troubling indications of a disproportionate lack of educational opportunities available to many SEHs in Pennsylvania and corresponding gaps in educational outcomes. We find that SEHs are concentrated in the state's most under-resourced schools and increasingly enrolled in cyber charter schools—where persistently poor student outcomes have been well-documented.

Ultimately, we conclude that as federal resources dry up, it will be imperative for state and local policymakers and school leaders to prioritize the needs of SEHs as part of the ongoing work to eliminate nation-leading educational inequities and build a more inclusive and effective educational system for all students.

Findings

1. Percentage of Student Homelessness in Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, and Pittsburgh

As shown in Figure 1, the prevalence of student homelessness statewide in Pennsylvania has steadily increased since 2013-14, reaching a high of 2% in 2021-22. We include the School District of Philadelphia (SDP) and Pittsburgh Public Schools (PPS), the state's two largest districts, both with high poverty and high rates of student homelessness. Rates of SEHs in SDP increased to 3.6% in 2021-22, while rates in PPS increased steadily to 7.8% in 2017-18 before declining in subsequent years down to 3.8% in 2021-22.

Figure 1: Rate of Students Experiencing Homelessness in Pennsylvania
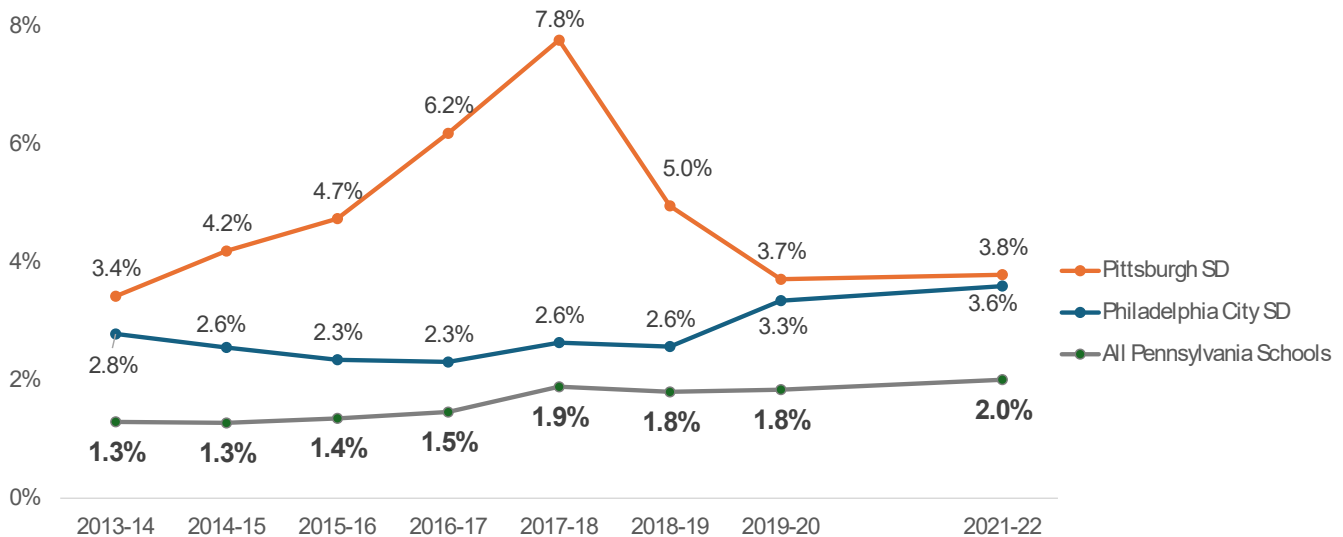
Source: ED Data Express 118 Homeless Students Enrolled & ELSI Total Enrollment (Exclude AE), 2021-22. Note: 2020-21 data is excluded as unreliable due to COVID.

2. Evidence of Under Identification: The Rate of SEHs Compared to Child Poverty

As discussed in our 2018 and 2021 PACER reports, under-identification of SEHs is a persistent issue in schools across the nation, despite the legal mandate on all state and local education agencies (LEAs) to accurately identify all students who meet the definition of homelessness in the federal McKinney-Vento law. The documented relationship between poverty and housing instability provides one way of assessing how well states or LEAs may be complying with this requirement.[4] As in our prior briefs, here we compare overall school-age child poverty rates and homelessness rates to calculate an "identification rate" of SEHs, which serves as a proxy to estimate the extent of under-identification that may be occurring in Pennsylvania and local communities, relative to the national average, or other states and communities.[5]

Pennsylvania slightly improved its identification of SEHs since 2021-2022, but improvements in practices are still needed. As shown in Table 1, Pennsylvania schools identify fewer SEHs per school-age children in poverty (11.8%) compared to the national average of 14.7%.

Table 1: Student Homelessness Identification Rate, Pennsylvania vs. Nation (Homelessness / Poverty), 2021-22

	Students Experiencing Homelessness (SEH)	÷	School-Aged Children in Poverty	=	Rate of Identification of SEH
PA	34,043	÷	287,826	=	11.8%
	2.0%		15.8%		
Nation	1,205,259	÷	8,215,775	=	14.7%
	2.4%		16.6%		

Figure 2 shows that Pennsylvania's 11.8% homeless identification rate (i.e., homelessness ÷ student poverty) ranks 30th among the 50 states, which is higher than the bordering states of New Jersey (6.1%) and Ohio (8.8%) but lower than the bordering states of Maryland (15.5%), Delaware (15.2%), West Virginia (17.5%), and New York (26.6%).

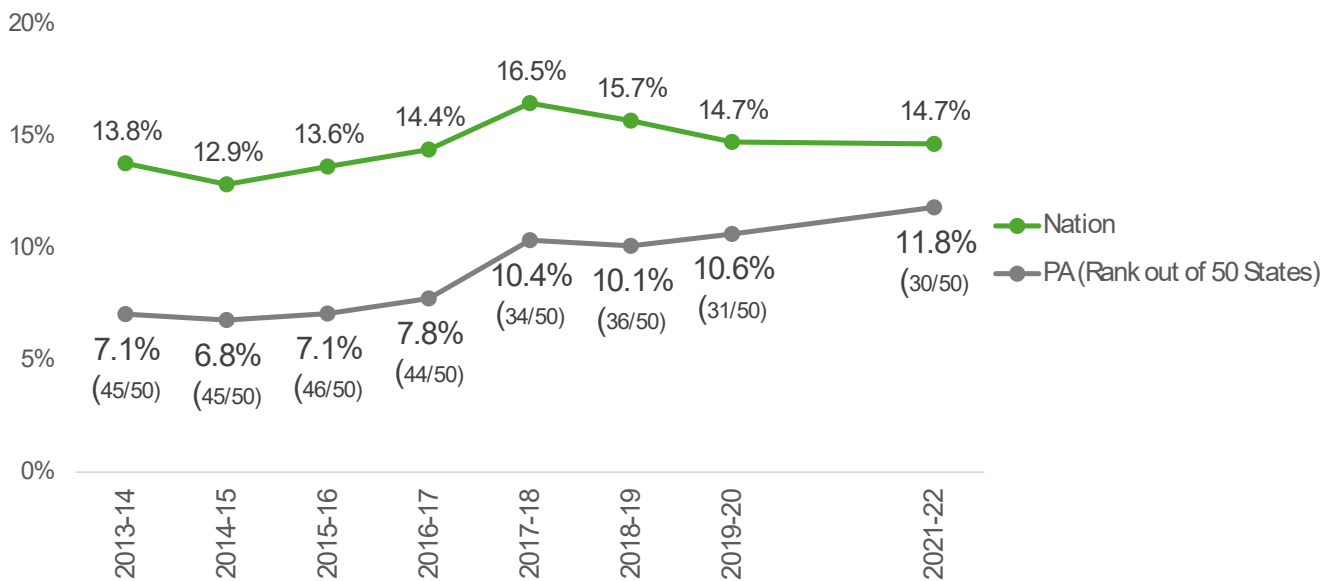**Figure 2: Student Homelessness Identification Rates, 50 State Rankings: (Homelessness / Poverty), 2021-22**
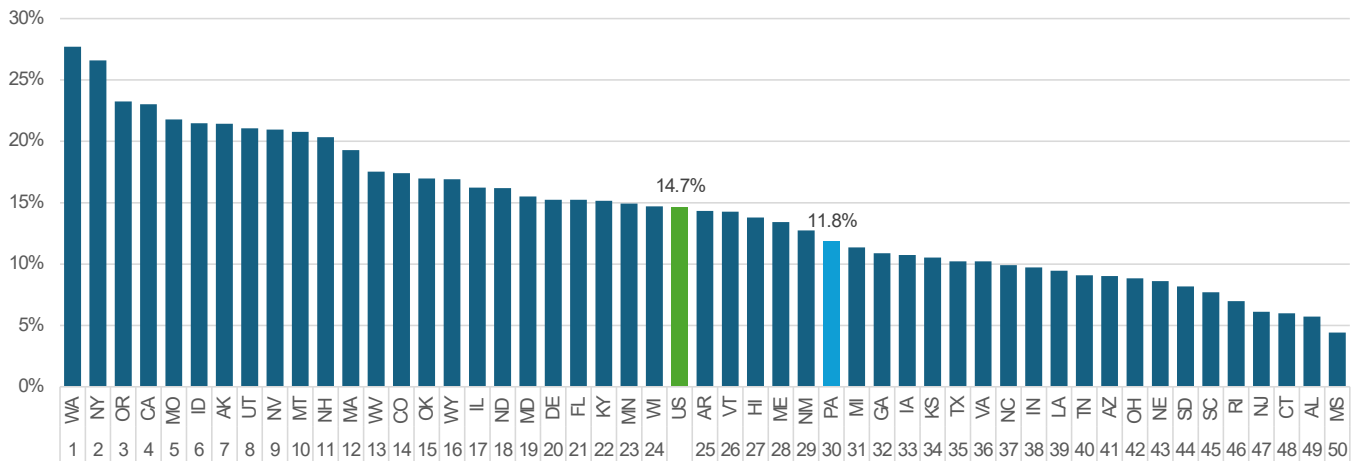
Source: US Census Poverty by Sex by Age & ED Data Express 118 Homeless Students Enrolled

The state's identification rate has increased in recent years, from 7.1% in 2013-14 to 11.8% in 2021-22 (Figure 3). Likewise, Pennsylvania's ranking against other states improved from 45th in 2013-14 to 30th out of the 50 states in 2021-22. The national rate fluctuated but ended higher in 2021-22 than in 2013-14.

As discussed in prior reports, the relatively low rates of SEHs in Philadelphia's public schools—the largest school system in the state and where overall poverty is high—is a driver of the state's low identification rate for SEHs overall.

Figure 3: Student Homelessness Identification Rates in Pennsylvania vs. Nation: (Homelessness / Poverty), 2013-14 to 2021-22

Source: US Census Poverty by Sex by Age & ED Data Express 118 Homeless Students Enrolled

Note: 2020-21 data is excluded as unreliable due to COVID.

Additional Evidence of Under-Identification of Students Experiencing Homelessness. The 2021-22 Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) shows substantially higher numbers of Pennsylvania youth experiencing housing insecurity than the rates of homelessness identified by schools.[6] The survey found that 2.9% of high school students in Pennsylvania and 5.4% in Philadelphia reported housing instability, both higher than the homelessness rates identified by schools across the state (2.0%) and the School District of Philadelphia (3.6%). The survey was not conducted in Pittsburgh. These higher rates on a self-reported survey may further indicate under-identification and, ultimately, denial of legal protections and supports students are entitled to if accurately identified as homeless.

3. Gaps in Educational Opportunities for SEHs

One reason accurate identification of SEHs is critical is so that schools can provide the comprehensive educational support needed to address the complex challenges SEHs often face. [See Call-Out Box on "The Need for Comprehensive Educational Supports for Students Experiencing Homelessness"]. Yet, data in Pennsylvania indicates that, even the SEHs who are identified are often denied adequate supports and educational opportunities they require to succeed in school.

Pennsylvania is known to operate one of the most inequitably funded public education systems in the nation, with state policymakers finding nearly than three-quarters of Pennsylvania's nearly 500 school districts

receiving less than adequate school funding.[18] As RFA has [documented](), this funding inequity is related to nation-leading gaps by student race and poverty in access to quality educational opportunity.[19] This corresponds to similarly large gaps in educational outcomes.[20] As discussed later, available evidence demonstrates that this educational inequity hits Pennsylvania's SEHs particularly hard.

Concentration of SEHs in under-resourced schools. RFA recently found that Pennsylvania's most inadequately funded school districts have fewer teachers, administrators, and other staff per student and pay lower salaries compared to the state's adequately funded districts.[21] This is so despite also serving higher rates of student groups with high educational needs, including economically disadvantaged students, English-learning students, and students receiving special education. As shown in Figure 4, we find that school districts with the largest funding adequacy gaps— or shortfalls between actual funding and what the state has calculated as adequate funding—also have the highest rates of students experiencing homelessness. The 91 Pennsylvania school districts with the largest adequacy gaps (averaging annual funding shortfalls of $6,558 per pupil) serve 2.8% of SEHs. In comparison, the 135 school districts with no gap (i.e., that receive adequate funding), serve only 1.2% of SEHs.

The Need for Comprehensive Educational Supports for Students Experiencing Homelessness

Students experiencing homelessness confront myriad challenges stemming from unmet basic needs. Food insecurity not only hampers problem-solving skills, memory, and attention,[7] but also exacerbates anxiety, decreases motivation,[8] fosters aggression, impedes the maintenance of friendships,[9] and contributes to low self-esteem and depression.[10] Similarly, sleep deprivation among homeless students can lead to misdiagnoses of ADHD, heightened anxiety and depression, daytime drowsiness,[11] compromised mental and physical health, and increased risk of unintentional injuries.[12] Moreover, stemming from experiences of instability of trauma, SEHs are disproportionately affected by mental and emotional health issues, learning disabilities,[13] delayed development of executive functioning skills,[14] and may even experience post-traumatic stress disorder.[15] Additionally, they are more susceptible to a range of physical ailments, including fever, vomiting or diarrhea, respiratory illnesses, delays in motor skill development,[16] and conditions such as asthma, lead poisoning, anemia, and cardiac disease.[17] All of these factors impact students' ability to learn, and demonstrate their need for robust educational supports.

Figure 4: Rate of Students Experiencing Homelessness in Pennsylvania School Districts Grouped by Size of Per Pupil Funding Adequacy Gap, 2022-23
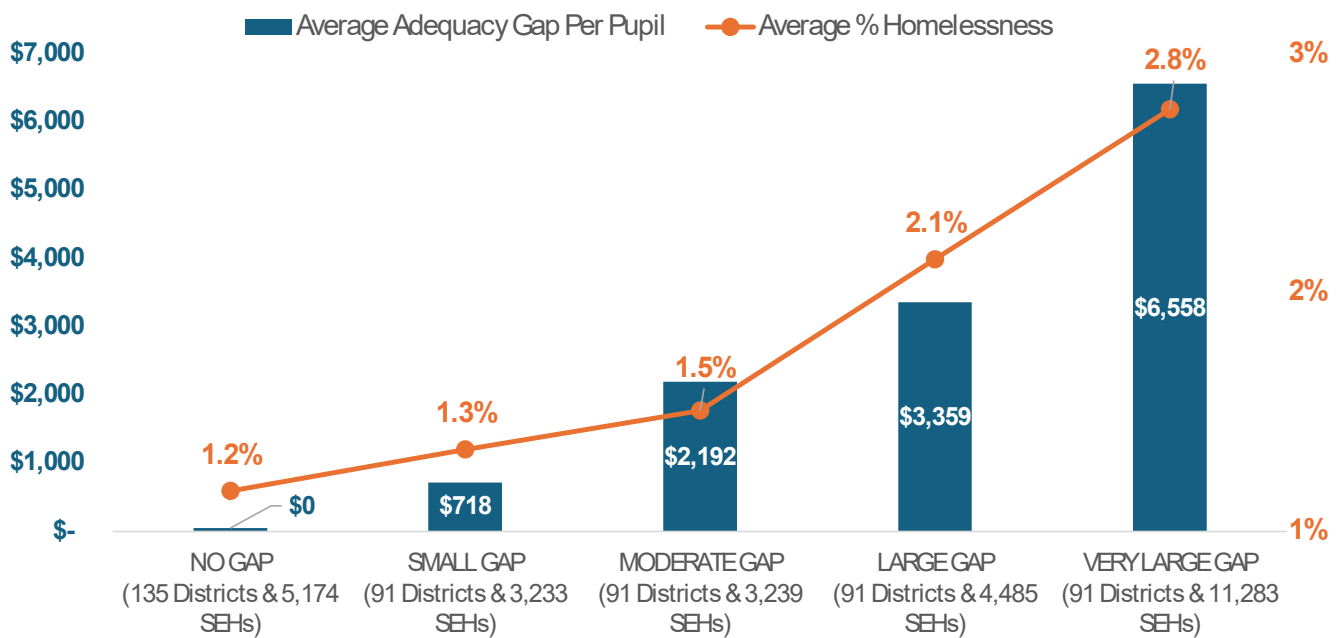

Source: Future Ready PA Index & 2024-25 Enacted Ready to Learn Block Grant. Note: SEH counts only include SEHs in school districts as funding adequacy gaps are not reported for charter schools. However, the majority (69%) of charter school students overall are residents of school districts with a "very large gap" in funding adequacy.

Increased enrollment of SEHs in cyber charter schools. Enrollment data also demonstrates a substantial recent increase in the percentage and number of SEHs enrolled in Pennsylvania's cyber charter schools (Figure 5). The number of SEHs in cyber charter schools more than doubled in just four years. This trend is troubling as research has found consistently poor outcomes for students in cyber schools. It also raises questions about the extent to which the estimated 17% of SEHs who experience illegal barriers to enrollment practices,[23] may rely on cyber schools as a last resort.

Under enrollment of SEHs in "brick & mortar" charter schools and district magnet schools. In contrast to cyber charters, in several Pennsylvania communities, including Philadelphia, brick and mortar charter schools enroll lower rates of SEHs compared to their students' school districts of residence. Moreover, SEHs in Philadelphia's brick and mortar charter schools are concentrated in Renaissance charter schools, or district schools with neighborhood enrollment catchments that are currently operated by a charter management company. The "non-Renaissance" brick and mortar charter schools in Philadelphia enroll 29% of the total students in the city's public schools, but only 20% of the SEHs. Under-enrollment is even greater in the school district's special admission, or criteria-based schools, which enroll 9% of total students and only 3% of the SEHs.[24]

Figure 5: Percent and Number of Students Experiencing Homelessness in Pennsylvania's Cyber Charter Schools, 2018-19 to 2022-23
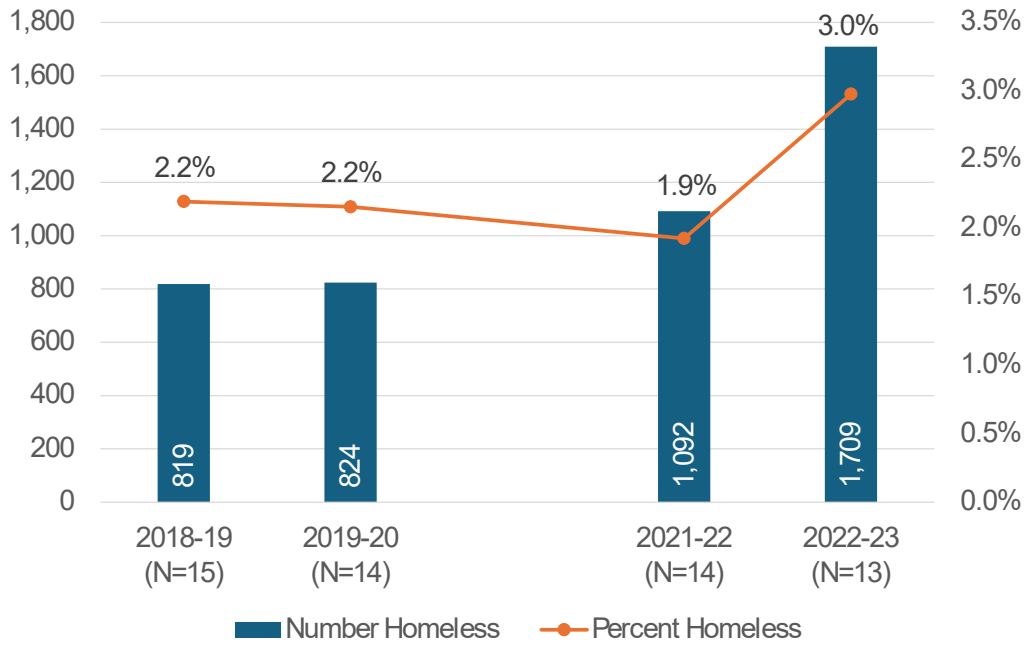
Source: Future Ready PA Index & ELSI Virtual School Indicator, 2018-19 to 2022-23. Note: 2020-21 excluded as unreliable due to COVID.

4. Lagging Educational Outcomes for Pennsylvania's Students Experiencing Homelessness

Data also indicates that lack of educational opportunity correlates to lagging educational outcomes for SEHs. Here, we examine several commonly reported measures of educational success to examine the educational outcomes of SEHs in Pennsylvania public schools. Figure 6 compares all students, students who are economically disadvantaged, and SEHs on four indicators of academic outcomes:

- Four-year cohort high school graduation rates,
- Rates of participation in the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSAs),
- Rates of proficiency or above on the PSSAs, and
- Chronic absenteeism rates.[25]

In each indicator, SEHs experienced worse outcomes compared to all students who were economically disadvantaged who, in turn, had worse outcomes than students overall. Data on chronic absenteeism is not available by student economic disadvantage, but SEHs in PA have significantly higher rates of chronic absenteeism compared to students overall. This reflects common experience that it is harder for students to attend school if they are experiencing housing instability. It also suggests that Pennsylvania schools are not providing supports sufficient to eliminate barriers to attendance by SEHs.

Figure 6: Pennsylvania Student Outcomes: All Students, Economically Disadvantaged Students, & Students Experiencing Homelessness, 2021-22
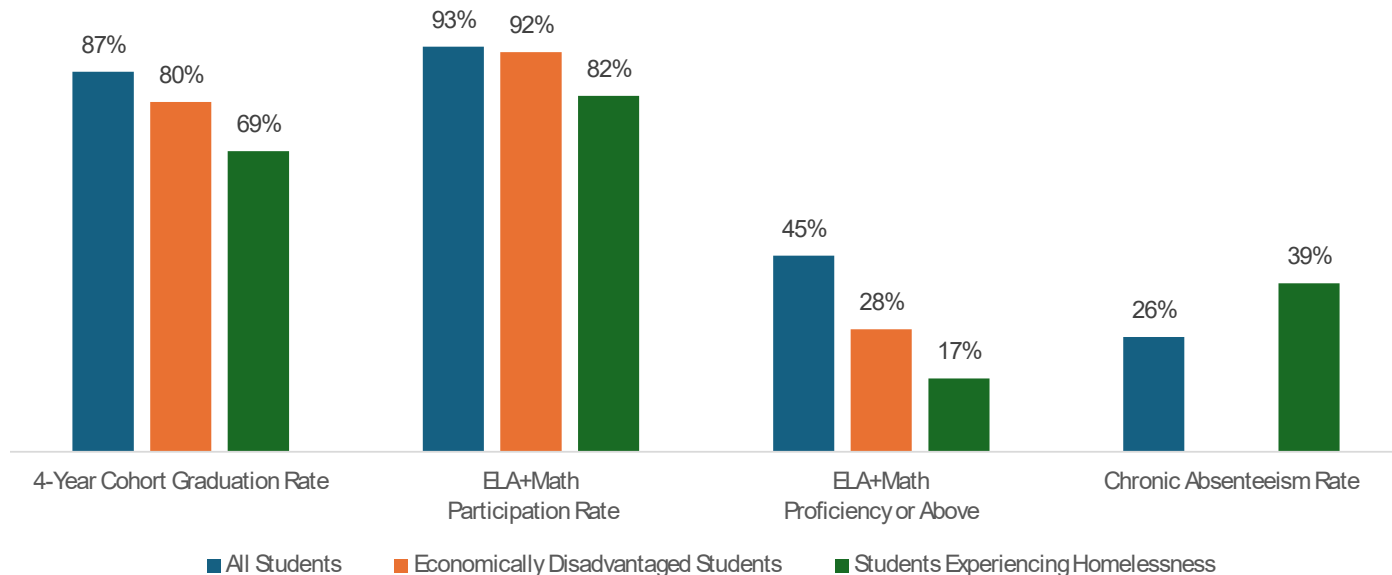
Sources: ESSA Report Card and unpublished ESSA Report Card data, ED Data Express 195 Chronic Absenteeism & ELSI Total Enrollment (Exclude AE), 2021-22. Note ELA & Math PSSA participation and proficiency rates are averaged across grades and subjects. Chronic absenteeism rates are not available for economically disadvantaged students.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This report provides an updated examination of student homelessness in Pennsylvania, highlighting its prevalence, challenges with identification, disparities in educational opportunities, and impact on academic outcomes. Main findings include that:

- Roughly 2% of students in Pennsylvania were identified as experiencing homelessness in 2021-22, a slight increase from prior years.

- The state has seen a statewide increase in the identification rate of homelessness (% students experiencing homelessness ÷ % students in poverty), but still ranks below the national average at 30th out of the 50 states.

- SEHs are heavily concentrated in Pennsylvania's most inadequately funded school districts, which provide fewer educational opportunities. SEHs are also increasingly enrolled in cyber charter schools which have poor overall student outcomes.

- Pennsylvania's SEHs are exhibiting worse academic outcomes than both all students and other economically disadvantaged students.

These findings underscore the urgent need for school leaders and policymakers in Pennsylvania to prioritize comprehensive strategies to support SEHs. Initiatives should focus on enhancing identification practices to ensure that all SEHs receive the necessary resources and support services to which they are legally entitled, including the removal of barriers to enrollment. Policy reforms must be adopted to ensure schools serving SEHs receive adequate resources to support their students. The infusion of federal ARP resources

may have contributed to positive trends in homelessness identification in recent years. As these federal resources dry up, it will be imperative for state policymakers to fill the gap to continue and expand this progress, particularly in Philadelphia and other school systems with large school funding adequacy gaps and high rates of poverty and homelessness. Additionally, broader investments are needed to address the underlying factors contributing to student homelessness, such as housing insecurity and economic instability. Ultimately, building a more inclusive and equitable educational system will benefit all students in Pennsylvania, including students who are experiencing homelessness.

Data on Student Homelessness

This brief relies on several data sources to examine student homelessness. The federal government publishes the ED Data Express and the Pennsylvania Department of Education provides rates of homelessness in the Future Ready PA Index and data on student outcomes in its ESSA Report Card to the federal government.

Each data source has benefits and flaws, and likely none capture the full extent of student homelessness. We utilize the federal ED Data Express data in the bulk of our analysis, as it includes students who have been homeless at any point during the school year, while PA's Future Ready data includes a snapshot of those homeless in October of each year. Likely for this reason, state snapshot rates of homelessness, while similar, are consistently slightly lower than the federal data. Where federal data is useful for comparing Pennsylvania to other states and communities, the state data is useful for comparisons among Pennsylvania schools and districts. Moreover, federal data is only current to the 2021-22 school year. The Future Ready Index data are current to 2022-23 and show a statewide spike in the rate of student homelessness in the most recent year. This may indicate further increases in student homelessness or improvement in the identification of eligible students.

In addition, the Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) captures self-reported housing instability among youth. The YRBS shows higher rates; however the data is only available for certain years and locations, limiting its usefulness for cross-state or cross-district comparisons.

Endnotes

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2. Pennsylvania Department of Education. (2024). *American Rescue Plan (ARP) Homeless Children and Youth*. Retrieved July 29, 2024, from https://www.education.pa.gov/K-12/Homeless%20Education/ARP/Pages/default.aspx.

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5. For more discussion of this approach to estimating identification, see our 2018 and 2021 PACER briefs.

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24. Findings based on analysis of data published in the Future Ready Pennsylvania Index. Philadelphia's directory of traditional and renaissance charter school is available at https://www.philasd.org/charterschools/#charterdirectory and a list of the district's criteria-based schools is available at https://webapps1.philasd.org/downloads/tdm/Admission_Criteria_for_Special_Admission_High_Schools.pdf.

25. Data on school drop-outs are not publicly reported for SEHs. However, the Pennsylvania Department of Education found that, in 2020-21 SEHs had a drop-out rate of 3.8% compared to 1.2% for all students.