Opportunities to Better Identify and Serve K-12 Students Experiencing Homelessness

Joint Legislative Audit and Review Committee
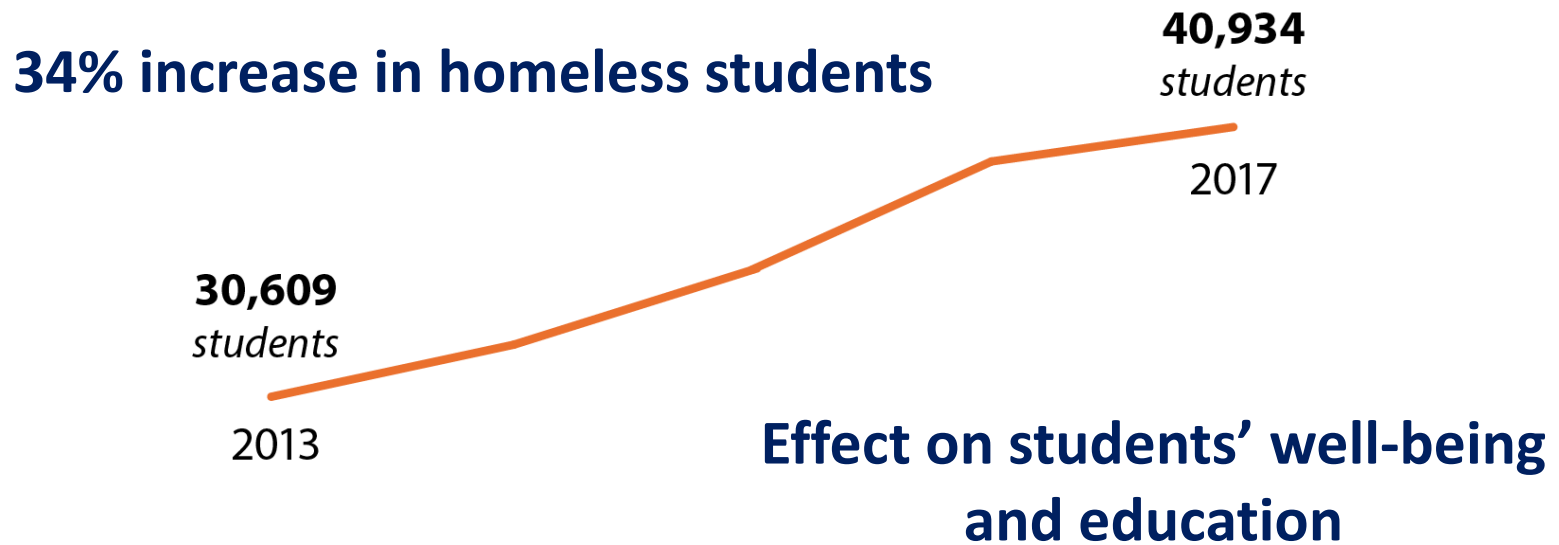
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Why we did this audit

34% increase in homeless students

40,934 *students*

2017

30,609 *students*

2013

Effect on students' well-being and education
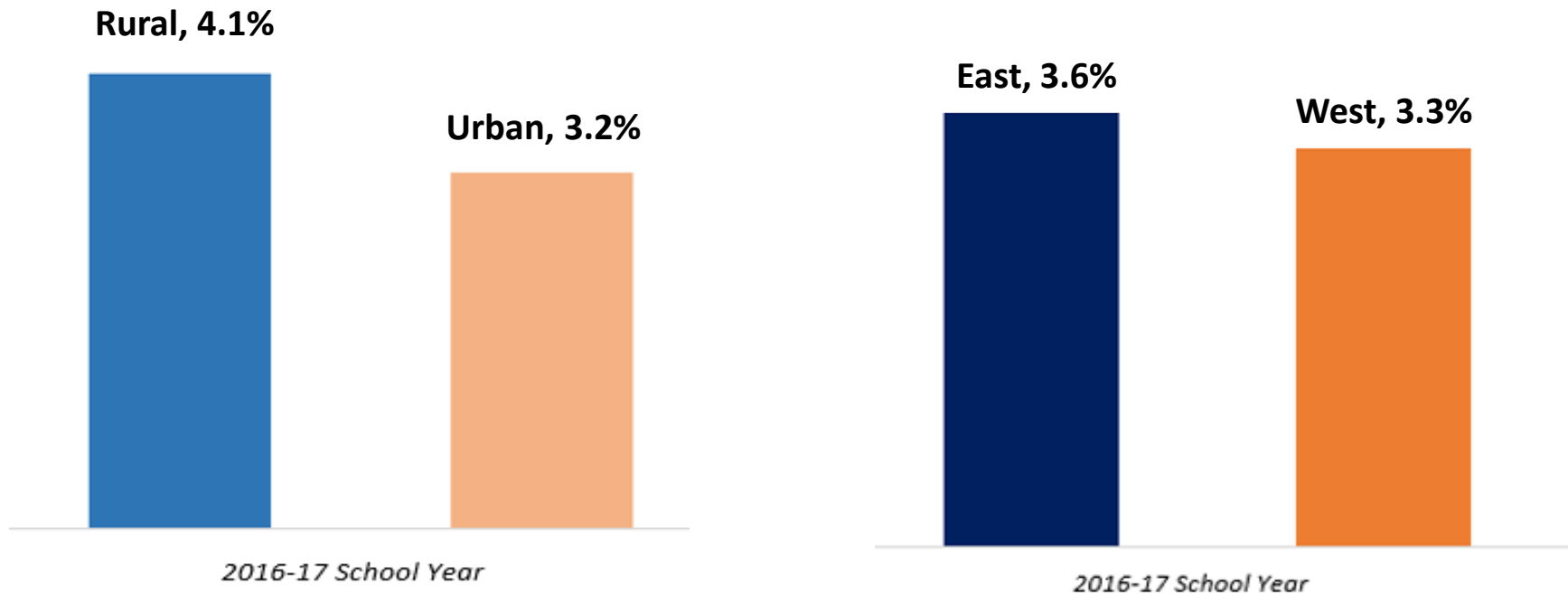
Growing stakeholder concerns

- Problems homeless students face

- Educational agencies' efforts to help these students

- Strategies to improve agencies' efforts

Objectives

- What are the characteristics, needs and causes of K-12 student homelessness?

- How can school districts and OSPI better identify these students, provide in-school supports, and connect them to community services?

- How have school districts used McKinney-Vento and Homeless Students Stability Program (HSSP) grant funding to help homeless students?

Student homelessness is common across Washington

Homeless students can be found in similar proportions
in urban and rural areas, and in eastern and western Washington

Rural, 4.1%

Urban, 3.2%

2016-17 School Year

East, 3.6%

West, 3.3%

2016-17 School Year

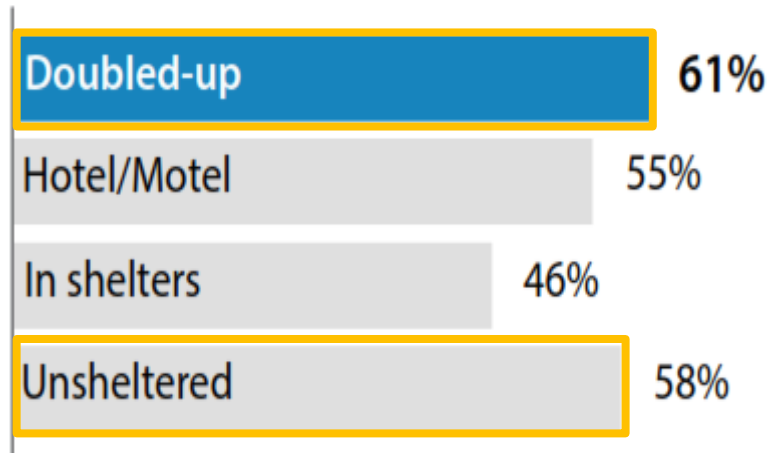Under the McKinney-Vento Act, students qualify as homeless if they live:

- Unsheltered
- In shelters
- In hotels or motels
- Doubled-up with friends or relatives

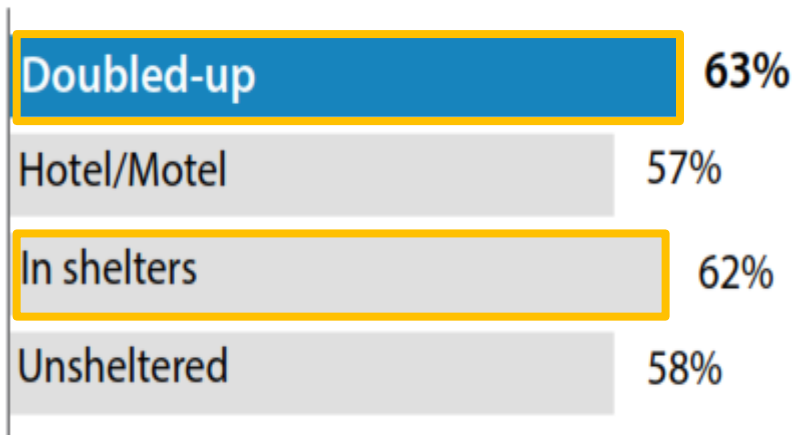**73 percent of homeless students live "doubled-up"**

Doubled-up students have similar outcomes

High school graduation rates

Doubled-up	61%
Hotel/Motel	55%
In shelters	46%
Unsheltered	58%

Regular school attendance rates

Doubled-up	63%
Hotel/Motel	57%
In shelters	62%
Unsheltered	58%

Key provisions of the McKinney-Vento Act require that school districts:

- Identify homeless students

- Provide these students with in-school supports, such as:

  - Immediate enrollment

  - Transportation

  - Free breakfast and lunch

- Connect these students to community resources

Gaps lead to under-identification of homeless students

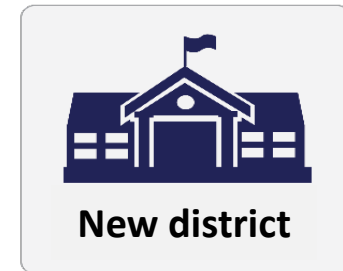| District method	Gap	To improve identification
Administer questionnaire	▪ One-time distribution misses students	✓ Administer multiple times throughout school year
Post material	▪ Difficult to understand ▪ Not in right places	✓ Use terms and languages families understand ✓ Post in places families visit
Train homeless liaison	▪ Key school staff are less likely to receive training	✓ Train staff who have regular interactions with students

Some districts delay enrollment of homeless students

Slow transfer of student records

Prior district → **New district**

- Unpaid fees and fines

- Safety concerns
- Class placement

To help ensure immediate enrollment, school districts should:

- ✓ Train enrollment staff on the right to immediate enrollment
- ✓ Provisionally place students in class while awaiting records
- ✓ Clarify records transfer policies

Homeless students need more flexibility to do well in school

Homeless students lack quiet spaces, computers and time for homework

- Need flexibility with assignments
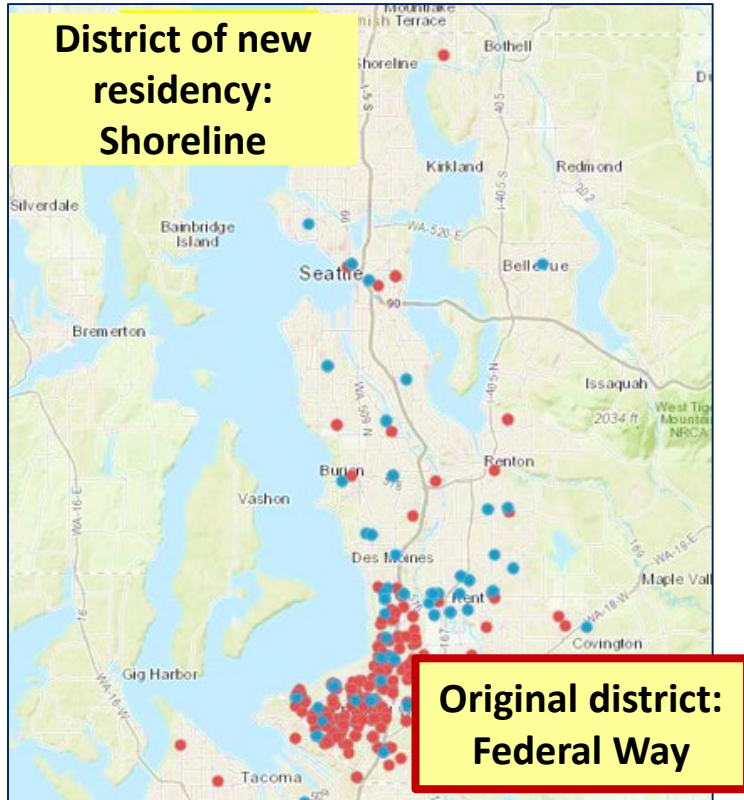
Homeless students change schools frequently

- Need flexibility with credit accrual

Waive similar completed courses	53%
Consolidate credit	59%
Provide alternative credit accrual opportunities	72%

To provide more flexibility, school districts should:

✓ Develop policies to inform and guide teachers in offering flexibility
✓ Implement state law intended to help students with credit accrual

District of new residency: Shoreline

Original district: Federal Way

2 hour round trip

- Late school arrival
- Absences
- Hunger
- Sleep deprivation
- Insufficient time for schoolwork

To minimize negative effects of transportation on education, districts should:

✓ Educate families to help them make school placement decisions that are best for students' academic success

Homeless student transportation can be costly for districts

Factors driving costs

- Many students transported across district boundaries

- Transportation needs specialized bus routes or taxis

125 school districts reported spending a total of
$15 million
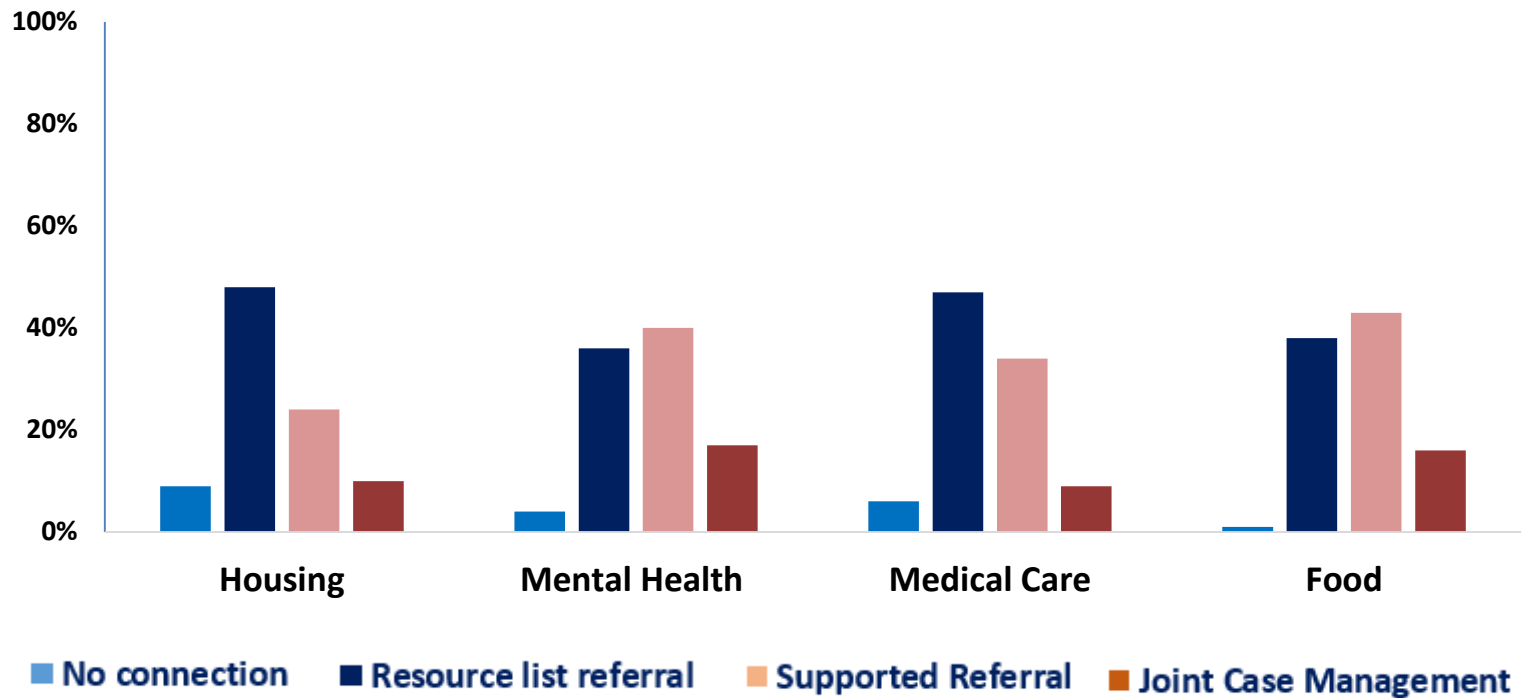
Factors compounding problem

- Many districts lack understanding about reimbursable modes of transportation

- Many districts do not share transportation costs

To reduce transportation costs, districts should:
- ✓ Claim reimbursement for eligible costs
- ✓ Establish inter-district transportation agreements

Student connections to community services

Districts varied in the level of support they provide
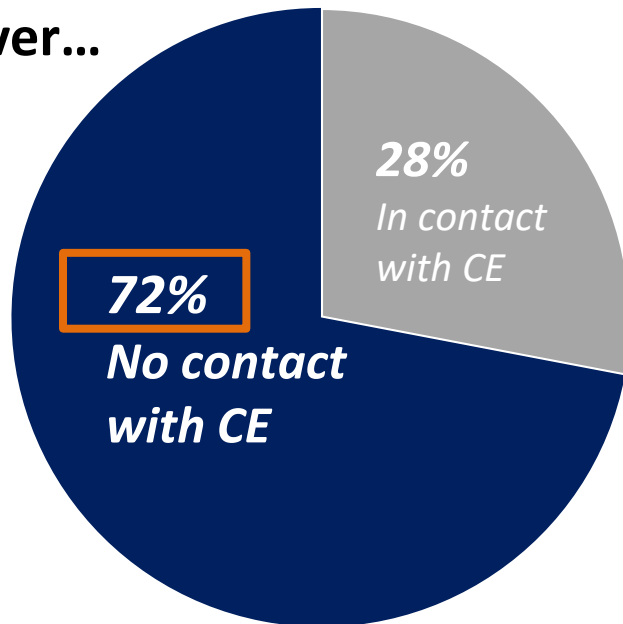to connect homeless students to community services

Establish contact with Coordinated Entry (CE) programs

- To help students that CE programs prioritize for assistance (unsheltered)

However…

28%
In contact with CE

72%
No contact with CE

Establish partnerships with local service providers

- For students CE programs typically don't help (doubled-up)

Two dedicated sources of funding for homeless students

Two primary dedicated sources of funding help school districts identify and support homeless students:

- Federal McKinney-Vento grants

- State Homeless Student Stability Program (HSSP) grants

$2.5 million dedicated grant funding → **Awarded to** → **36 out of 295** school districts
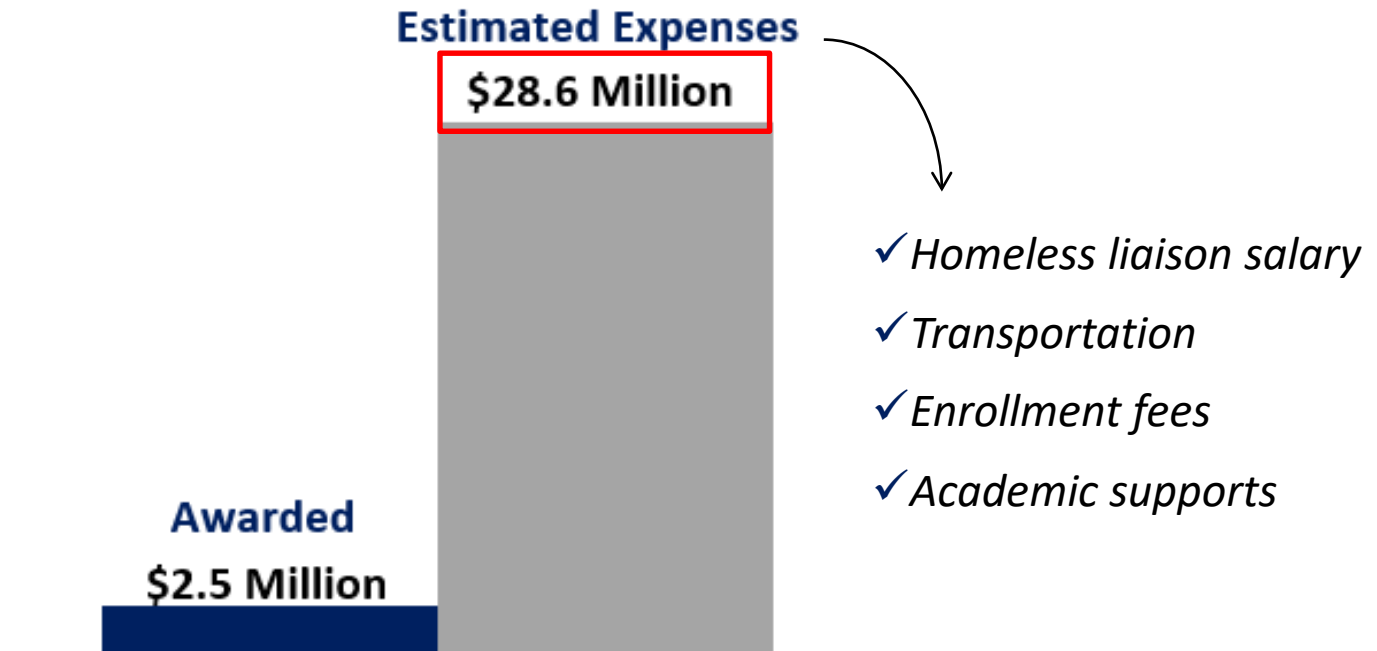
Districts face challenges accessing and using grant funding

- Districts find the grant application confusing and complicated

- Districts face limitations in using funding to help students

  - Food beyond breakfast and lunch

  - Rent assistance

Districts do not receive enough grant money for homelessness

Dedicated grant funding for student homelessness is less than one-tenth of what districts need to support those students

Estimated Expenses

$28.6 Million

Awarded

$2.5 Million

✓ *Homeless liaison salary*

✓ *Transportation*

✓ *Enrollment fees*

✓ *Academic supports*

To school districts

- Strengthen identification, in-school supports, and connections to community services for homeless students

To the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction

- Simplify grant application

- Provide districts more flexibility in using funding

- Offer more training opportunities for rural school districts

- Provide guidance in the following areas:

  - Offering academic flexibility to students

  - Awarding credit for partial, unresolved or incomplete coursework

  - Involving families in school placement decisions

  - Establishing inter-district transportation agreements

To the Department of Commerce

- Simplify grant application

- Provide districts more flexibility in using grant funding to provide rent assistance

To Washington State School Directors' Association

- Align its records transfer model policy with the homeless students model policy

- Collaborate with OSPI to develop model policies and procedures where appropriate

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