



BOSTON COLLEGE

School of Social Work

A School-Housing Partnership for Stability: *Indications of Success and Opportunities for System Change*



Report 2023

Executive Summary

A considerable portion of the 46k Boston Public Schools (BPS) student body experiences family homelessness (see Figure 1). Students experiencing family homelessness cannot consistently access school, resulting in substantial inequity (see Figure 2).

In the context of the Boston Public School's BPS Homeless Education Resource Network's multifaceted strategic plan, BPS and FamilyAid (FA) partnered to connect both families at risk of homelessness and families currently experiencing homelessness with support. In some cases, this included housing vouchers from the Boston Housing Authority. The goals of the initiative are to increase housing and educational stability and improve parent and child socioemotional wellness.

Since 2019, FA has served over 1,300 BPS families from more than 100 schools. FA and other housing providers have helped more than 900 of these families secure permanent housing.

BPS and FA are also working with United Way of Massachusetts Bay (UW) and Boston College School of Social Work (BCSSW) to improve the quality and use of research evidence at the intersection of housing and education. Our overarching research questions are:

- ① To what extent is rapid receipt of homelessness prevention services associated with short and medium term academic and socioemotional outcomes?
↓
- ② What are the experiences of homelessness prevention services staff and clients?

Our collaborative research includes surveys of program recipients (N=116), housing crisis responder staff (N=16), and BPS homeless liaisons (N=42); qualitative interviews with program recipients (N=9); and analysis of administrative data.

since 2019



FAMILYAID

..... served



>1,300

BOSTON PUBLIC
SCHOOL FAMILIES

..... from



>100

SCHOOLS



>900

BPS FAMILIES
secured housing

Strengths of partnership programming.

In surveys, (N=42), BPS homeless liaisons reported the following positive features:



Good coordination and communication between FA and BPS



Emphasis on prevention, housing support, and vouchers



Ease of family enrollment and expedited access to supports



Families' access to case management, assistance with paperwork, and referrals

However, innovations are needed to improve school-based homeless liaison capacity to identify families at risk of or experiencing homelessness, a key component of the initiative.

Resources are required to sustain the initiative.

They include:



Housing vouchers



Funding to maintain staffing to support the growing number of eligible families



Coordinating infrastructure, including a shared data system and regular meetings



Flexible financial assistance for families that is responsive to their dynamic needs

Figure 1. BPS students recorded as experiencing homelessness

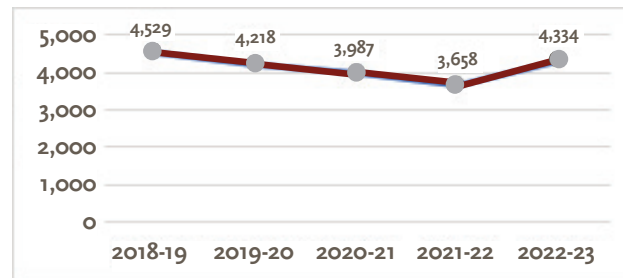
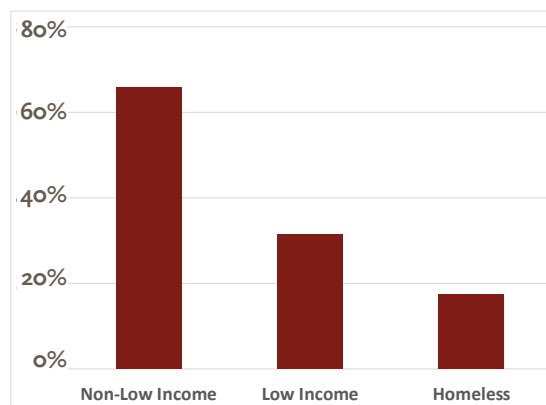


Figure 2. 10th Grade BPS Students Meeting or Exceeding Math Expectations on 2022 Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) Test



Background

A considerable portion of the 46k¹ Boston Public Schools (BPS) student body experiences family homelessness (see Figure 1),² defined as lacking “fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence” and living: in shelter; in places not meant for human sleeping; at motels, trailer parks, or camping grounds because of no alternative adequate option; and doubled up with others under financial duress (see Figure 3).³ BPS students who identify as Hispanic and Black disproportionately experience homelessness.⁴ There is an additional group of students in families that are at risk of homelessness.

School and housing agency staff know that families experiencing homelessness face substantial challenges. While a vast network of expert government and private stakeholders are invested and responding with substantial positive impact, the need has far surpassed existing capacity. Many families who experience housing instability are simply not connected to any service provider. Specific systemic challenges reported staff surveys (N=16 FA staff and N=42 BPS staff) include staff turnover, long waiting lists, service gaps, insufficient communication, and unanswered calls.

Figure 3. Definitions:

Family homelessness:

Lacking “fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence” and living: in shelter; in public or private places not meant for human sleeping; at motels, hotels, trailer parks, or camping grounds because of no alternative adequate option; and doubled up under financial duress

Doubled-up under financial duress:

Sharing the housing of other persons due to loss of housing, economic hardship, or a similar reason.

At risk of homelessness:

Expected loss of stable, independent housing that is rented or owned as part of a household

Homeless liaisons:

Social workers, family liaisons, and other BPS staff designated as responsible for identifying and supporting students who experience homelessness, as required by the McKinney Vento Homeless Assistance Act

Negative impacts of homelessness on children can include bullying, asthma, ear infections, and developmental problems.⁵ Students experiencing homelessness cannot consistently access school. In addition, homelessness is associated with more school transfers,⁶ higher absenteeism,⁷ and lower course grades,⁸ test scores,⁹ and graduation rates.¹⁰ In 2022, the percentages of BPS students experiencing homelessness who met or exceeded 10th grade assessment expectations in English Language Arts (26%), Mathematics (17%), and Science and Technology/Engineering (13%) were approximately 7 to 14 percentage points lower than students with low incomes and 39 to 49 percentage points lower than students without low incomes.¹¹

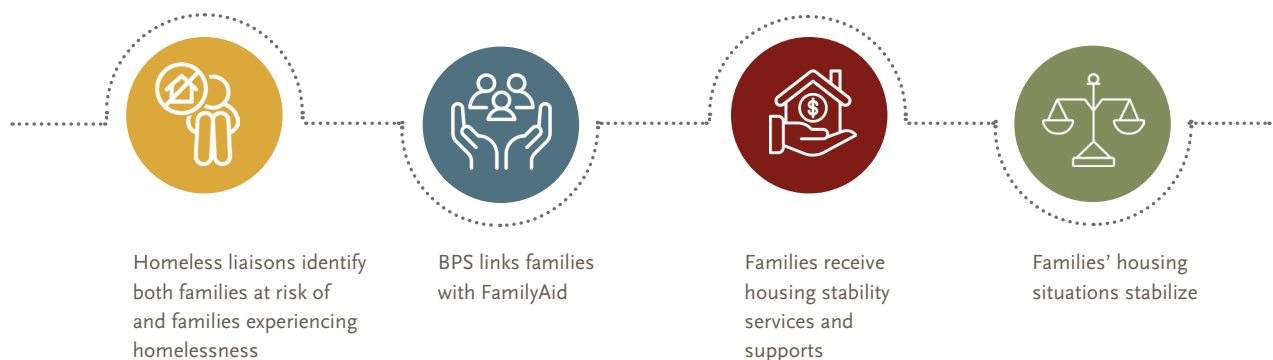
(Students experiencing homelessness are included in the group of students with low incomes). In 2022, the United States Interagency Council on Homelessness called for systematic prevention of homelessness.¹²


The federal McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act establishes schools as a point of intervention for students experiencing homelessness.¹³ Schools can also be opportune setting to identify students in families at risk of homelessness to be referred to partnering housing organizations for prevention.

Program Description

Beginning with a City of Boston investment in SY17-18, BPS invests more than \$1 million annually in the form of per-pupil and high concentration allocations directly into school budgets to support students and families experiencing homelessness. In 2019, BPS and FA established a partnership to connect families with services to facilitate housing stability, parent and child socioemotional wellbeing, and educational stability (see Figure 4). With training and support from the BPS Department of Opportunity Youth, McKinney-Vento homeless liaisons identify families at risk of or experiencing homelessness. Opportunity Youth staff verify case eligibility and communicate referrals to FA in batches shared via Google spreadsheets. FA case managers then connect with families for screening, assessment, and collaborative planning. Families are offered a range of services including short-term financial assistance; benefit application support; linkage with other service providers; housing application support; voucher application support; and housing search assistance. FA continues to support families while they transition into permanent housing.

Figure 4. Homeless liaisons identify both families at risk of and families experiencing homelessness.





*“
He’s doing amazing.
The day I told him...the day
that I showed him our apartment,
he just cried and cried. He was so
happy. He loves that he has his
own space...He loves everything.*

*- Voucher recipient reflecting on
child’s experience*

2019



Since 2019, FA has served more than 1,300 BPS-referred families (over 4,000 individuals) from more than 100 schools. FA and other housing provider agencies have helped more than 900 of these families secure permanent housing with vouchers.



2020-23

Between 2020 and 2023, BPS and FA leveraged their partnership to assist BPS families in obtaining Section 8 and City Funded Housing Vouchers that were specifically allocated to BPS families experiencing homelessness via the Boston Housing Authority. Families experiencing homelessness with the most urgent need were prioritized. Relevant considerations were length of time experiencing homelessness, current living circumstances, socioeconomic or academic challenges, and lack of access to other providers or resources.

2019-20



In the first year of the collaboration (2019-2020), staff piloted with 50 families an initial version of the Early Homelessness Intervention and Prevention program (EHIP).

2022



Referrals were paused in the context of COVID-19 and resumed in February 2022, with an additional 300 BPS families participating. Families eligible for EHIP are those who are concerned that their current circumstances could lead to homelessness. Relevant factors could include falling behind on rent, experiencing a significant rent increase, threat of eviction, loss of employment, threat of utility shut-off, and reports of domestic violence. The program aims to keep families housed and out of shelter.

Approximately 734 BPS families were referred for Section 8 Vouchers in School Year 20-21, 311 for Emergency Housing Vouchers and City Funded Vouchers in School Year 21-22, and over 400 for Housing for Education Vouchers in School Year 22-23.

Early Findings from Research

Early evidence suggests that BPS-FA partnership-based programming has already had substantial positive impacts on families. In individual interviews, (N=9), program recipients mentioned the value of increased privacy, less interpersonal conflict, day-to-day consistency, and physical proximity to supportive friends, family, and school staff.

In response to a survey, (N=42), BPS homeless liaisons noted the initiative's many positive features including:

- Good coordination and communication between FA and BPS
- Emphasis on prevention, housing support, and vouchers
- Ease of family enrollment and expedited access to supports
- Families' access to case management, assistance with paperwork, and referrals



A crucial first step in connecting families with services and supports is the identification of families in need of assistance.¹⁴

Family housing status is initially assessed upon school enrollment and then updated as staff learn of changes. In surveys, homeless liaisons reported that they use several effective strategies to identify families experiencing housing hardship (e.g., referrals from school personnel, student self-reports, and assessments of students who present with risk factors). Nevertheless 83% of respondents said they experienced small or big problems in identifying students at risk of homelessness (see Figure 7), and 81% reported that they faced problems in identifying students experiencing homelessness.

Improving homeless liaison capacity to identify families, particularly those at risk of homelessness, would expand family access to services and supports, thereby further reducing inequities.

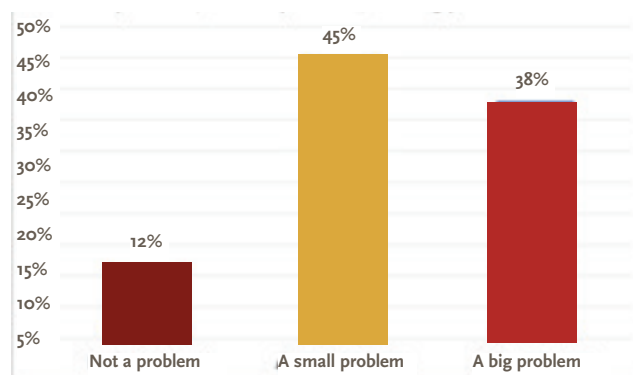


Figure 7. Homeless liaison problems identifying students at risk of homelessness (N=42)

Sustaining and Scaling the Program

For many families in the Boston area, the private housing market is not accessible.¹⁵ There is a need for cross-systems collaboration in making housing resources accessible and available to families. Local organizers, program administrators, policy makers, and researchers are working toward this goal:



Dana-Farber
Cancer Institute

With support from Dana-Farber Cancer Institute, stakeholders are mapping the local system of services for children who experience homelessness with an eye toward opportunities for improvement (Child Homelessness Intercept and Mapping Engagement (CHIME)).



At least seven school districts in Massachusetts are leveraging McKinney-Vento Homeless Education Grant funding or private funding to establish partnerships with housing organizations to connect families with housing stability services and supports.



Boston Mayor Michelle Wu launched a Special Commission to End Homelessness.

BPS and FA are part of this movement. Program implementation experiences indicate that the following resources are required to sustain the BPS-FA initiative:

- **Housing vouchers.**
- **Continued funding to maintain staffing and directly support families.** The initiative relies on the following funding sources:
 - (1) Philanthropic support
 - (2) City of Boston General Funds
 - (3) Federal grants obtained by FA
 - (4) Federal COVID-19 response allocations to BPS that will sunset in August 2024.
- o BPS funding included \$1,500,000 annually in SY21-22 and SY22-23 from the American Rescue Plan (ARP) and \$650,000 annually in SY21-22 and SY22-23 from the Elementary and Secondary Emergency Relief (ESSER).
- o FA service costs over four school years totaled \$5,484,430 with a substantial portion (\$2,383,398) used as direct household assistance, including tenancy startup costs, rental arrearages, summer camp tuitions, and educational enrichment programming. Other operational costs include staff salaries, benefits, technology, office space, and overhead.
- **BPS homeless liaison time and tools to identify both families at risk of homelessness and families experiencing homelessness.** More than 175 social workers, family liaisons, and other staff functioning as homeless liaisons across the BPS school system are critical to the initiative.
- **Support for FA case managers, who draw on extensive experience and skills to respond to complex and individualized case needs.** The initiative relies on 32 full-time equivalent FA staff.
- **Cross-sector coordinating infrastructure.** For example, families use COVID-19 era school-issued Chromebooks to connect with BPS and FA staff. BPS staff refer families to FA via Google spreadsheets. Also, FA staff monitor family progress using a Clarity database.
- **Ongoing flexibility to respond to dynamic contextual issues and family needs.** The COVID-19 pandemic has shown that family circumstances can rapidly change. As an institutional point of contact with families, BPS must remain ready to respond, in partnership with FA.



Research Study Progress and Plans

BPS and FA are working with United Way of Massachusetts Bay (UW) and Boston College School of Social Work (BCSSW) to improve the quality and use of research evidence at the intersection of housing and education.



United Way of
Massachusetts Bay



BOSTON COLLEGE
School of Social Work

We are currently funded by an Institutional Challenge Grant sponsored by the W.T. Grant Foundation, Spencer Foundation, and Doris Duke Charitable Foundation to evaluate school-housing partnership-based family homelessness prevention programming.



SPENCER FOUNDATION



Our collaborative research includes surveys of program recipients, analysis of administrative data, surveys of housing crisis responder staff and homeless liaisons, and qualitative interviews with families. We are using Stata to analyze survey and administrative data to assess the relationship between early receipt of EHIP services and youth academic and socio-emotional outcomes and MAXQDA to analyze client interview transcripts. Full results from the research are expected in the summer of 2025.

Acknowledgments:

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²“Administrative Data Request” (Boston Public Schools, 2023).

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