



ESSER enables district to meet more needs of homeless students

Using ESSER funds in combination with state money and local partnerships is enabling Riverside (Calif.) Unified School District to better identify root causes of homeless students' struggles and meet their needs, school administrators said.

The district with more than 40,000 students is using ESSER funds to improve its multi-tier system of supports. The more-comprehensive MTSS is enabling educators to drill down to root causes and to pay for resources to respond to students' needs, said Homeless/Foster Liaison Christopher Sewell and Director of Pupil Services Raul Ayala. It benefits all students, especially homeless students, a priority population with greater needs, the Riverside administrators said.

Districts can use ESSER funds to assist students experiencing homelessness in combination with other funding and local partnerships. Indeed, the U.S. Education Department encourages states and districts to use ESSER funds to address inequities in groups of students, including students experiencing homelessness. *FAQ: Elem. and Secondary Sch. Emergency Relief Programs, Governor's Emergency Educ. Relief Programs*, [121 LRP 18070](#) (OESE 05/26/21).

For example, districts may follow Riverside's example by taking these steps:

- **Noticing the signs of homelessness:** Principals should understand which students are in the most need and they can use Title I funds to examine what the school does for all students, Ayala said. Other low-income students have many of the same needs as students experiencing homelessness. Teachers refer high-needs students to school counselors more often. Counselors develop relationships with high-needs students and learn which students are experiencing homelessness, he said.

- **Creating screening tools:** A housing survey Riverside schools use at the beginning of every year identifies students who are homeless then or upon enrollment. However, families can become homeless at any time, Sewell said.

Homelessness may show up as academic or social-emotional struggles, Ayala said. For example, a student may be identified with academic needs, which are due to poor attendance, which is due to transportation problems.

ESSER funds can be used for any activity authorized by subtitle B of Title VII of the [McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act](#), including transportation back to their school of origin when it is in the student's best interest. Through the expanded MTSS, the additional funds allow Riverside to provide transportation to students who moved outside its boundaries to neighboring districts.

"It's like peeling back these layers," Ayala said. "You look at what is causing the problems."

- **Assisting with distance learning:** Riverside uses its Expanded Learning Opportunity grant, which the state funds with ESSER money, to expand distance learning. It also provides tutoring at school and virtual

or one-on-one tutoring for students who need the most help, Sewell said. That help is available for all students, and homeless students get priority, he said.

For example, the district provides Chromebooks to all students and hotspots to students who need them. Students who are homeless are more likely to lose their device or break it, Sewell said. In the case of a homeless student, the family's belongings may have all been seized or they may be locked in a storage unit to which the family no longer has access. So, using the grant money, the district makes sure students have a working device.

Districts must apply to access the grant for costs dating back to March 13, 2020, and follow generally accepted accounting principles, the state says.

- **Using state funds:** Riverside uses a three-year state Homeless Children and Youth grant to pay for a family services coordinator who meets with families at homeless shelters and builds a relationship with them. He informs them about district and community services as needed.
- **Partnering with local governments:** Families will often say their biggest need is housing. Sewell said they are referred to the county's Fair Housing Council for rental relief. Homeless students have priority for the city parks department's after-school and summer enrichment programs, which include sports, the arts, and academics.
- **Maintaining relations with nonprofits:** Riverside maintains relationships with both new and longstanding local partners. District staff regularly meet with the various organizations to discuss needs and gratitude with stories about how local partnerships successfully help students.

"We're just trying to remove the barriers," Sewell said.

Title1Admin@ESEA Now related resources:

- [Smart Start: Homeless Students: Overview of McKinney-Vento Requirements](#)
- [Smart Start: Homeless Students: Placement for School Stability](#)
- [Children and Youth Experiencing Homelessness: An Introduction to the Issues.](#)

--[Dayna Straehley](#) covers best practices for Title I and other school funding issues for LRP Publications.

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