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Prioritizing the Delivery of Services to Homeless Students Who Also Have Special Needs

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This thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Honors in the Discipline in  
Education

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### **Abstract**

In the United States there are 234,506 children who are homeless and also identified as having special needs within the 2015/2016 school year. This population experiences extensive biological, psychological, social, and academic needs (Black & Hoeft, 2015; Chow, Mistry, & Melchor, 2015; Gargiulo, 2006; Hernandez Jozefowicz-Simbeni & Israel, 2006). Schools face varied challenges of barriers such as properly identifying students and staff and funding issues (Bowman, et al., 2008; Gargiulo, 2006; Hernandez Jozefowicz-Simbeni & Israel, 2006), while families struggle with issues such as time constraints and high stress levels (Chow, Mistry, & Melchor, 2015; Hernandez Jozefowicz-Simbeni & Israel, 2006). While the challenges of both schools and families have been identified in the research, less is known about the best methods of delivering the complex array of services needed by this population of students. Therefore, this study will utilize a qualitative, case study design to investigate the best methods of prioritizing the delivery of multi-layered services for homeless students who have disabilities.

## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction**

An eleven-year-old girl wakes up every day with uncertainty of what the day will bring. She goes to school seeking refuge from the struggles of her daily home routines, only for those hardships to be thrust back upon her when she walks back to the place she resides at the end of the school day. Dasani, a homeless child, is responsible for taking care of six younger siblings in a one-room “apartment” located within a homeless shelter, while her parents search for work and money (Elliott, 2013).

According to the National Center for Homeless Education’s federal data summary, there were 1,304,803 recorded homeless students enrolled in the 2015/2016 public school year in the United States (National Center for Homeless, 2017). This is about 2% of the total number of public school students (Public School, 2016). Related to this statistic, in 2014, approximately 20% of school-aged children in the United States lived in poverty (Family Characteristics, 2016). This statistic is born out by Dasani and her family, who have been homeless for three years due to impoverished conditions (Elliott, 2013). Often times, as shown through Dasani’s family, the outcome for some families living in extreme poverty is homelessness.

The term “homeless children” encompasses a variety of definitions. Among these definitions, children living within public or private shelters are considered to have inadequate shelter to meet their needs. This includes places not designed for regular living arrangements, such as cars, motels, campgrounds, etc. In relation to shelters, children living with a parent within a transitional housing program or with relatives/friends due to inadequate housing are also considered to be homeless. “On the street” children, or children moving from place to place such as runaways or being forced from their homes, may be living in temporary shelters or in no place

at all. The term “homeless children” relates to these children as well, as they wait for assistance from social services, if it is ever received (Pennsylvania’s, 2016).

“During the 2014-15 School Year, 17,678 public school districts operated and enrolled students. Of those districts, 93% reported data on students experiencing homelessness” (National Center for Homeless, 2017). Despite the high number of districts reporting data on students experiencing homelessness, the very fact of their homelessness as well as their academic and social emotional needs can go unnoticed. “Many studies have found that in addition to logistical and procedural barriers to school access, homeless children experience physical, developmental, mental health, and educational problems at much greater rates than national norms” (Tobin, 2016, p. 2).

In addition to the learning and developmental issues, homeless students often must face peer ridicule and derision due to the stigma around being homeless in the United States. Dasani and her siblings are often called “shelter boogies” by their peers in a derogatory way, meaning they live in the homeless shelter. They are known as the neighborhood outliers. Dasani’s initial reactions to the name-calling was to defend her siblings and herself through a fight response. As a result, attention was drawn to her behavior rather than her academic and social emotional needs (Elliott, 2013).

The stigmas arising among homeless children are often doubled when homeless students are also affected by a disability. The population of homeless students who also are challenged with a disability creates an even narrower statistic among public school students. Within the 2015/2016 school year, there were 234,506 students of the 1,304,803 homeless children identified as requiring special needs through the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. Children with disabilities formulate the largest subgroup of homeless students; just around 18%

of the entire homeless student population (National Center for Homeless, 2018). These students are often faced with peer stigmas associated with both homelessness and disability. They may also present an array of physical, social and emotional needs related to homelessness, as well as academic special needs due to their disability. Because of these intertwining struggles, educators must accurately identify and address the needs of this unique population in order to motivate them to achieve their full potential. This goal is not without its challenges. Gargiulo (2006) emphasizes that this group of students require “coordinated and collaborative efforts between human/social service agencies and the education community at large” (p. 3). The problem, however, is that schools often do not possess the multifaceted resources required to meet the needs of children who are homeless and have special needs. In order to do so, schools must have the means to correctly identify the population, identify needs, and coordinate the multi-tiered resources to meet these needs. Furthermore, the literature has not always been clear in delineating those needs, identifying the evidence-based practices needed by these students and their families at various grade levels, and finding best methods of prioritizing delivery of the needed resources.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Literature Review**

When analyzing the literature related to the double-stigma of homelessness and disability, it is important to note the two major laws associated with this population. The McKinney-Vento Education of Homeless and Youth Assistance Act in concordance with the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act identify students of this population to receive the most appropriate and inclusive education possible within the public school system.

As amended by the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) in 2016, the McKinney-Vento Act addresses the academic needs of homeless students within the education system. The act requires states to provide the same opportunities to homeless students to be as academically successful as other students. Through this law, homeless students should be held to the same academic achievement standards within public schools, as enforced through State and Local Educational Agencies (Office of Secondary and Elementary Education, 2016).

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, the second law applied to this population, categorizes students into various special needs services. As amended most recently in 2014, IDEA includes five major provisions to meet the academic needs of children with disabilities. These children are given the right to a free, and appropriate public education. In addition to this, children with disabilities have the right to an appropriate evaluation in which all evaluators are knowledgeable and the tests are nondiscriminatory. Children are required to have an individualized education plan (IEP), an official document written and revised following the law. It also states that accommodations and supports for academic success must be provided in the least restrictive environment. Both parents and students need to be present when the decisions are made during the IEP meeting when decisions are made about placement and

education supports. Lastly, procedural safeguards are set in place to protect the legal rights of both the child and his/her family (Connecticut, 2009).

The McKinney-Vento Act and IDEA stipulate the legal requirements that schools must follow when providing homeless students and students with disabilities a free and appropriate public education that is equal to the academic standards for fellow students. However, a number of researchers (Black & Hoefft, 2015; Chow, Mistry, & Melchor, 2015; Gargiulo, 2006; Hernandez Jozefowicz-Simbeni & Israel, 2006) question whether or not schools are providing the necessary resources and accommodations for this unique population to the full extent that these two laws require, and note the challenges schools face when serving this group of students and their families (Bowman, Burdette, Julianelle, & National Association of State Directors of Special Education (NASDSE), 2008).

As Gargiulo (2006) describes, “Schools are often ill-equipped to meet the multifaceted problems associated with homelessness” (p. 360). When a disability is added to the extensive list of needs of a homeless child, that list expands even further. This population’s needs can be classified into four categories: biological, psychological, social/emotional, and academic.

Because children’s bodies are constantly changing, their biological needs become a significant in order for them to develop psychologically, socially, emotionally, and academically. Black and Hoefft (2015) describe the impact of the environment surrounding a child who is homeless, and the prolonged effects stressful living situations have upon the brain. This includes the interruption of executive functions such as decision-making and memory retention, as well as learning. Children who also have a disability are more deeply affected by these interruptions in brain development as they already struggle to learn within a classroom. In addition, the overall growth and development of a child can be interrupted, causing areas of concern in



“speech/language development, fine and gross motor skills, social/emotional maturity, and cognitive deficits among other problems” (p. 358). Health problems can arise from the persistent mobility and unhygienic living conditions a homeless child experiences (Gargiulo, 2006).

Because of this frequent mobility, psychological needs are also interrupted and can cause challenges in day-to-day living among children who are homeless. According to Black and Hoefl (2015), during early childhood, there is a greater vulnerability to extreme stress and the psychological issues that arise because of its effects. The transitioning of children who are homeless often leave them with potential attachment issues and challenges in forming relationships with the people in which they come in contact. This prolonged stress of poverty and homelessness increases the risk for negative health outcomes, such as mental health disorders. Toxic stress, a type of stress in which there are multiple stressors, is also at an increased risk in children who are homeless due to “increased family transitions, unresponsive caregiving, community violence, and lack of social support” (p. 16). This toxic stress, when paired with a disability, further intensifies a child’s ability to be actively learning within a classroom.

Children of this population tend to experience high levels of social stress as well, due to feelings of isolation. Their social needs are impact their sense of belonging, safety and security within the school setting. Chow, Mistry, and Melchor (2015) describe the constant humiliation children who are homeless face through teasing and bullying. Children are more likely to feel a sense of insecurity due to being without a home, as well as disruptions in friendships and relationships. This can lead to experiences of “stress, depression, anxiety, worries, a sense of isolation, withdrawal, aggression, antisocial behavior, and substance abuse” (Hernandez Jozefowicz-Simbeni & Israel, 2006, p. 38). The double stigma of being homeless and having a

disability intensifies due to social issues such as these that leave children feeling like an outcast among their peers.

In order to meet the academic needs of children who are homeless and have a disability, it is imperative to also meet their biological, psychological, and social emotional needs. For example, Hernandez Jozefowicz-Simbeni and Israel (2006) state that “attention to children’s social and emotional development is critical because it has important implications for academic success and lifelong learning” (p. 643). If these needs are addressed, then these children are better able to focus in the classroom. Meeting these academic needs, however, is a challenge within this specific population. These children are entitled to the support guaranteed under IDEA and those supports must be delivered in a timely and consistent manner. The delivery of these supports are often fragmented and disrupted due to frequent mobility associated with homelessness (Gargiulo, 2006). According to Hernandez Jozefowicz-Simbeni and Israel (2006), “homeless students are more likely to experience low achievement test scores, poor grades, education disability, school behavior problems, grade retention, truancy, and school dropout” (p. 39). Because of all these potential risks, this population’s academic needs become even more crucial to attain. As Gargiulo (2006) notes, “Meeting the needs of young children who are homeless is not the duty of any one individual; rather, it is a responsibility accepted and shared by everyone in the school culture” (p. 360).

A few studies (Bowman, et al., 2008; Gargiulo, 2006; Hernandez Jozefowicz-Simbeni & Israel, 2006) analyzed the implications of implementing the IDEA and McKinney-Vento laws, finding that it is extremely difficult for schools to identify the needs of this population. Hernandez Jozefowicz-Simbeni and Israel (2006) attribute these difficulties to the minimal awareness of the McKinney-Vento Act itself, and its policy implications which schools must

enact and follow. If schools are unaware of the policies that they are mandated to follow, the children suffer as a result. Furthermore, oversight to ensure that schools are following the mandates of the law contribute to the negative continuation of identification issues of children who are homeless and also have special needs. “There is not a consensus to determine what specific data local agencies need to make decisions for this population” (Bowman et al., 2008, p. 6). Therefore, data systems are inconclusive when determining the exact number of students who identify within this population. (Bowman et al, 2008).

In addition, students who are homeless are constantly moving due to housing availability further complicating schools’ ability to maintain accurate records and meet the unique needs of this population. “Consequently, their education is often fragmented, disrupted, and in some instances, outright terminated” (Gargiulo, 2006, p. 359). Because of this disruption, proper identification of children who are homeless and have special needs is extremely difficult for a school to accurately determine. When children with a disability are homeless and move to a different school or district, the transfer of their IEP or IFSP records may be delayed. This then prevents a child from receiving appropriate educational services in a consistent manner. It is also difficult for schools to continue proper services when working with families who do not have secure contact information (Bowman, et al., 2008).

Furthermore, many districts experience large staff turnovers, as well as high staff-to-student ratios (Hernandez Jozefowicz-Simbeni & Israel, 2006). Due to staff turnovers, children in this population may not be receiving the appropriate educational services they require. One teacher may understand a specific student identified under this population, but if they leave the school, new personnel need time to fully grasp the student’s academic needs, preventing the student from receiving quick access to an appropriate education. Meeting the needs of each

student in a school also poses a challenge due to a high number of students and a limited number of staff. Children who entail extra attention, such as children who are homeless and also have a disability, suffer due to the loss of extra assistance within the school setting.

Funding in a number of districts also impinges on a school's ability to fully address the broad range of needs that homeless students and their families involve (Hernandez Jozefowicz-Simbeni and Israel, 2006, p. 40). When a student who is homeless and also has a disability is enrolled in a school, the school requires funding for both special education services and non-related services to provide that child with an appropriate education. Schools are often times not provided with the amount of funding they demand to meet the needs of this unique population (American Speech-Language-Hearing Association, 2017).

Not only do schools struggle to meet the needs of students who are homeless and have a disability, but families also struggle in meeting the needs of their children. Hernandez Jozefowicz-Simbeni and Israel (2006) describe how "several risks and barriers encountered by homeless students can be linked to the struggles of their parents and to family functioning" (p. 39). A few studies (Chow, Mistry, & Melchor, 2015; Hernandez Jozefowicz-Simbeni & Israel, 2006) show how parental distress can cause multilayered effects, both academic and non-academic, on a child's development. Families become less responsive to their child's academic obligations due to the complexity and struggles of homelessness through the prioritization of meeting basic needs as opposed to higher level special needs, as a child who has a disability requires. IEP meetings can also become stressful for families due to the technical nature of the meeting and the recommendations the IEP team may have for a family. When a family's focus is on meeting basic needs, it is very challenging to focus on meeting their child's academic demands, especially if they require financial obligations (Chow, Mistry, & Melchor, 2015).

Furthermore, the time constraints affect the degree to which how families can collaborate with a school to meet their child's academic needs. Hernandez Jozefowicz-Simbeni and Israel (2006) note how difficult it is for families to attend IEP meetings due to jobs or challenges in finding adequate childcare for other children. Parents or guardians could be released from work at inconvenient times for both attending IEP meetings and even assisting their child with academics at home. Attending IEP meetings also becomes difficult for families when there is a lack of transportation to get to the school. When a family cannot attend an IEP meeting, in which they need to be present in order for the child to receive services, the child suffers and cannot be as academically successful as they could be (Hernandez Jozefowicz-Simbeni & Israel, 2006).

In summary, the large number of children who are homeless and disabled experience extensive biological, psychological, social, and academic needs (Black & Hoeft, 2015; Chow, Mistry, & Melchor, 2015; Gargiulo, 2006; Hernandez Jozefowicz-Simbeni & Israel, 2006). Schools face varied challenges of (Bowman, et al., 2008; Gargiulo, 2006; Hernandez Jozefowicz-Simbeni & Israel, 2006) while families struggle with (Chow, Mistry, & Melchor, 2015; Hernandez Jozefowicz-Simbeni & Israel, 2006). While the challenges of both schools and families have been identified in the research, less is known about the best methods of delivering the complex array of services needs by this population of students. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to determine the best methods of prioritizing the delivery of multi-layered services for homeless students who have disabilities.

## **Chapter Three**

### **Methodology**

This investigation involved examining responses from five stakeholders in an urban school district, including a high school principal, middle school principal, district home-school visitor, high school guidance counselor, and director of special education. Interviews encompassed questions relating to district policies and procedures in working with students who are homeless and also have special needs, and prioritization of responding to the unique needs of these students. Responses were analyzed to determine common themes among those interviewed in working with this population.

### **Approach and Design**

A qualitative, case study design was used to conduct the investigation. According to Leedy and Ormrod (2013), case study can be defined as “a type of qualitative research in which in-depth data are gathered relative to a single individual, program, or event, for the purpose of learning more about an unknown or poorly understood situation” (p. 100). There is limited, unclear research representing the population of students who are homeless and have special needs. Because of this, a qualitative case study design identified with my project. This design allowed data collection and interpretation from specific individuals in the field familiar with this unique population of students, and offered the means to examine documents used to serve this population. A case study also assisted in gaining a further understanding of specific viewpoints, while identifying evidence-based practices needed by these students and their families at various grade levels, and finding best methods of prioritizing delivery of the needed resources.

### **Setting and Sample**

This study analyzed responses of five key stakeholders in the public school setting in working with students who are homeless and have special needs. Open-ended, semi-structured interviews took place within the school setting, following the criteria for a qualitative case study.

The study was set in a small, urban district in south central Pennsylvania. The selected district has four schools and 1,362 total students enrolled, ranging from kindergarten through twelfth grade. Females are represented at 48.61% and males are represented at 51.69% of the district population. The dominant ethnicity of the school district is Caucasian, at 57.86%, while students of Hispanic ethnicity represent 27.39% of the district population. Other ethnicities are also represented in smaller numbers, including African American at 8.3%, Multi-Racial at 5.73%, and Asian and Native Hawaiian representing less than 1% of the student population.

Of all students enrolled, 65.71% of students are determined as being “economically disadvantaged”, according to Pennsylvania School Performance Profile, and 21.07% have special needs (Pennsylvania School Performance Profile, 2018). Around 3% of the entire district population is homeless, with 30% of those homeless students having an Individualized Education Plan. Because of the extensive numbers of “economically disadvantaged” and students with special needs, this district was selected for this case study.

The five stakeholders selected to participate in the study were directly or indirectly involved in developing and/or implementing the district policies and procedures in working with students who are homeless and also have special needs. Participants selected included a high school principal, a middle school principal, a district home-school visitor, a high school guidance counselor, and the director of special education.

These individuals were selected because of their personal and professional knowledge in prioritizing the needs of students who are homeless and have special needs. They are referenced under pseudonyms as Mark Miller (high school principal of the district), Jennifer Jones (middle school principal of the district), Carrie Cane (district home-school visitor), Ann Andrews (high school guidance counselor), and Jana Johnson (director of special education).

### **Data Collection**

To complete the qualitative case study, I conducted onsite interviews with designated stakeholders within the selected school district. Face-to-face interviews, lasting approximately 45 minutes, followed a protocol of seven open-ended questions (See Appendix A), that facilitated detailed, open-ended responses of participants' personal viewpoints. Creswell (2014) describes these types of interviews as "ideal for participants who are not hesitant to speak, who are articulate, and who can share ideas comfortably" (p. 218). Interview questions focused on individual experiences and understandings of prioritizing the unique needs of students who are homeless and have special needs, and how these understandings affect students across the school district. Follow up questions were posed to elaborate meaning of interviewees responses to the protocol question.

In order to collect the data from interviews, selected participants were contacted at least one week prior to the scheduled interview. Participants were given a copy of the study's abstract and informed consent form to allow time to review the purpose of the study in brief detail and prepare for the interview. The district superintendent was given a copy of the site consent form to sign by Jennifer Jones (middle school principal of the district). Confidentiality information was included in both the informed consent and site consent forms (See Appendix B and C).



Participants were assured all information provided would be kept confidential and not shared with anyone besides the thesis faculty advisor, and that all data would be destroyed upon completion of the project in May, 2018. Participants were also informed that neither they nor their district name would be mentioned within the final project, and personal names would be listed under pseudonyms. All participants signed the designated forms prior to the interview.

After all consent forms were signed, one-on-one interviews were conducted. Interviews were audio recorded while simultaneously taking brief notes with all participants at one of the district building convenient to each interviewee. The first couple questions related to experiences within the school district of participants meeting the identified needs of students who are homeless and have special needs, also taking into consideration community involvement and opportunities to assist this population. After this, questions then related to the laws needed to be followed and service methods set in place to meet the needs of this population of students, as well as their families. The last questions related to personal experiences and viewpoints in consistently meeting the needs of these students, and participants' opinions on how processes and procedures could be improved, if at all. Finally, official documents such as the Homeless Student Intake Form (See Appendix D) in addition to Individualized Education Plans were examined to further understand the processes and procedures in working with students who are homeless and also have special needs. Creswell (2014) explains, “[documents] provide the advantage of being in the language and words of the participants” (223).

### **Data Analysis**

After the interviews were conducted, I transcribed the recordings and added the personal notes taken during the interviews to set apart each stakeholder in their views on the topics

discussed. As Creswell (2014) states, “organization is especially important when you combine data from several sources into one file for analysis” (p. 169). Through this method, I was able to identify quotations and phrases said among participants. Having transcriptions of each interview made it beneficial to identify common themes emerging among participant responses, assisting in identifying what participants deemed most important in working with the unique population of students who are homeless and have special needs. The transcription also assisted in identifying uncommon themes, signifying what is not as commonly known across the district.

### **Trustworthiness**

Steps were taken to ensure validity and trustworthiness of this study. Creswell (2014) describes these terms as, “means that the researcher determines the accuracy or credibility of the findings through strategies such as member checking or triangulation” (p. 259). These methods clarify that the researcher asks participants about the accuracy of findings and involving participants pertaining to multiple perspectives on the research topic.

Both forms of validity can be applied to this case study. Prior to the project beginning, I was very intrigued and driven by assisting the population of homeless students. After researching, I realized the population of those who are homeless but also have special needs is an even more unique and interesting population. I immersed myself in the research through an extensive literature review prior to conducting the study, determining the needs of this population and the issues related to reaching those needs.

The school district selected to participate in the study was a district I had been involved in within fieldwork. This allowed me to understand a few policies and procedures of the district before conducting the interviews. When the research and case study began, I fully immersed

myself within the interviews and determining common themes among a district containing a significant amount of students meeting the criteria of the interested population. Interview questions developed pertained to the already determined research, as well as aiming to answer questions not seen in prior research. Questions asked participants to draw upon information based on personal experiences in order to assist in answering my original research question. The findings from the collected data led me to determine what works well in meeting the needs of students who are homeless and have special needs, as well as what could be adjusted, across grade levels within a specific small, urban school district.

## **Chapter 4**

### **Results**

The findings from this study were analyzed from two major sources of data. The first major source of data was collected from interviews with five major stakeholders: a high school principal (Mark Miller), a middle school principal (Jennifer Jones), the district home-school visitor (Carrie Cane), the high school guidance counselor (Ann Andrews), and the director of special education (Jana Johnson). Common themes emerged across these interviews in response to district policies and procedures in working with students who are homeless and have special needs. The second major source of data was collected through analysis of various documents used in evaluating and assessing homeless students who also have special needs.

#### **Role of Home-School Visitor**

Because of the close-knit community culture of the district, all of the participants emphasized the critical role that a home-school visitor plays in addressing the complex needs of students who are homeless and have special needs. Jennifer Jones commented specifically on the roles the home-school visitor plays throughout a homeless student's academic day:

As part of her position she will go ahead and get gift cards and things to help try and help the families. She'll hook them up with connections for housing and anything that we can do for them to help them. As far as transportation, she can get them a place to stay and then get them transportation to school until they can get back on their feet and find a place to live, and she will help connect them with community aid and such (Middle School Principal).

The home-school visitor, Carrie Cane, described her roles as the district home-school visitor, which included: being the school social worker, attendance work, making home visits, holding SAIP (Student Attendance Improvement Plan) meetings, working with Children and Youth, making referrals to other agencies, working as a form of assisted communication between the district and families, working with the community to run campaigns and drives, begin the foster care point of contact for the district, assisting the special education department in obtaining parental signatures for IEPs, attending SST meetings, being the SAP (Student Assistance Program) coordinator, is on the district emergency response team, and provides transportation for students and families, as needed. Carrie Cane commented on her role, stating:

I think there is a real strength [in my position], as much as it's crazy and I don't do a great job in writing everything down, I know the families. That personal connection.

There is more to [this position] than is quantifiable. You get to know the families and they're going to feel supported by the district (Home-School Visitor).

This personal connection assists Carrie Cane in reaching families as needed to attend IEP meetings and other related services for students who are homeless and have special needs. Ann Andrews further elaborated on this, describing Carrie Cane as someone who will go to the houses of families when she, or anyone, cannot get ahold of parents/guardians by telephone. "I always refer to [Home-School Visitor] because she hears what's going on with families in the community, and knows how to contact them."

The Home-School Visitor organizes multiple arrangements for students and their families, as noted by participants. Jana Johnson commented on this, describing how the role "is our first connection to work with the family." Because of the necessary accommodations needed for students who are homeless and have special needs, the Home-School Visitor was described

across all participants to be an extremely important role across a small, urban, public school district.

### **Close-Knit School Community**

The close-knit community of the school also facilitated the ease with which communication could occur among the stakeholders. All participants mentioned the close school community as having a positive effect among students who are homeless and have special needs. High School Principal Mark Miller described the district as, “Unique in that we’re one school district that serves one community.” He elaborated further in saying the district uses a “collaborative approach” in working as a team in order to work effectively in meeting the needs of all students, including the population of students who are homeless and have special needs.

To describe this community network in further detail, Jana Johnson stated, “One of the biggest strengths we have here is that we like one huge family. We’re all very interconnected. There’s only a handful of administration, but we all do multiple roles” (Director of Special Education). These roles help each stakeholder to work well with one another to determine what is best for all students.

Home-School Visitor Carrie Cane elaborated further, stating, “We are all doing a lot with a little.” She described this to mean that even though the district has little resources and funding, district stakeholders do as much as they can to make sure they are meeting the needs of all students. This collaboration is shown during monthly Student Support Team (SST) meetings, where teachers, guidance counselors, the home-school visitor, and principals come together to assess the needs of individual students and what the district can do to support them. All participants described the SST model as a strength the district possesses in meeting those needs.

Jennifer Jones described this model as the main reason as to why processes and procedures move quickly in working with this population of students.

Jana Johnson agreed with these descriptions on the close-knit community. She described specifically the needs of students who are homeless and have special needs. “The emotional and social needs of children have continued to increase with my years in education. It keeps getting younger and younger. There’s limited resources, especially the younger ones. They’re dealing with so much stuff” (Director of Special Education).

Because of these growing, intensified needs, Ann Andrews described how everyone in the district will work together to help any student as needed:

When we start noticing drops in grades or absenteeism or discipline referrals, we know something is going on. So then we talk to each other via group emails and work together to overcome obstacles (High School Guidance Counselor).

Participants described that this close-knit community really allows immediate action to be taken in order to help each student as quick as possible. This specifically relates to students who are homeless and have special needs, for their needs often must to be met immediately due to the complex nature of their home lives.

### **Surrounding Community Network**

Through a formal network connecting faith, businesses, hospitals, physicians, a safety net was established for these families and children. All participants described community connections as highly beneficial in meeting the needs of all students, especially those who are homeless and have special needs. Mark Miller described the community as, “A very tight-knit group and people are willing to help each other when there’s a need.” To elaborate on this,

middle school principal, Jennifer Jones, highlighted specific examples of this community atmosphere:

It's groups like the Foresters, the Elk's Club, the Lion's Club, we have a local business man who has a garbage disposal company. He's very involved in the community, always is giving money. We have a lot of people. Even businesses that are outside of the borough limits will often help us, like Weis and Musser's. So we have a lot of community support, and we need it (Middle School Principal).

She further explained district involvements with community agencies allow processes to move quicker, such as getting assistance for families who are homeless. She described the processes to take much longer if these community resources and connections were not already set in place.

The home-school visitor, Carrie Cane, works frequently with the community to provide resources to students and their families. She has connections with multiple churches who donate money and resources to the district and the families that need it, such as coat and sneaker drives. Carrie Cane uses this money to provide needed resources to families, such as gas cards, clothing, and food. "We are a high-need community with a lot of good connections."

Jana Johnson described these community connections as a huge tribute to successfully working with students who are homeless and have special needs. "If we weren't able to work together and support each other to get what the kids need, we wouldn't be able to do what we need to do" (Director of Special Education). The community and the school work well together to support these students and their families, specifically through programs run by the local library police force. More specifically, Ann Andrews, the High School Guidance Counselor, described a local rapper in community who created a Vision Program (a mentoring program) in



which he works with students on music and hangs out with them after school. She described him as a positive role model for all students.

Jana Johnson described the importance of these relationships: “You have to have a good relationship with your community partners and business partners” (Director of Special Education). She claimed processes and procedures for working with students who are homeless and have special needs would not be expedited to the extent in which they are in this school district if these partnerships were not in place.

### **District-Created Programs**

An array of programs not designed for this population, but this population could benefit from these programs such as counseling services inside the schools, a peer-to-peer mentoring program, and SAP (Student Assistance Program). All participants described at least one of the district-created programs to prove beneficial to working with students who are homeless and have special needs, the largest support program being the school-based counseling.

[There is] counseling through the school that we have here every day and counselors get to see students, so that can also help them with the emotional piece and the psychological piece of being homeless or having a disability. They get that for free here (Jennifer Jones, Middle School Principal).

Jana Johnson also commented on the school-based counseling, describing it as a “huge successful resource for all families in the district” (Director of Special Education).

Peer-to-peer mentoring is a new program added to the district this year at the high school level. According to Mark Miller, this program, which involves juniors and seniors mentoring

freshmen and sophomores, has been very successful in “improving grades, decreasing discipline referrals, and increasing attendance rates” (High School Principal).

Ann Andrews commented on a few peer-to-peer mentoring programs she started herself this year as well in the ninth grade, including BOOM (Boys Overcoming Obstacles of Maturity) and FIRE (Females Inspiring Real Empowerment). These are after-school programs in which community members come in to speak, they go on field trips, and they start service projects as a group. These peer mentoring groups are not geared specifically to the population of students who are homeless and have special needs, but these students could benefit from its resources and activities in multiple ways.

The Student Assistance Program (SAP) is run by Carrie Cane (Home-School Visitor). This service allows her to work with the district and the community in finding resources for families who are in need. Mark Miller described SAP as a strong program across the district, for it allows for identification of needs early on, which helps families in the quickest way possible as a result.

Mark Miller reported that the district is constantly looking to add new and different programs to support the needs of every student in multiple ways, which is why students who are homeless and have special needs benefit from these crafted programs.

### **Document Analysis**

I independently examined the documents in place for students who are homeless and have special needs. This included the “Homeless Student Intake Form” (See Appendix D) and Individualized Education Plans. If a family is homeless upon entering the district or becomes homeless throughout the course of the school year, parents or guardians are asked to fill out the

“Homeless Student Intake Form”. This document asks parents/guardians to provide any information related to the current homeless status of the student(s) entering the district, precipitating event for homelessness, current living arrangements, and services provided or referrals made for the student(s). While the form does ask parents/guardians to place a checkmark next to any related services needed for the child, it does not provide any section besides “other” to list a special need or accommodation a homeless child may have.

Individualized Education Plans are written for each specific student based on their goals for the end of an academic year. Because of the specificity of this document for each student, they will receive services exactly how it is written on the IEP.

## **Chapter 5**

### **Conclusions**

The participants' responses to the posed topics and questions aligned with findings described within the literature review and yielded new information. Results from the study indicated that the best methods of prioritizing the multi-layered services to students who are homeless and have special needs requires understanding specific roles each stakeholder fills to make connections and provide resources to students. For example, the role of the home-school visitor and good communication across the district and community are not separate entities. The two interact and amplify the effects on students who are homeless and have special needs. The procedures followed require all stakeholders to play an important role in understanding and working well with one another. Procedures could be interrupted or slowed down without these key relationships across the district faculty, staff, and administration. Furthermore, the safety net determined by the extensive community connections provide these students with access to resources that may be lacking in other communities. In order to reach these students, school engagement is also necessary. Despite the fact that these students are homeless, they need more than their basic biological and academic needs to be met. They also need to be drawn into the school through integration of a variety of programs that promote school engagement and provide a counterbalance against the mobility of their family and potential marginalization as a student with special needs.

After comparing data found in the literature and this case study, many findings were confirmed. Hernandez Jozefowicz-Simbeni and Israel (2006) describe the importance of meeting all needs of students who are homeless and have special needs, specifically their social and emotional needs, in order to promote their academic success. Participants in this study were in

agreement, describing the extensive range of needs the school must fulfill to assist this population of students. Gargiulo (2006) describes the responsibilities placed on all stakeholders within the school culture in meeting the needs of these students. All participants within this case study agreed, and relied heavily on the importance of all school personnel working together to ensure each student, specifically those who are homeless and have special needs, receives services needed. The literature also discusses the significant risk these students have for dropping out and receiving low grades (Hernandez Jozefowicz-Simbeni and Israel, 2006). Participants in this study agreed, resulting in the district-created programs to lower this risk among this population. However, more research is needed to identify the effects of these district-created programs. Furthermore, research is inconclusive in determining the best ways to address these needs once a student or family enters the district. Contrary to the findings, Black and Heoft (2015) described a lack of social support to assist this population of students. In the case study, all participants described the extensive amount of social support, both within the school and the surrounding community, that was utilized to benefit this population of students.

### **Implications for Practice**

Given the finding associated with the significant role that the home-school visitor played in delivering services effectively, it is problematic that many school districts eliminated this position during tight budgetary times. These budget cuts could interfere with procedures related to the responsibilities a home-school visitor takes on. Overload on other pupil personnel increases the likelihood that these students will fall through the cracks. Additionally, it presents its own challenges of getting families to attend and fully participate in IEP meetings, because their main focus is to achieve basic food and shelter needs. If a school does not have the informal

network of support to meet the needs of these families and students that was present in this district, there is an even greater imperative for organizing a formal network of communication. In addition, despite being a small community with close ties, there is no guarantee small communities elsewhere will have the extensive safety net presented in this specific school district. In those communities that do not have the close-knit community ties, schools can still determine what district-wide services are available for all students to buffer against the risk of disengagement from school that is all too common in this population. This would include services such as mentoring programs, school-based counseling, and student assistance programs.

In larger, urban districts with higher numbers of students who are homeless and have special needs, the rates of mobility are increased. Therefore, it becomes even more important to filter through and organize a formal network of communication among stakeholders in the districts.

Finally, based on the findings from document analysis in this study, districts should consider blending information on both the “Homeless Student Intake Form” and Individualized Education Plans to best assist these students in acquiring the services they need.

### **Implications for Future Research**

Researchers (Black & Hoeft, 2015; Chow, Mistry, & Melchor, 2015; Gargiulo, 2006; Hernandez Jozefowicz-Simbeni & Israel, 2006) are in agreement that in order to provide the best procedures of multi-layered services to students who are homeless and have special needs, the child needs to be understood personally and within their family situation. Further investigation is needed to explore the impact of district-wide services, such as advisor/advisee and mentoring, on increasing rates of school engagement and decreasing school dropout rates for this population.

Additionally, the range of technology used to allow virtual attendance at IEP meetings and school meetings, such as using a shelter's computer to Skype or Facetime meetings and conferences, should be investigated to determine if these approaches to increase parents' involvement in their child's special education and academic needs.

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**Appendix A**  
**Interview Protocol**

1. What are the greatest strengths and challenges experienced by the school in delivering academic, social, emotional and psychological services to students who are homeless and also identified with special needs?
2. What changes, if any, has the district/school made to address the identified needs of this population, particularly in linking children and their families to services and supports beyond what the school can provide and creating a collaborative school/community network of support?
3. To what extent do the national, state and local laws, policies and procedures support or hinder the delivery of services to this population?
4. What delivery of service methods do you find to be the most and least expedient and beneficial for both these students and their families?
5. What has surprised you the most and least in attempting to deliver these services in a timely manner (\*How do you address the needs and requirements of IEP meetings with families who are homeless? \*Consistency in delivering IEP needs to students who are constantly in and out of school)?
6. If you had to propose a plan for smooth interconnections of services to meet the needs of this population, what would you identify as strengths already in place? What changes would you prioritize in your recommendations?
7. Are there any particular documents such as procedures/guidelines in place that would be available for me to look at to further clarify and provide background?

## **Appendix B Informed Consent Form**

Title of Research: Prioritizing the Delivery of Services to Homeless Students Who Are Also Disabled

Principal Investigator: Emily Nolte

### Purpose of Research:

Children who are homeless and have disabilities have a diverse and extended amount of needs to be provided by both schools and families. Schools face unique challenges in their efforts to support these students and their families. Numerous methods and procedures have been investigated by researchers with limited consensus on the most effective approaches. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to investigate various methods and procedures of a school in effectively meeting the needs of this population of students.

### Procedures:

By agreeing to participate in this study, I will be responding to a series of questions during an approximately 45-minute interview taking place on-site at my school. I will answer these to the best of my ability. I may withdraw at any time if questions make me uncomfortable. The investigator will be taking notes, as well as digitally recording my responses to the questions. In some cases, I may be contacted via email afterwards to clarify responses to the questions asked within the interview.

### Risks and Benefits

I understand that no risks or discomforts are anticipated from my participation in this study. I understand that I will be receiving no direct benefit from this study, but will hopefully receive the benefit of advancing research on best methods and procedures for serving homeless students who also have a disability. No payment will be made for participating in this study.

### Compensation

I understand that I will not receive any compensation for participating in this study.

### Confidentiality

The information gathered during this study will remain confidential with all records to be kept private and locked in a file during the study. Only the researchers listed on this form will have access to the study data and information. The results of the research will be published in the form of an undergraduate paper and may be published in a professional journal or presented at an Elizabethtown College research conference. In any report or publication, the researcher will not provide any information that would make it possible to identify me. Audio recordings will be terminated after final conclusions are made.

### Withdrawal without Prejudice

My participation in this study is strictly voluntary; refusal to participate will involve no penalty. If I initially decide to participate, I am still free to withdraw at any time.

Contacts and Questions

If participants have any questions concerning the research project, they may contact Emily Nolte (principal investigator) at [noltee@etown.edu](mailto:noltee@etown.edu) or Dr. Coyle (faculty advisor) at [coyleh@etown.edu](mailto:coyleh@etown.edu). Should participants have any questions about their rights as a participant in this research, they may contact the Elizabethtown College Institutional Review Board at (717) 361-1133 or the IRB submission coordinator, Pat Blough at [bloughp@etown.edu](mailto:bloughp@etown.edu).

**Statement of Consent:**

- I am 18 years of age or older.
- I have read the above information. I have asked questions and received answers. My organization is willing to participate in this study.
- A copy of this consent form has been provided to me.

Participant Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Investigator Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

## **Appendix C Site Consent Form**

Title of Research: Prioritizing the Delivery of Services to Homeless Students Who Are Also Disabled

Investigator: Emily Nolte

### Purpose of Research:

Children who are homeless and have disabilities have a diverse and extended amount of needs to be provided by both schools and families. Schools face unique challenges in their efforts to support these students and their families. Numerous methods and procedures have been investigated by researchers with limited consensus on the most effective approaches. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to investigate various methods and procedures of a school in effectively meeting the needs of this population of students.

### Procedures:

Participants will be contacted by the investigator through email to arrange an interview of approximately 45 minutes to an hour in length. Participants may withdraw at any time if questions make them uncomfortable. The investigator will be taking notes, as well as digitally recording responses to the questions. In some cases, the investigator may need to contact participants via email afterwards to clarify responses to the questions asked within the interview.

### Risks and Benefits

No risks or discomforts are anticipated from participating in this study. Interviewees participating in this study will receive no direct benefit from, but will hopefully receive the benefit of advancing research on best methods and procedures for serving homeless students who also have a disability. No payment will be made to individuals participating in this study.

### Compensation

There is no compensation for participating in this study.

### Confidentiality

The information gathered during this study will remain confidential and all records will be kept private and locked in a file during the study. Only the researchers listed on this form will have access to the study data and information. The results of the research will be published in the form of an undergraduate paper and may be published in a professional journal or presented at an Elizabethtown College research conference. In any report or publication, the researcher will not provide any information that would make it possible to identify me, my school, or district. Audio recordings will be terminated after final conclusions are made.

### Withdrawal without Prejudice

Participating in this study is strictly voluntary; refusal to participate will involve no penalty. Participants can withdraw from the study at any time. When possible, the data collected prior to withdrawal will be removed from the study.

Contacts and Questions

If participants have any questions concerning the research project, they may contact Emily Nolte (principal investigator) at [noltee@etown.edu](mailto:noltee@etown.edu), or Dr. Coyle (faculty advisor) at [coyleh@etown.edu](mailto:coyleh@etown.edu). Should participants have any questions about their rights as a participant in this research, they may contact the Elizabethtown College Institutional Review Board at (717) 361-1133 or the IRB submission coordinator, Pat Blough at [bloughp@etown.edu](mailto:bloughp@etown.edu).

**Statement of Consent:**

- I am in the position of authority to approve this study.
- I have read the above information. I have asked questions and received answers. My organization is willing to participate in this study.
- A copy of this consent form has been provided to me.

Name of Site \_\_\_\_\_

Site Representative Name (Printed) \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Site Representative Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Investigator Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

**Appendix D  
Homeless Student Intake Form**

Parent/Guardian Responsible for Enrolling Student: _____ _____
Relationship to Student: _____
Address: _____
Home Phone Number: _____ Cell Phone Number: _____
Name of Person Completing Intake Form: _____
Phone Number: _____

**Student Information**

Student Name	Date of Birth	Gender	School Building	Grade	Check Box indicating need	
					Book Bag	Immunizations

**Homeless Status**

Place an <b>X</b> next to the appropriate status for the homeless student	
<b>Living with family</b>	
<b>Separated from family</b>	
<b>Foster Care Pending</b>	
<b>Unaccompanied Youth</b>	
<b>Runaway</b>	
<b>Other</b>	

**Precipitating Event for Homelessness**

Place an <b>X</b> next to the appropriate precipitating event for homelessness	
<b>Abandonment</b>	
<b>Act of Nature</b>	
<b>Death of Parent/Guardian</b>	
<b>Domestic Violence</b>	
<b>Eviction</b>	



<b>Fire</b>	
<b>Incarceration of Parent/Guardian</b>	
<b>Other (specify)</b>	

**Living Arrangements**

Place an <b>X</b> in the box indicating the appropriate living arrangements, also provide name & date entered					
<b>Emergency Shelter</b>		<b>Shelter Name</b>		<b>Date Entered</b>	
<b>Transitional Housing</b>		<b>Program Name</b>		<b>Date Entered</b>	
<b>Hotel/Motel</b>		<b>Name of Hotel/Motel</b>		<b>Date Entered</b>	
<b>Street, car, Park, Abandoned Bldg.</b>					
<b>Doubled Up</b>					
<b>Other (specify)</b>					

**Services Provided and/or Referrals Made for Student**

Place an <b>X</b> next to the appropriate services provided and/or referrals made for students	
<b>Tutoring</b>	
<b>Counseling</b>	
<b>Medical/Dental</b>	
<b>Early Childhood Programs</b>	
<b>After School Programs</b>	
<b>Transfer of Records</b>	
<b>Other (specify)</b>	

I, \_\_\_\_\_ affirm that the residency information provided herein is true  
(Parent/Guardian Name) and accurate.

I, \_\_\_\_\_ have been advised of my rights and my child's rights under the  
(Parent/Guardian Name) McKinney Vento Federal Homeless Assistance Act.

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Signature of Parent/Guardian)

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Student's Name)

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Date)

*Any person making a false statement regarding residency will be in violation of section 42 U.S.C. §11431 of the Pennsylvania Basic Education (BEC). Violation of this could lead to disciplinary action, including dis-enrollment.*