PROJECT
HOPE
VIRGINIA

ADDRESSING THE CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM OF MCKINNEY-VENTO STUDENTS: POLICY ALTERNATIVES FOR VIRGINIA SCHOOLS

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Glossary

Chronic Absenteeism
Defined as missing 10% or more of the school year for any reason, including excused and unexcused absences. Chronic absenteeism is linked to poor academic outcomes and increased dropout rates.

McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act
A federal law that guarantees the right to a free, appropriate public education for children and youth experiencing homelessness. It requires school districts to remove barriers to enrollment and attendance.

McKinney-Vento Liaison
A designated staff member in each school district is responsible for identifying homeless students, ensuring access to services, and coordinating compliance with the McKinney-Vento Act.

Project HOPE–Virginia
Virginia's statewide program for the education of children and youth experiencing homelessness is housed at the College of William & Mary. Project HOPE provides districts with technical assistance, training, and support.

Early Identification
The process of recognizing and enrolling students experiencing homelessness before the school year begins to ensure timely access to transportation, school supplies, and support services.

School-Based Health Center (SBHC)
SBHCs are health clinics located on school campuses that provide students with access to medical, behavioral, and sometimes dental services. SBHCs reduce barriers to care and help reduce health-related absences.

Telehealth
Telehealth services use videoconferencing or other remote technology to connect students with healthcare providers. They can reduce absences by enabling timely medical treatment without requiring off-campus travel.

Title I, Part A
A federal funding program that provides financial assistance to schools with high numbers or percentages of children from low-income families. Districts may set aside Title I funds specifically for supporting homeless students.

Executive Summary

Each year, more than 20,000 students in Virginia experience homelessness. These students are over 20 percentage points more likely to be chronically absent than their peers—placing them at increased risk for academic failure, long-term instability, and continued poverty. Chronic absenteeism among McKinney-Vento students is driven by complex barriers, including inadequate early identification, unmet health and hygiene needs, and wide variation in school district capacity to provide timely and coordinated support.

This report, prepared for Project HOPE—Virginia's program for educating homeless children and youth—examines the root causes of chronic absenteeism among homeless students and evaluates four policy alternatives to reduce it. The analysis considers each alternative's effectiveness, equity, cost, and feasibility using qualitative insights and research-based evidence from Virginia and national case studies.

Key Findings

The four policy alternatives explored in this report fall into three categories:
- *Outreach Strategies***:** The Early Identification & Enrollment Initiative combines community-based enrollment events (like those in Henrico County) with low-cost micro-outreach activities (e.g., laundromat nights, targeted mailings) to increase early McKinney-Vento identification before the school year begins.
- *In-School Strategies***:** Two initiatives—school-based hygiene access and expanded health services—reduce absenteeism by removing barriers like lack of clean clothes or untreated illnesses, frequently preventing homeless students from attending school.
- *Administrative Strategy***:** The Data-Informed Attendance Team Initiative supports school-based teams that regularly monitor attendance data, coordinate interventions, and assign school-based mentors to students with persistent absenteeism.

While all four alternatives show promise, the Data-Informed Attendance Team Initiative emerged as the strongest across all evaluation criteria. It offers a cost-effective, equitable, and sustainable solution that builds internal school capacity to monitor attendance trends and intervene early. By rotating participation in attendance teams and assigning mentors to students who continue to struggle, this model spreads responsibility across staff, reduces the burden on McKinney-Vento liaisons, and ensures that students have consistent support.

Disclaimer

The author conducted this study as part of the program of professional education at the Frank Batten School of Leadership and Public Policy, University of Virginia. This paper is submitted in partial fulfillment of the course requirements for the Master of Public Policy degree. The judgments and conclusions are solely those of the author, and are not necessarily endorsed by the Batten School, by the University of Virginia, or by any other agency.

Acknowledgments and Dedication

I am deeply grateful to Professor Andrew Pennock for his continued guidance and support throughout the year. His thoughtful feedback and encouragement at every stage of this project have been instrumental in shaping both the analysis and my growth as a policy practitioner.

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Finally, I want to thank my former students, whose resilience and brilliance inspire me. This project is for them—and for all students who deserve an equitable opportunity to learn, grow, and thrive.

Honor Statement

On my honor as a student, I have neither given nor received unauthorized aid on this assignment.

Introduction

Each year, more than 20,000 students in Virginia experience homelessness—a number that reflects not only a housing crisis but an education crisis. Homeless students in Virginia are more than 20 percentage points more likely to be chronically absent than their peers, a disparity that undermines academic success and increases the likelihood of long-term instability. While the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act provides important legal protections, it does not guarantee the comprehensive support required to keep students consistently engaged in school.

In recent years, the Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) and Project HOPE have expanded efforts to identify and support homeless students. However, wide disparities in attendance and identification remain due to varying levels of district resources and capacity. Unhoused students are identified early in some districts and receive transportation, mentorship, and family engagement support. In others, liaisons are overburdened, resources are limited, and families remain unaware of their rights. These uneven conditions contribute to a lack of consistent attendance and limit educational opportunities for some of the most vulnerable youth in Virginia.

This report analyzes the barriers contributing to chronic absenteeism among McKinney-Vento students and proposes four evidence-based policy alternatives for improving attendance. The report evaluates each alternative across four criteria: effectiveness, equity, cost, and feasibility. The final recommendation is an intervention to support school districts in creating a system to identify and support McKinney-Vento students. This ensures that all students experiencing homelessness have an opportunity to succeed.

Problem Statement

In Virginia, over 20,000 students experiencing homelessness face disproportionately high rates of chronic absenteeism, which creates barriers to academic achievement and long-term stability (Duffield, 2024). Despite federal protections under the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, these students continue to face challenges due to gaps in early identification, inconsistent access to school-based supports, and wide variation in district capacity. With McKinney-Vento funding averaging just $97 per student in 2020, many districts lack the capacity and infrastructure to consistently address attendance barriers such as limited school engagement, inconsistent access to health and hygiene supports, and logistical challenges like transportation that disproportionately affect students experiencing homelessness (Federal and State Resources for Students Experiencing Homelessness, 2023). While Project HOPE supports compliance and provides resources to school districts, McKinney-Vento liaisons are often stretched thin, and school staff may lack the tools or training needed to identify and support at-risk students. As a result, many students experiencing homelessness go unrecognized or unsupported until they are already chronically absent—contributing to academic disengagement, lower graduation rates, and heightened long-term vulnerability.

Client Overview

Project HOPE serves as Virginia's Program for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth. It fulfills this role by ensuring compliance with the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act and providing school districts statewide technical assistance, professional development, and resources. Its mission—to guarantee equitable educational opportunities for homeless students—uniquely positions it to address the systemic barriers perpetuating chronic absenteeism and its detrimental effects on academic outcomes (*Homeless Children and Youth: Causes and Consequences – NCCP*, n.d.).

The increasing number of students experiencing homelessness in Virginia, coupled with rising rates of chronic absenteeism, highlights the urgency of Project HOPE's work. While the program has achieved considerable success in ensuring compliance with federal mandates, it recognizes that compliance alone does not meet the comprehensive needs of this population. For instance, many districts cannot implement robust support systems due to inadequate funding, staffing shortages, and insufficient educator training (Dawson, 2018). These gaps leave homeless students without the transportation, trauma-informed care, and consistent educational support they need to succeed.

Project HOPE's efforts are particularly crucial now as the lingering effects of the COVID-19 pandemic have exacerbated challenges for students experiencing homelessness. Disruptions to learning environments, increased housing instability, and growing inequities in resource access have heightened the risk of absenteeism, learning loss, and disengagement (Duffield, 2024). By addressing these challenges, Project HOPE fulfills its mandate and advances its broader commitment to educational equity and inclusion.

Furthermore, Project HOPE is uniquely positioned to advocate for systemic changes beyond individual school districts. Its expertise and statewide reach allow it to influence policies, advocate for targeted funding, and promote innovative solutions such as data-sharing protocols, tailored transportation programs, and comprehensive educator training. For example, in districts like Richmond Public Schools, Project HOPE has supported the development of dedicated teams to address homelessness. Scaling these successes across the state could transform the educational landscape for homeless students (Dawson, 2018).

In addition, Project HOPE's capacity to engage with community organizations and stakeholders positions it as a central actor in fostering partnerships that enhance support for homeless students. Collaboration with local agencies, shelters, and mental health providers can create a safety net that ensures these students receive holistic support, from transportation to academic assistance and mental health care. These partnerships are essential for addressing the multifaceted needs of homeless youth and preventing absenteeism (Duffield, 2024).

By leveraging its expertise, resources, and statewide influence, Project HOPE can address chronic absenteeism among homeless students.

Background on the Problem

Homelessness among students is a growing and often overlooked crisis in Virginia, with close to 20,000 students identified as experiencing homelessness each school year. This vulnerable population faces significant barriers to educational success, exacerbating cycles of poverty and instability. While the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, reauthorized under the Every Student Succeeds Act, guarantees these students access to a free and appropriate public education, limited funding leaves many critical gaps in support (Duffield, 2024). In 2020, the average funding for homeless students under McKinney-Vento was only $97 per student—a starkly insufficient amount to address these students' full range of challenges.

Source: U.S. Department of Education, Homeless Student Enrollment Data by Local Educational Agency School Year 2014–15.

Despite these federal protections, students experiencing homelessness frequently encounter unmet basic needs, transportation difficulties, health barriers, and a lack of trauma-informed or consistent adult support—factors that collectively contribute to disproportionately high rates of chronic absenteeism. In Virginia, this absenteeism has led to significant learning loss, lower test scores, reduced graduation rates, and an increased likelihood of continued housing instability into adulthood.
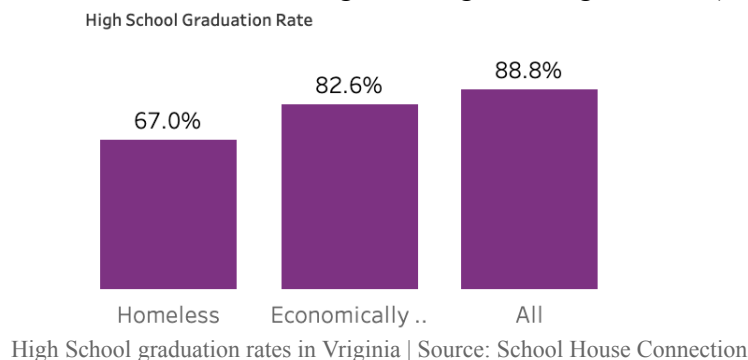
Systemic issues within the education system further compound these challenges. Homeless youth are frequently undercounted due to insufficient training for school staff, siloed data systems, and a lack of proactive identification practices (DiPierro et al., 2022). The stigma surrounding homelessness perpetuates a narrow public perception of the issue—often excluding children and families—leading to invisibility, particularly in rural and suburban areas where resources are even more limited than in urban settings. Marginalized groups, including Black, Latino, and LGBTQ+ youth, are disproportionately represented among the homeless student population and are often left without tailored interventions or adequate support systems.

The COVID-19 pandemic has further intensified these challenges. As schools transitioned to remote learning, many homeless students lost access to stable environments, critical resources, and consistent engagement. By 2021, chronic absenteeism among homeless students in Virginia had risen to 52%, compared to 30% for the general student population (Education for Students Experiencing Homelessness, n.d.). These numbers highlight the urgent need to address attendance—not simply as a symptom but as a lever for early intervention and long-term student success.

Tackling these challenges requires a multi-faceted and system-informed approach. Improved use of attendance data, cross-functional teams, and better integration of community partnerships are also critical to building the infrastructure that supports consistent engagement and academic success for McKinney-Vento students. These interventions, when implemented together, have the potential to reduce absenteeism, improve outcomes, and disrupt the cycle of youth homelessness in Virginia.

Consequences of the Problem

High rates of chronic absenteeism among students experiencing homelessness have consequences at the individual, school system, and societal levels. At the individual level, absenteeism contributes to learning loss, leading to lower test scores and higher dropout rates. Unhoused students are often more likely to be absent than their housed peers. This has long-term implications for housing, employment, and health stability. Research shows that students who miss just two days per month (roughly 18 days per year) are more likely to fall behind academically and are at an increased risk of not graduating from high school (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012).

High School Graduation Rate

67.0% 82.6% 88.8%

Homeless   Economically ..   All

High School graduation rates in Vriginia | Source: School House Connection

At the household level, chronic absenteeism can reflect the existing hardships that a family is facing. When students miss school due to health concerns, transportation issues, or basic unmet needs, families can be forced to make difficult tradeoffs such as lost work time or increased reliance on emergency services. In cases where youth are unaccompanied, missed school may result in disconnection from services, which makes students more likely to engage with the welfare or juvenile justice systems (Hirschfield, 2018). When chronic absenteeism goes unaddressed, it also has financial consequences at the school level, as many states, including Virginia, rely on average daily attendance formulas to allocate state and federal funding. Lower attendance can also reduce funding under Title I, Part A. This creates a cycle where under-resourced schools lose even more capacity to support their most vulnerable students.

From a societal perspective, the long-term financial cost of student absenteeism is considerable. Students who drop out are more likely to require public assistance, experience incarceration, and have lower lifetime earnings. One study estimates that each student who does not graduate from high school costs taxpayers an average of $292,000 over their lifetime in lost tax revenue and increased public service use (Levin et al., 2007). When chronic absenteeism goes unaddressed, schools may face reduced funding tied to average daily attendance formulas. This creates a cycle where under-resourced schools are further penalized.

For McKinney-Vento students in Virginia, chronic absenteeism is both a symptom of and a contributor to long-term instability. It limits educational attainment, deepens poverty, and hinders upward mobility. These consequences make reducing chronic absenteeism a legal and moral imperative and a necessary investment in educational equity and public well-being.

Evidence of Potential Solutions to Addressing Chronic Absenteeism among McKinney-Vento Students

Students experiencing homelessness are more likely to face homelessness than their housed peers due to systemic barriers, family instability, and limited access to school-based support. Various interventions have been used across the U.S. to improve school attendance for this population. There is limited research on the effectiveness of these interventions, specifically for students experiencing homelessness, so some research is focused on addressing chronic absenteeism for all students. This section reviews evidence on those strategies, with attention to the strength of findings, methodological rigor, and relevance to Virginia's educational and administrative context.

Supportive Incentives and Relationships

Supportive relationships have been shown to improve the attendance of students experiencing homelessness. Students experience an increased sense of belonging when they have a mentor in school who can help buffer the effects of instability. Programs that include mentorship, social work, or consistent adult engagement in the school environment show promising results across various contexts.

The "Finding Support & Significance at School" initiative combines mentorship, attendance monitoring, and relationship-building with students and families. Participants experienced improved attendance, highlighting the role of feeling a connection to school and personalized student support. (Bundshuh et al., 2021). Similarly, in New York City, school-based social workers trained to support homeless students were associated with improved attendance and emotional well-being (O'Hagan & Mirakhur, 2024). These professionals helped students navigate academic and personal challenges through consistent, targeted support.
A meta-analysis by Eklund et al. (2022) found that absenteeism interventions incorporating mentorship or other adult relationships were more effective than those focused solely on academic remediation or discipline. The presence of a trusted adult can play a critical role in helping students maintain school engagement, particularly when they face disruptions outside the classroom. These studies suggest that relationship-centered strategies can reduce absenteeism among highly vulnerable students.

Communication and Data Sharing

Communication and data tracking systems are essential for identifying and supporting chronically absent students, especially for students experiencing homelessness. In addition, school outreach, such as phone calls, text messages, or home visits, can help maintain contact with families and reinforce a student's connection to the school. In Providence Public Schools, researchers found that consistent and personalized communication from staff had measurable positive effects on attendance among at-risk students (National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance (NCEE), 2021).

In addition, access to recent attendance data disaggregated to include students identified as McKinney-Vento allows educators to identify students needing intervention before absenteeism becomes chronic. However, many school districts lack the data infrastructure to track attendance by McKinney-Vento status, limiting their ability to respond effectively. The *Homeless Student Absenteeism in America* report notes that while districts may report compliance data for federal purposes, this information is often unavailable or not visible at the school level, which delays intervention efforts (National Center for Homeless Education at SERVE, 2017).

Several states have begun addressing this gap. In Illinois, the state tracks attendance by McKinney-Vento status as part of its accountability system, and it provides districts with tools to monitor trends and tailor interventions. Kansas has implemented real-time dashboards and school-based attendance teams that meet weekly or biweekly to review student data and coordinate support. These teams include teachers, counselors, nurses, and administrators, and team members are intentionally rotated so that the majority of staff participate. This helps emphasize the importance of attendance among all staff and disperse the burden of meetings. Early findings from Kansas suggest that this integrated, team-based approach improves follow-through and leads to more timely responses to student needs.
Finally, the *Missing School, Missing Home* policy brief emphasizes that standardized attendance data—specifically disaggregated by housing status—can improve resource targeting and strengthen school responses to students facing housing instability (Erb-Downward & Watt, 2018). These examples show how school systems that combine communication strategies with data are better positioned to support students experiencing homelessness and reduce chronic absenteeism.

Family and Community-Based Outreach
Family and community engagement are essential components in reducing absenteeism among at-risk students. Schools that actively engage with families create a support system around the student that reinforces the importance of education and encourages regular attendance. The "School and Family Partnership" study demonstrates that when schools involve families in attendance efforts, students are more likely to attend consistently, even when facing significant life challenges (Capretta et al., 2024).

Community-based partnerships provide resources to support homeless students inside and outside of school. For example, Colorado has implemented partnerships with local organizations to provide after-school programs, mental health support, and other services that address the broader needs of homeless youth. These partnerships help stabilize students' lives and build community trust, making it easier for schools to engage families in attendance initiatives (Sullivan-Walker et al., 2017).

In Virginia, Henrico County has implemented summer enrollment events hosted near hotels with a high concentration of students. These events, which offer school supplies, food, and on-site enrollment support, led to a 14% increase in early McKinney-Vento identification and a 90% attendance rate for students identified before the school year. While the success of these events may be partially attributable to motivated families self-selecting into participation, they provide a valuable example of how early, community-centered engagement can reduce barriers and build school connections before chronic absenteeism takes root.

Hygiene and Basic Needs Access

The stigma associated with personal hygiene is a frequently cited reason why students experiencing homelessness avoid attending school in qualitative research. Several districts have piloted programs to expand access to showers and laundry machines in schools. In Salt Lake City, Utah, a high school that installed hygiene facilities for homeless students reported reductions in absenteeism and disciplinary incidents based on administrative records and school leader interviews. In Detroit Public Schools, the installation of in-school washers and dryers across the district corresponded with a 10 percentage point decrease in chronic absenteeism. However, no control group was used to isolate program effects (Winfrey, 2024).
Whirlpool's Care Counts™ program has provided school-based laundry facilities in over 100 schools, reporting that 73% of participating students improved their attendance after using the machines. Though based mainly on internal program data or anecdotal reporting, these findings are promising. However, peer-reviewed evaluations are limited, especially for rural districts.

School-Based Health Services

For students experiencing homelessness, absences related to health are an additional barrier to consistent school attendance. Several states have introduced school-based health centers (SBHCs) or partnered with telehealth providers to expand access to care for uninsured and underserved students. In North Carolina, the introduction of school-based telehealth services resulted in a 29% decrease in the likelihood of students becoming chronically absent and a reduction of 20 missed days per year among participating students (Sparks, 2023). A longitudinal study in Hawai'i found that adding SBHCs reduced chronic absenteeism by 3.9 percentage points after three years of implementation (Murphy & Neely, 2023). These studies use difference-in-differences and regression models to approximate causal impact, though challenges remain in measuring indirect outcomes such as parent work absences or access to ongoing care. Virginia faces particular constraints in this area due to its relatively high student-to-nurse ratio (1 nurse per 1,000 students), which exceeds national recommendations. Research from Massachusetts and California suggests that increased nurse staffing reduces absenteeism and leads to broader public savings: one study estimated that every $1 invested in school nursing yields $2.20 in reduced emergency care costs, parent productivity losses, and Medicaid expenditures (Wang et al., 2014).

Transportation Services

Transportation remains one of the most frequently reported barriers to school attendance for students experiencing homelessness. While federal law mandates transportation for McKinney-Vento students, the logistics and costs of this requirement often exceed local district capacity. Some states and districts have used specialized vans or rideshare partnerships to reduce absenteeism, but evidence of impact is primarily anecdotal or drawn from program-level evaluations. Because of high cost and implementation variability, few large-scale studies have assessed the isolated effect of expanded transportation services on attendance outcomes. As such, while transportation is a clear barrier, further research is needed to assess the cost-effectiveness and scalability of specific strategies.

Alternatives and Criteria for Evaluation

Overview

This section presents four evidence-based alternatives to address chronic absenteeism among students experiencing homelessness, organized into three categories: *outreach*, *in-school*, and *administrative strategies*. This framework reflects the different pathways through which support can be delivered to McKinney-Vento students based on where services are offered and how families access them:

- *Outreach strategies* bring services directly into the community, meeting families where they are to reduce barriers related to mobility, awareness, and trust.
- *In-school strategies* enhance the school environment by addressing unmet student needs, such as hygiene and healthcare, which often lead to absences.
- *Administrative strategies* strengthen systems, coordination, and staffing to support sustainable implementation of McKinney-Vento policies, especially in under-resourced districts.

Organizing the alternatives in this way allows for a more holistic understanding of how different types of interventions can work together: identifying students earlier, reducing practical barriers to attendance, and improving the capacity of schools and districts to meet student needs. Each alternative is evaluated using the following criteria: effectiveness, equity, cost, and feasibility.

This analysis considers four policy alternatives aimed at removing obstacles to attendance and improving school engagement for McKinney-Vento students:

1. *Outreach-McKinney-Vento Early Enrollment & Engagement Initiative:* A scalable model that combines large-scale community-based enrollment events, like those implemented in Henrico County, with low-cost, flexible micro-outreach strategies such as laundromat nights and personalized end-of-year communication. This approach helps districts of varying capacities identify homeless students before the school year begins and ensure timely access to school services.
2. *In-School-School-Based Shower & Laundry Access Initiative*: This initiative ensures students have reliable access to hygiene facilities, removing a key reason some students avoid attending school.
3. *In-School-School-Based Health & Telehealth Expansion*: Increasing access to healthcare services within schools, helping students manage physical and mental health needs that might otherwise keep them from attending.

4. *Administrative-McKinney-Vento Regional Support Structure & Community Resource Coordination*:Establishing regional coordinators to provide additional staffing, outreach, and service coordination, particularly for districts with limited capacity.

Criteria

1. Effectiveness in Reducing Chronic Absenteeism

The primary goal of each alternative is to increase school attendance among students experiencing homelessness by addressing barriers that contribute to chronic absenteeism. Alternatives will be evaluated for effectiveness based on the observed reduction in absenteeism rates among McKinney-Vento-identified students, measured against baseline data before implementation. Quantitative data sources will include school attendance records and disaggregated absenteeism reports. Qualitative data may be gathered from McKinney-Vento liaisons and student/family surveys to understand the impact of each intervention. Alternatives that result in a statistically and substantively significant decrease in absenteeism will be rated more highly.

2. Equity

Equity considers whether the alternative improves attendance outcomes equitably across geographic, demographic, and institutional differences. Some interventions may be more effective in urban or suburban districts, where infrastructure and partnerships already exist, while rural or high-poverty areas may face capacity limitations. This criterion evaluates whether an alternative includes diverse district contexts, especially those with historically limited resources. Measures will include geographic data on implementation, demographic breakdowns of students served, and qualitative reports on differential access or barriers. Alternatives that support statewide impact, particularly in under-resourced or rural districts, will be considered more equitable.

3. Cost

Cost evaluates the financial burden of implementation, including upfront investments, recurring expenses, and the availability of external funding. Alternatives will be assessed on their ability to leverage existing state and federal funding streams, such as Title I, Part A homeless set-aside funds, McKinney-Vento subgrants, Medicaid reimbursement (for health services), and potential corporate sponsorships. Programs requiring substantial infrastructure or staffing will be compared to those that use existing facilities or personnel. Lower-cost interventions that use scalable funding models and place minimal strain on local school budgets will be prioritized.

4. Feasibility

Feasibility captures the practical implementation challenges and the political conditions necessary for success. This criteria includes two dimensions:

- *Operational Feasibility*: Assesses how easily an intervention can be implemented within Virginia's school districts' existing infrastructure, staffing, and routines. Programs that use existing facilities (e.g., locker rooms for showers), personnel (e.g., McKinney-Vento liaisons, school nurses), and funding streams will be rated more highly. This dimension also considers variation across district types—urban, suburban, and rural—and whether a policy can be adapted to local capacity constraints.
- *Political Feasibility*: Evaluates the likelihood of support from key stakeholders, including district administrators, school boards, and state policymakers. Interventions that align with current policy priorities (e.g., reducing absenteeism, improving equity), have successful models in Virginia or other states, or are framed around widely supported values (e.g., student well-being, family engagement) are more likely to gain traction. Resistance may arise if an intervention is perceived as overly burdensome, unfunded, or at odds with local control.

Alternatives

The following section presents four policy alternatives organized into outreach, in-school, and administrative strategies and evaluates each using the above criteria. Each alternative includes a description of the intervention, supporting evidence, and an assessment of its expected performance regarding effectiveness, equity, cost, and feasibility. This structure is designed to help Project HOPE and the Virginia Department of Education identify which interventions are most impactful, scalable, and responsive to local district capacity.

Outreach Alternatives
Alternative 1: McKinney-Vento Early Enrollment & Engagement Initiative (Outreach)

Early identification is one of the most powerful tools available for reducing chronic absenteeism among students experiencing homelessness. Research shows that students identified under McKinney-Vento protections before the start of the school year are significantly more likely to receive transportation, meals, and academic services on time—and to attend school consistently. Yet many school divisions in Virginia, particularly rural or under-resourced ones, lack the capacity to engage in effective pre-year outreach or enrollment activities.

The Early Identification & Enrollment Initiative offers a flexible, two-tiered strategy to support school divisions in connecting with McKinney-Vento students before the school year begins. It is grounded in community engagement practices that reduce stigma, build trust, and connect families to services in an approachable setting.

Tier 1: Community-Based Enrollment Events

Modeled after Henrico County's summer cookout and school supply drive, this approach brings enrollment and identification directly to where families are living—hotels, motels, shelters, and transitional housing. These events offer:

- Free school supplies, hygiene kits, backpacks, and meals
- On-the-spot McKinney-Vento enrollment and school registration
- Transportation and meal sign-up
- Health screenings and referrals
- Engagement games and community partner booths (e.g., food banks, health departments)

Henrico's approach led to a 14% increase in early identification and an attendance rate of 90% for students identified before the school year began. While this high attendance rate may partially reflect a selection effect, families who attend summer events may already be more motivated or connected, early engagement still provides a critical opportunity to establish trust, coordinate services, and reduce common start-of-year disruptions. The model has since been replicated informally in other parts of the state. Pricing for the events:

Category	Description	Cost
Event Supplies	Tents, tables, promotional materials, signage	$3,000
School Supplies & Hygiene Kits	Backpacks, clothing, personal hygiene products	$10,000
Food & Beverages	Meals/snacks for families attending events	$3,000
Staffing & Outreach	Advertising, transportation to outreach sites, event coordination	$5,000
Total Cost Per District		$21,000

(Moors, 2022)

Source: Henrico County Schools

Tier 2: Micro-Outreach Strategies

For smaller or lower-capacity districts, the initiative also supports micro-outreach models that provide earlier touchpoints without requiring a large-scale event. These include:

- Hosting laundromat-based outreach nights with free laundry funded by school coin drives or community partners.
- Sending personalized outreach letters, flyers, or text messages to families with known housing instability at the end of the school year.
- Pop-up enrollment tables at food banks, libraries, grocery stores, or summer community events.

These smaller efforts are designed to be easily managed by a single liaison and to serve families who may not attend traditional school events due to stigma, work schedules, or transportation barriers.

Project HOPE could support implementation by creating a toolkit for hosting outreach events, sample flyers, permission forms, and partnership guides, and guidance on using Title I, Part A homeless set-aside funds, McKinney-Vento grants, or sponsorships (e.g., Dominion Energy, United Way). This support is especially important given the wide variation in district capacity. While some divisions can independently plan events, others may lack the staffing or infrastructure to initiate outreach without additional resources or templates.

Criteria
- ***Effectiveness*:** High. Research and field examples from Henrico show that early identification significantly improves school readiness and attendance among homeless students. By bringing enrollment and information directly to families before the school year begins, this initiative prevents early-year disruptions that lead to absenteeism.
- ***Equity*:** Moderate to high. The initiative's flexibility in offering both large-scale events and micro-outreach strategies means it can be adapted to meet the needs of both urban and rural districts. However, rural districts may require logistical support or regional coordination to fully implement community-based events.
- ***Cost*:** Moderate. For large-scale events, costs may include supplies, food, staff overtime, and outreach materials, which averages around $21,000 per district based on Henrico's reported costs. Micro-outreach strategies can be implemented for a fraction of that cost, especially with in-kind support or small set-aside allocations.
- ***Feasibility*:** Moderate. Larger, better-resourced divisions (like Henrico, Richmond, or Fairfax) can implement these models independently. Smaller districts may need guidance or support from regional partners. Because both tiers build on existing community spaces (like laundromats or shelters) and require no permanent infrastructure, they are highly scalable across Virginia.

In-School Alternatives

While outreach efforts focus on identifying and engaging McKinney-Vento students before the school year begins, in-school strategies aim to remove barriers preventing students from consistently attending once enrolled. Students experiencing homelessness often struggle with unmet basic needs, including minimal access to hygiene facilities or healthcare. This can lead to stigma, illness, and disengagement from school. The in-school alternatives outlined in this section focus on making schools more accessible, supportive, and responsive to the unique needs of McKinney-Vento students, ultimately reducing chronic absenteeism by increasing the incentives and ability for students to be present.

Alternative 2: School-Based Shower & Laundry Access Initiative

Students experiencing homelessness often face significant barriers to school attendance due to limited access to hygiene resources. A lack of clean clothes and regular showers can lead to social stigma, bullying, and discomfort, causing students to avoid school altogether. Research consistently shows that improving access to hygiene supports can positively impact school attendance and engagement. In Los Angeles, for example, a school implementing an on-campus laundry program found that students who previously skipped school due to self-consciousness about their hygiene began attending more regularly once they had access to washers and dryers (Li, 2024). At East High School in Salt Lake City, Utah, the installation of showers and laundry facilities served over 100 homeless students and their families, increasing school engagement and reducing absenteeism (This High School Installed Showers and Washing Machines for Its Homeless Students to Use, 2017). The Whirlpool Care Counts™ Program found that 73% of elementary students who were on track to be chronically absent improved their attendance after using on-campus laundry (Care Counts Statistics, n.d.). Similarly, Detroit Public Schools saw a 10 percentage point improvement in chronic absenteeism following the launch of a district-wide laundry initiative (Winfrey, 2024).

This initiative would pilot a shower and laundry access program in 10 Virginia middle and high schools, selected to reflect a mix of urban, suburban, and rural communities with high rates of McKinney-Vento-identified students. All Virginia middle and high schools must have showers in locker rooms, though these are rarely available outside athletic programs. This initiative would repurpose existing facilities to create structured, discreet access for McKinney-Vento students before or after school. Schools could implement privacy measures, such as shower curtains or partitions, and designate specific hours for use. To promote safety and confidentiality, school staff could coordinate access and monitor access by trusted personnel—such as athletic coaches or school nurses—who already work in those spaces.

In addition to restoring access to showers, schools could implement multiple models of laundry support based on their infrastructure and capacity:

- Installing washers and dryers in custodial or utility areas is a practical and cost-effective option for schools with available space. Districts could apply for support through programs such as Whirlpool Care Counts™ or Tide Loads of Hope to cover installation and supplies.
- Schools could also provide personal hygiene kits and laundry detergent for students to take home, a strategy already used in Henrico County.
- As an added support, schools may provide lockers for McKinney-Vento students to store clean clothes, hygiene items, or school supplies safely and privately.
- In communities where in-school laundry isn't feasible, schools could explore laundromat partnerships or vouchers, which would discreetly and accessible connect families to external resources.

Criteria

- ***Effectiveness:*** This initiative has a high effectiveness rating based on evidence from multiple school districts that have implemented similar programs. Attendance improvements of up to 10 percentage points have been observed following the introduction of school-based laundry and shower access. By addressing a frequently cited reason for school avoidance—lack of hygiene—this initiative directly supports improved attendance.
- ***Equity:*** Equity is a core strength of this intervention. Because most schools already have locker room infrastructure, urban and rural districts can implement the initiative with modest modifications. Schools can meet students' needs regardless of geography or building constraints by providing flexible implementation options—including home-use kits, on-site facilities, and vouchers.
- ***Cost:*** This initiative is relatively low-cost compared to constructing new facilities. Most schools already have the plumbing and space needed to support showers and laundry access, and installation costs for washers/dryers are minimal. Title I and McKinney-Vento funding, community donations, or corporate partnerships with brands like Whirlpool and Tide could offset ongoing hygiene supplies and detergent costs.
- ***Feasibility:*** The initiative is highly feasible. It leverages existing school infrastructure, fits within the scope of current staff responsibilities, and can be scaled based on district capacity. Coaches, nurses, or McKinney-Vento liaisons can coordinate student access to ensure privacy and supervision. The flexible design of this initiative also means it can be piloted in various formats, allowing districts to start small and expand over time.

Alternative 3: School-Based Health & Telehealth Expansion

Health-related absences are a leading cause of chronic absenteeism, particularly among students experiencing homelessness who often lack access to consistent, affordable medical care. Many miss school due to untreated illnesses, chronic conditions, or mental health needs that go unaddressed due to barriers such as lack of insurance, transportation, or proximity to providers. For these students, accessing care often requires missing multiple school days or forgoing treatment altogether.

School-based health interventions—including school-based health centers (SBHCs), telehealth services, and increased nursing support—have emerged as promising strategies to reduce absenteeism by removing logistical and financial barriers to care. A study in Hawai'i found that chronic absenteeism dropped by 2.7 percentage points after two years of school-based health service implementation and by 3.9 percentage points after three years (Murphy & Neely, 2023). In North Carolina, students using school-based telehealth were 29% less likely to become chronically absent and missed, on average, 20 fewer days per year (Sparks, 2023). These services enable students to receive timely care on campus and return to class the same day, reducing disruptions to learning.

This initiative would establish a competitive grant program for a 10-school pilot to test the feasibility and impact of these interventions in Virginia. Participating schools would be located in districts with high chronic absenteeism rates and a significant population of McKinney-Vento-identified students. Grantees could select from three implementation models based on their infrastructure and local context:

- Telehealth integration via partnerships with local hospitals, mobile health units, or Federally Qualified Health Centers (FQHCs)
- Expansion or enhancement of existing School-Based Health Centers (SBHCs) to provide primary, mental, or preventive care
- Hiring additional school nurses to reduce student-to-nurse ratios and provide more consistent, daily access to care

Expanding school nursing capacity represents a particularly scalable and cost-effective approach. While the Virginia Board of Education recommends a ratio of 1 nurse per 1,000 students, this is far above the National Association of School Nurses' recommendation of 1:750, and the American Academy of Pediatrics' standard of one full-time registered nurse in every school. In practice, Virginia's average ratio is around 1:923, with some large districts exceeding 1:1,200. This staffing gap limits schools' ability to provide early intervention for health issues, manage chronic conditions, and ensure McKinney-Vento students have access to referrals and continuity of care.

Each participating school would designate a health lead—such as a nurse, counselor, or McKinney-Vento liaison—to coordinate care, monitor health-related attendance trends, and connect students to services.

Criteria

- *Effectiveness***:** This initiative ranks highly in effectiveness. Multiple studies have shown measurable absenteeism reductions following implementing school-based health services. Telehealth, SBHCs, and expanded nursing help prevent avoidable absences by meeting students' health needs in real time, with the added benefit of reducing emergency room use and delayed treatment.
- *Equity***:** The program is moderately equitable. Telehealth and nurse staffing expansion improve access to care in urban and rural settings. However, broadband access and provider shortages may pose challenges in some areas. Allowing districts to choose a model based on their existing capacity helps ensure the intervention is accessible statewide.
- *Cost***:** Costs vary widely depending on the model. Hiring a full-time nurse costs an estimated $80,000–$90,000 annually, while SBHCs may cost up to $659,684 per year, depending on the services offered (Ran et al., 2016). Telehealth programs are typically less expensive but require investment in digital infrastructure and coordination. Funding sources include Medicaid reimbursement, HRSA grants, Title I funds, and public-private partnerships with health systems or philanthropic organizations.
- *Feasibility***:** The initiative is moderately feasible. While implementing SBHCs may present infrastructure and staffing challenges, telehealth services and increased nurse staffing offer more immediately implementable solutions. Hiring nurses leverages existing roles and aligns with state recommendations, making it a politically and operationally viable pathway for many districts. Providing a flexible menu of implementation options increases the likelihood of adoption and long-term success.

Administrative Alternative
Alternative 4: Data-Informed Attendance Team Initiative

Many Virginia school districts collect detailed attendance data but lack the staff capacity or structure to analyze and act on it in real-time. This is especially true for McKinney-Vento students, whose unstable living situations often result in inconsistent attendance patterns that go unnoticed until they become severe. Without transparent processes for early intervention, schools are frequently reactive rather than proactive—responding only after students are chronically absent.

The Data-Informed Attendance Team Initiative would help schools build the internal infrastructure to track absenteeism, identify at-risk students early, and intervene before patterns of disengagement take root. Modeled on the Kansas "Success Teams" framework, this initiative would encourage schools to form multidisciplinary attendance teams that regularly review disaggregated data—including McKinney-Vento status—and coordinate supports.

Key features of this model include:

- Attendance team meetings are held weekly or biweekly with McKinney-Vento liaisons, counselors, nurses, attendance clerks, and administrators. Team membership can rotate over time to include classroom teachers and other staff members, ensuring that those who know the student best are part of the conversation and intervention planning. This approach emphasized in the Kansas Success Teams model, helps build school-wide ownership of attendance and promotes more holistic support for students.
- Use real-time data dashboards to flag students approaching chronic absenteeism thresholds (10% of missed school days).
- Assignment of a school-based mentor for students who continue to struggle with attendance. Mentors would be trusted staff members, including counselors or teachers, who are consistent connection points. This helps make students feel more supported and engaged. This strategy builds on the evidence from New York City's Success Mentors program, which significantly reduced absenteeism for students matched with caring adults.

In schools where attendance problems persist despite Tier 1 interventions, teams would implement a Tier 2 mentorship strategy. This draws on models like the NYC "Success Mentors" program, which found that students paired with a mentor gained two additional weeks of instruction compared to similar students without a mentor. Mentors could be trained school staff, volunteers, or trusted community partners who build consistent, caring relationships with students and serve as an additional touchpoint for problem-solving and encouragement.

To support implementation across the state, Project HOPE could provide technical assistance, training modules, and data tools. While some states, like North Carolina and Pennsylvania, have

formal regional McKinney-Vento coordinators to offer this type of cross-district support, Virginia could initially build capacity through regional workshops, peer learning networks, or virtual communities of practice.

Criteria

- *Effectiveness*: This initiative is highly effective in targeting the root causes of chronic absenteeism. Evidence from Kansas and New York shows that structured data use and mentoring can substantially improve attendance. The tiered model also allows for differentiated responses based on student need.
- *Equity*: This strategy promotes equity by ensuring that McKinney-Vento students are explicitly tracked in school data systems and not overlooked in generic absenteeism responses. It builds school-wide systems that benefit all students, embedding supports for the most vulnerable.
- *Cost*: The cost is low to moderate. Most district staff needed for team meetings are already employed. Mentorship programs can be staffed by volunteers or existing personnel with stipends. Small grants may be needed for data tools, training, or incentives, which can be covered by Title I or McKinney-Vento set-aside funds.
- *Feasibility*: This model is highly feasible and scalable. It builds on existing staff roles and state data systems and can be rolled out gradually. With minimal infrastructure requirements, it can be adopted by both large and small districts. State-level support, through training or virtual coordination, can serve many of the same functions as regional coordinators without requiring new hires.

Outcome Matrix

Criteria	Early Identification & Enrollment Initiative	School-Based Shower & Laundry Access	Health & Nurse Expansion Pilot	Data-Informed Attendance Team Initiative
Effectiveness	**High**. Henrico's model led to a 14% increase in early identification and 90% attendance among students identified early. Micro-outreach strategies support broad reach; strong early-year impact.	**Moderate to High**. Districts with hygiene access report 9–15% attendance improvement; addresses a specific, student-reported barrier.	**High**. Telehealth and nurses shown to reduce absenteeism by 2–7.9 percentage points in other states; strong link between health access and school attendance.	**High**. Kansas and NYC models show strong outcomes. Mentors provide consistent engagement and reduce chronic absenteeism by up to 20%. Easily built into daily school operations.
Equity	**High**. Tiered model supports rural and urban districts; adaptable for districts with limited capacity; reaches hidden homeless families.	**High**. Addresses stigma, builds dignity; uses existing facilities available across school types; supports highly marginalized students.	**Moderate**. Expands care access, but provider shortages may limit reach in rural districts.	**High**. Equitably supports McKinney-Vento and other at-risk students; low-cost and feasible in districts with limited staff.
Cost	**Moderate**. ~$21,000 per district for large events; micro-outreach is significantly cheaper. Eligible for Title I, McKinney-Vento, and sponsor funding.	**Low to Moderate**. $10,000–$15,000 for installation; <$5,000 annual for supplies. Can leverage corporate donations and Title I funds.	**High**. $100K–$300K annually per district depending on model. Reimbursable through Medicaid and HRSA, but high upfront costs.	**Low to Moderate**. Uses existing staff; minimal new spending. Mentor stipends or training could be supported by Title I or ESSER funds.
Feasibility	**High**. Easy to implement using current roles and community partnerships. Politically popular, with visible and family-friendly framing.	**Moderate**. Low infrastructure burden, but requires supervision and upkeep. Strong appeal with families.	**Moderate**. Implementation requires coordination with providers, privacy compliance, and dedicated space. May face resistance in some districts.	**High**. Minimal disruption to school routines. Popular with educators. Strong research base and alignment with existing VDOE priorities.

Explaining the Matrix

While multiple alternatives demonstrate strong potential, the Data-Informed Attendance Team Initiative ultimately emerged as the most balanced and sustainable option across all four evaluation criteria. Like the Early Identification & Enrollment Initiative, it performs highly on

effectiveness, offering research-backed reductions in chronic absenteeism through consistent data use and targeted interventions such as school-based mentorship. However, it surpasses early outreach in providing ongoing, school-based monitoring and support throughout the academic year, allowing staff to respond quickly when attendance patterns shift. It also ranks highly on equity and feasibility, as it can be implemented using existing personnel and routines in schools of all sizes. While the Early Identification & Enrollment Initiative remains a compelling and politically visible strategy, its impact is concentrated in a limited window. In contrast, the Data-Informed Attendance Team Initiative builds the internal capacity for schools to track, intervene, and adapt over time, making it the most robust and scalable solution for reducing chronic absenteeism among McKinney-Vento students statewide.

Recommendations

Based on the outcome matrix and the four evaluation criteria: effectiveness, equity, cost, and feasibility, I recommend that Virginia school districts implement the Data-Informed Attendance Team Initiative as the primary strategy to reduce chronic absenteeism among McKinney-Vento students. This approach is grounded in strong empirical evidence from states such as Kansas and New York, where structured attendance teams and school-based mentoring have produced measurable reductions in chronic absenteeism. In Kansas, the "Success Teams" model demonstrated how cross-functional school teams, supported by data dashboards and early warning systems, can identify at-risk students early and coordinate targeted interventions. New York City's Success Mentor program showed that students paired with consistent adult mentors attended nearly two additional weeks of school compared to their peers.

The Data-Informed Attendance Team Initiative outperformed other alternatives in the matrix on key dimensions of equity and feasibility. Unlike infrastructure-heavy or start-of-year interventions, this model enables schools to respond consistently during the school year to emerging attendance concerns using staff already in place. It is especially suited for statewide implementation, as it requires minimal infrastructure and can be scaled across diverse district types. By involving teachers, counselors, attendance clerks, nurses, and administrators in regular attendance team meetings, with rotating participation when appropriate, the model distributes responsibility across the school, rather than placing the full burden on McKinney-Vento liaisons. In addition, rotating participation lessons the burden on individual staff while maintaining a structured intervention. This shared approach not only reduces the workload on overextended liaisons, but also improves staff-wide understanding of homelessness and attendance barriers, fostering a more responsive and supportive school culture.

For districts that already have robust attendance infrastructure, effective data systems, and strong collaboration across student support staff, I recommend implementing the Early Identification & Enrollment Initiative as a complementary strategy. These districts may have the capacity to plan community-based enrollment events,such as the cookout model in Henrico, or scale micro-outreach strategies like laundromat nights or targeted mailings. When paired with strong in-school support, early outreach can improve identification rates and ensure students experiencing homelessness are connected to critical services before the school year begins.

Together, these tiered recommendations acknowledge the diversity of school district capacity across Virginia and provide a clear, adaptable pathway for reducing chronic absenteeism among students experiencing homelessness.

Implementation

Overview

This implementation plan outlines a phased approach for piloting the Data-Informed Attendance Team Initiative, a school-based model to reduce chronic absenteeism among McKinney-Vento students through collaborative, data-driven support. The initiative centers on forming cross-functional attendance teams that regularly analyze real-time attendance data, identify students needing intervention and assign mentors to students with persistent absenteeism. Project HOPE will lead all phases of development, district recruitment, training, technical assistance, and evaluation.

Stakeholders and Roles

One of the model's key advantages is that it distributes responsibility across the school community rather than concentrating on the McKinney-Vento liaison alone. The following stakeholders play essential roles:

- Project HOPE
  - Serves as the central implementation lead.
  - Develops and distributes the implementation toolkit, including templates for attendance team meetings, early warning data flags, and mentor guidance.
  - Recruits pilot districts, offers training and technical assistance, facilitates quarterly roundtables, and manages data collection and evaluation.
  - Leads refinement of tools and guidance based on implementation feedback.
- Pilot School Districts
  - Form school-based attendance teams composed of key support personnel (e.g., McKinney-Vento liaisons, counselors, nurses, teachers, administrators, and attendance clerks).
  - Use disaggregated attendance data to flag students at risk of chronic absenteeism.
  - Pair Tier 2 students with school-based mentors for individualized support.
  - Participate in monthly reporting and feedback activities.
- Attendance Teams
  - Meet weekly or biweekly to review data, flag concerns, and coordinate support.
  - Rotate teacher and support staff participation to ensure student insights are shared across roles.
  - Use Project HOPE templates to document discussions and interventions.
- Mentors (School Staff or Volunteers)
  - Provide Tier 2 support to students with ongoing absenteeism.
  - Serve as trusted adults who build consistent, relational support.
    Reinforce student connection to school and troubleshoot barriers to attendance.

Addressing Equity and Selection Bias

To ensure broad applicability and statewide relevance, Project HOPE will proactively address the risk that only well-resourced districts apply and participate in the pilot:

- Targeted Outreach:
  - Rural, high-poverty, and lower-capacity districts will be actively recruited and offered one-on-one support through the application process.
- Reserved Pilot Slots:
  - At least 3 of the 10 pilot districts will be reserved for schools serving high numbers of McKinney-Vento students and facing documented capacity challenges.
- Simplified Application:
  - Districts will complete a short application with fillable templates and the option for an interview in place of a written narrative.
- Ongoing Technical Assistance:
  - Light-touch coaching during the pilot year will be available for low-capacity districts, ensuring implementation fidelity even with limited infrastructure.

These steps help ensure the pilot generates lessons relevant across Virginia's geographic and institutional diversity.

Timeline and Sequencing

Phase	Timeline	Activities
Toolkit Development	Jan–Feb 2026	Project HOPE finalizes the attendance team toolkit, mentor pairing guidance, and data templates.
Pilot Announcement	March 2026	Launch of the initiative at the Project HOPE Annual Conference. Outreach and Q&A sessions with interested districts.
Recruitment and Application Support	March–April 2026	The application window opens. Project HOPE provides targeted technical assistance to rural and under-resourced districts.
District Selection	May 2026	Ten districts are selected, ensuring representation across district types and capacity levels.
Training and Onboarding	June–July 2026	Attendance team training and toolkit orientation. Optional virtual onboarding for low-capacity districts.

Implementation	Aug 2026–April 2027	Attendance teams meet weekly/biweekly, and mentors are assigned to Tier 2 students. Project HOPE provides technical support and coaching.
Mid-Year Check-In	January 2027	Project HOPE collects interim data and convenes districts to share progress and troubleshoot barriers.
Evaluation and Final Reporting	May–June 2027	Final evaluation of absenteeism trends, fidelity, and participant feedback. Recommendations for statewide expansion.

Data Sharing Agreements and Privacy

Because attendance data and McKinney-Vento identification are protected under FERPA, each pilot district will enter into a Data Sharing Agreement (DSA) with Project HOPE. These agreements will:

- Define the data elements to be shared (e.g., disaggregated attendance records, mentor pairing data).
  Limit access to designated Project HOPE evaluation staff.
- All public reporting is required to be de-identified and aggregated.
- Ensure that student privacy is protected in full compliance with federal law.

Feedback Loop for Continuous Improvement

A structured feedback loop will be embedded in the pilot to ensure real-time learning and adaptation:
Key features include:
- Monthly Data Snapshots
  - Districts submit basic attendance, mentor, and meeting data using a standardized template.
- Quarterly Virtual Roundtables
  - Project HOPE convenes pilot teams to discuss challenges, share promising practices, and identify tool or training gaps.
- Responsive Toolkit Updates
  - Based on implementation feedback, Project HOPE refines guidance documents and provides supplemental resources (e.g., conversation starters for mentors and simplified data forms).
- Targeted Coaching
  - Districts encountering difficulties may receive individualized support or be paired with more successful peers.

Project HOPE can test, refine, and scale a promising intervention that aligns with research and the practical realities of Virginia's diverse school districts through this phased implementation approach. The initiative is designed to be impactful and sustainable through shared responsibility across school staff and providing support through feedback loops. After the pilot year, Project HOPE will be able to evaluate the program's success and pivot or scale to other districts.

Conclusion

Among Virginia's at-risk student populations, those experiencing homelessness face complex barriers that impact school attendance and, thus, academic success. Students who do not regularly attend school miss critical instruction and supportive services and lose a sense of belonging in school. While state and federal laws offer a framework for compliance, they do not ensure that schools can proactively engage and support McKinney-Vento students.

This report recommends a Data-Informed Attendance Team Model as the most effective, feasible, and equitable alternative for reducing chronic absenteeism statewide. By embedding support within school infrastructure, this model distributes responsibility across staff, uses data to identify students early, and connects them to caring adults and targeted interventions. A community engagement model to support early identification can provide a complementary strategy for districts with strong attendance systems.

Implementing this approach requires coordination, training, and support, especially for under-resourced districts. However, the payoff can be significant. By improving attendance for students experiencing homelessness, there is the potential for a long-term reduction in public costs and improved graduation rates, which can disrupt the cycle of poverty. With targeted state-level support and sustained district commitment, Virginia can make meaningful progress in ensuring that homelessness does not hinder a child's education.

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