

Children in Transition School Advocate and Liaison Descriptions of Supports for Students Experiencing Homelessness in the Washoe County School District

October 5, 2017

The Children in Transition (CIT) program in the Washoe County School District (WCSD) identifies and enrolls homeless children and youth and strives to eliminate barriers that impact student academic success. A central goal of the CIT program is *to promote enrollment stability at the school of origin so that students can better access curriculum and learn*. To meet this goal, the CIT program has six objectives (see callout).

In September 2017, CIT program leaders sought to learn more about how students experiencing homelessness are supported in schools and to explore opportunities to strengthen those supports. With help from the Office of Accountability, the insights of CIT advocates were elicited during three separate training sessions for elementary, middle, and high school advocates. Using a guided discussion approach, advocates sat in teams of 4-7 people and responded to three questions at 5 minute intervals. Approximately 60 advocates participated. The discussion questions were:

1. How are students who are homeless supported at your school?
2. What are the gaps in support for students who are homeless at your school?
3. What suggestions do you have to improve the support provided to homeless students?

Responses were captured on chart paper and summarized. This information will be used by CIT program staff to:

- Establish expectations for how CIT staff support schools.

Children in Transition Program Objectives

1. Ensure WCSD personnel are aware of homeless and foster children and their needs;
2. Collaborate with agencies to locate homeless children and youth;
3. Facilitate school enrollment and provide nutrition and health services;
4. Provide transportation to students' schools of origins when it is deemed in the best interest of students;
5. Coordinate services to meet the special needs of children who are experiencing homelessness; and
6. Reduce and remove barriers to education so that students can achieve academic success.

- Guide expectations for how students receiving CIT services are supported within the Multi-tiered System of Supports (MTSS) framework. Information will be used within inter-departmental planning (i.e. MTSS and CIT) to align practices, develop protocols and policy, and support schools.
- Inform training for school staff about supporting homeless students.

CIT advocates are school staff members, most often school counselors, who have taken the additional responsibility of identifying students who may be homeless and assessing their individual needs. They then work with CIT liaisons to ensure students receive the services and resources needed to attend school and achieve academic success. In this role, CIT advocates are positioned to see the strengths and gaps within support mechanisms.

CIT Advocate Insights

CIT advocates described how students experiencing homelessness are supported in schools. They also described several barriers that limit support for students and offered suggestions for how to improve the services provided.

How are students experiencing homelessness supported in schools?

Advocates explained that resources to meet basic needs and transportation services are provided by the CIT program at all schools. Such resources include free lunch, clothing, jackets, and school supplies. Fees for sports and extra-curricular activities are also routinely provided to students who qualify for CIT services. Transportation services include bus passes and rides provided by CIT to and from school. In addition to those funded by CIT, other supports were described, including interventions, case management, and before and after-school programs. Staff awareness was also mentioned as an asset that strengthens support for students in schools.

Interventions. Interventions to build resiliency and reduce risk are provided at some schools to support students who are homeless. Interventions mentioned included check-ins, home visits, and social-emotional learning activities. These interventions were used to monitor attendance and foster relationships.

Case management. Advocates described providing intensive supports through case management approaches; however, the extent to which these approaches are grounded in accepted case management principles is not clear. Referrals to outside community agencies for additional support and more intensive counseling are made. Some reported utilizing Safe Schools Professionals or social workers to perform these functions. Others use existing grant-funded initiatives, such as Project Prevent-Practice PEACE, to support this work. Case management of

family needs was mentioned as being provided by Family Resource Centers and by other community agencies for medical services.

Before and after-school options. Several programs offered outside of school hours to support students who are experiencing homelessness were described, including Boys and Girls Club memberships, opportunities to receive meals, and tutoring programs. One advocate described a study club at her school that offers one-to-one support for students. Another school directed funds to pay for teacher stipends for an afterschool program 1-2 days a week.

Staff awareness. Some middle and high school advocates described school efforts to build the awareness of the entire staff about the needs of students who experience homelessness. One school provides whole staff training on the subject. Some advocates send email messages to teachers to let them know which students receive CIT services.

Other supports mentioned are therapy dogs, resource tools for staff (i.e. CIT laminated checklists), and CIT information packets for families provided by school registrars.

What are the gaps in support for students who are homeless?

Middle and high school advocates described several gaps in the support for homeless students. Elementary school advocates were not asked this question because of time constraints. The gaps described are categorized into five areas, which include transportation, stigma associated with homelessness, teacher awareness, community resources, and communication.

Transportation was described as insufficient. Advocates were appreciative of the transportation options available through CIT; however, some said these options often do not meet the needs of all of their students. For example, city transit is not accessible for many students in rural areas and the district is challenged to provide transportation that is timely, if at all. When it is provided, older students are sometimes reluctant to use it because they perceive it as stigmatizing. One person explained, “they [students] do not want to be seen riding the short bus.” Other mentioned challenges are long transit times and lack of transportation options for extra-curricular activities, particularly when short notice of those activities is given to CIT staff.

Stigma associated with homelessness was mentioned by several advocates as limiting their ability to identify students for CIT services, the level to which parents and guardians access the services available to them, and the degree to which students self-identify and self-advocate.

Inconsistent teacher awareness about the needs of students experiencing homeless and their ability to identify students in need of CIT services was described as a barrier to support. One team wrote “Teachers are not always aware they [students and families] are CIT.” The lack of

awareness may affect the ability of those staff members to appropriately respond to the specific needs of students in their classrooms.

Limited community resources were described as a gap in support for families experiencing homelessness. Specifically, there is a shortage of medical care and mental health care services. There are limited resources for other needs as well: Family shelters are often full and the ability to maintain basic hygiene is limited by poor access to laundry services and showers.

Communication was mentioned as a challenge that contributes to gaps in support for students. Communication between parents and students with CIT advocates was described as challenging. Also mentioned is a lack of follow-up; however, it is not clear if this refers to communication between CIT advocates and liaisons or between CIT advocates with students and families.

One team expressed concern about the misperception that certain schools do not need help supporting students who are homeless because those schools are well-funded or the population of homeless students is hidden. Other barriers mentioned include length of time processing paperwork, limited access to technology, submission of false CIT applications, and poorly-timed lunch schedules that limit access for transported students.

How can the support provided to students experiencing homelessness be improved?

Advocates offered many suggestions to strengthen the supports provided to students who experience homelessness. These suggestions fall into four categories, which include process and policy, professional development, resources, and family involvement.

Process and Policy. Advocates asked for improvements to process-related activities involved with accessing CIT services and supporting students who may be experiencing homelessness. Several people called for the creation of **tools to facilitate support for students**, such as cheat sheets for services that can be offered to students and their families, automated academic and grade reports of students in CIT, and streamlined fillable forms to reduce redundancy in reporting and the time involved in making requests. Others asked for **changes to the process for identifying students for CIT services**. The requested changes are:

- Adding a mandatory question in the school registration form for self-identification of homeless status.
- Streamlined process for enrolling students in CIT from year to year.
- Blending programs, such as CIT and FRL, to create an umbrella of services, facilitate the creation of one plan for support instead of multiple plans, and using synced forms to improve identification and decrease redundant application processes.

Several teams asked for **improved communication between CIT staff, schools, and families**. Specifically, they asked to be informed about the specific reasons students do not qualify for CIT services, a list of names of students whom schools have been reimbursed for by CIT, and more timely communication between all parties about transportation availability and needs. Other requests included more flexibility for providing resources to families, faster reimbursement of fees for CIT students, and clarification of services that are provided by CIT.

Professional Development. Advocates asked for increased awareness of school staff about the needs of students who experience homelessness and how to respond to those needs. Several teams suggested school-wide **professional development** to increase staff knowledge about the issues surrounding homelessness. Professional development topics requested include:

- Social and emotional learning
- CIT purpose, protocols, and supports
- Trauma-informed practice
- Effects of poverty and homelessness on student academic and social well-being
- Inclusive practice

Resources. Many suggestions by CIT advocates centered on the availability of resources. Suggested resources are categorized into four types, which include community resources, tangible goods, transportation, and CIT welcome kits.

1. **More community resources**, such as emergency shelters, affordable housing, showers and laundry services, and expanded transportation. One team suggested that the WCSD and community agencies collaborate to increase the availability of resources.
2. **Additional tangible goods**, including laptops or iPads, food goods, clothing and shoes, various sized school and sport uniforms, laundry and shower vouchers, and furniture. One suggestion was to provide an inventory of supplies upfront to schools so advocates can plan for and distribute accordingly.
3. **Expanded transportation options**. Advocates requested dedicated buses, increased availability of afternoon transportation, and more flexibility in the use of bus passes.
4. **CIT welcome kit** with school and resource information for students and their families. The kit would include information about WCSD and community services that complement those provided by CIT and it would be written in English and Spanish.

Other suggestions to expand access to resources included increasing collaboration with the Boys and Girls Club, providing stipends to teachers for after-school tutoring, and ensuring charter and options schools have the same access to resources as other WCSO schools.

Family Involvement. Several advocates noted the necessity of supporting families, as opposed to supporting individual students. Strategies to **increase support to families** include:

- Family resource fairs
- Home visits conducted by CIT liaisons
- Parent advocate to follow-up with families, case manage, and provide support
- Classes for parents

One team asked for more parent accountability for student school attendance; however, specific actions to hold parents accountable were not specified.

CIT Liaison Insights

CIT liaisons also provided their insights about the supports they provide, challenges they encounter, and suggestions for strengthening the support provided by CIT.

Supports. CIT liaisons described several supports that are provided through CIT, including transportation services, enrollment support, and collaboration between school counselors and CIT staff to meet student needs.

Challenges. A barrier to support provided by CIT liaisons is their large caseloads, which makes it difficult to follow-up with school staff. They also described the challenge of transiency among school staff, whereby staff movement contributes to the need to continuously educate new staff about the specific needs of students and the status of supports for those students. New staff require training about CIT protocols and expectations, which can delay services for students.

Suggestions. CIT liaisons asked for increased funding to pay for additional resources for schools, more support staff for CIT (i.e. CIT liaison assistant), a bus for pre-K students, and increased transportation services to meet after-school transportation needs. Other suggestions provided by CIT liaisons were specific to their work experience. These included working a 10 hour shift-schedule to allow for a four-day work week and the option to work from home.