



Episode 12: Continuity of Operations for Students and Families Experiencing Homelessness

#REMSontheAir Podcast Intro (Recorded): [00:00:00] Welcome to the #REMSontheAir Podcast, hosted by your partners at the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Safe and Supportive Schools and its Readiness and Emergency Management for Schools Technical Assistance Center. If you're an old friend, you know us as the REMS TA Center, your national school safety center.

Join us as we chat about key topics in school and campus safety, security, and emergency management with experts and partners from the field.

Janelle Hughes: Hello and welcome back. We are so excited to host the REMS TA Center's second podcast episode. My name is Janelle Hughes, and I serve as the Project Director for the REMS TA Center, also known as the Readiness and Emergency Management for Schools Technical Assistance Center. I have enjoyed being able to continue to share [00:01:00] information, training, and resources with you throughout this time, and to be able to grow and progress the work of the TA Center as the world of school safety is continually changing, which I'm sure you all know.

And with that, I'm so pleased to introduce my cohost for today, the REMS TA Center's Training Manager, Amanda Everett.

Amanda Everett: Thanks, Janelle. I have also enjoyed being able to support the field for nearly 8 years now. And, similarly, I have learned so much through sharing information, training, and resources and through our collaborations with partners at the local, state, national, and Federal levels.

Janelle Hughes: Yes, it has really been great to collaborate with partners on many important school safety topics. And, of course, of late, in light of the COVID-19 pandemic, the REMS TA Center has been conducting a lot of work related to continuity of operations, or COOP, planning here to support schools, school districts, and institutions of higher [00:02:00] education.

And today, we'll delve into that topic a bit to discuss continuity of operations planning for homeless and displaced students during this COVID-19 pandemic.

Amanda Everett: A major part of supporting students during and after an emergency is ensuring that their needs are still being met. A key objective of schools in the United States is to provide effective educational programming in a safe and secure learning environment.

Supporting activities needed to achieve this include program administration, communication with stakeholders, transportation of students, and provision of food programs and medical services. If an emergency occurs, schools and districts must have processes and systems in place to ensure continuity of education, learning, and these supporting activities, even if it

means they must occur at a different school or location, or even with alternate staff and teacher support.

In order to continue providing educational programming during or after [00:03:00] a large emergency event, which may require school dismissal or closure, schools and districts should identify essential functions of the school that must continue under any and all circumstances. These essential functions will likely involve teaching and learning, the physical aspects of buildings in the campus, business functions, and emotional and psychological recovery.

It is truly a challenging time for everyone around the world right now, but specifically for students and families who are experiencing homelessness or who are currently displaced.

Janelle Hughes: Absolutely. And, you know, we're talking about this today in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, but this is really the case also thinking about other hazards that schools and school districts and IHEs [institutions of higher education] are experiencing, including wildfires and the results of storms and hurricanes.

During our webinar with the National Center for Homeless Education and School Health [00:04:00] Connection, we actually discussed student supports for students and those families experiencing homelessness during the COVID-19 pandemic. It was important then, and, of course, it is always important to discuss how emergency events, such as the pandemic, can sometimes increase, unfortunately, the population of students and families experiencing homelessness and displacement.

Our partners from the National Center for Homeless Education and School Health Connection really illuminated during our webinar how an emergency can also impact an education agency's ability to adequately support this population. Let's hear a snippet from that webinar now.

Janelle Hughes (Recorded): According to the Federal data summary for school years 2015 and '16 through 2017 and '18, the National Center—which comes from the National Center for Homeless Education—there was an increase of 15% in the homeless student population over that 3-year [00:05:00] period.

The report states that 16 states reported growth in their identified homeless student populations of 10% or more. Eight states experienced growth in the homeless student population of 20% and more. And, in contrast, only five states reported a reduction of 10% or more. Of the five states, only two reported a decrease in the number of homeless students identified by public schools for 2 consecutive years.

A report released this May from the Association of State and Territorial Health Officials provides information on how states are housing the homeless during the COVID-19 pandemic.

As we all know that this has remained a continuing issue at this time. And we have included this report in the Web links and encourage you to review it to see how your states are working to respond to this issue.

On the Federal level, many actions have been taken in response to the pandemic. Congress passed the *Coronavirus Aid [00:06:00] Relief and Economic Security*, also known as the *CARES Act*. This act includes more than \$4 million in emergency solutions grant funding to address the impact of COVID-19 among individuals and families who are homeless or at risk of homelessness.

Federal partners are also working to ensure students and families have the support they need in other arenas. The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development released a Disaster Recovery Homelessness Toolkit that provides a housing-first strategy, and they also released a recovery guide that addresses post-disaster homelessness.

With an increase of the homeless and displaced student population, the need for student and family support from education agencies, of course, also increases. It is imperative for the support provided by education agencies to occur not only during emergencies but also before and after, including the current global COVID-19 [00:07:00] pandemic.

Amanda Everett: Federal resources are available to support students and families experiencing homelessness. It's also very important to know how education agencies can prepare for an emergency, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, before, during, and after the emergency occurs. Being mindful of COOP planning is a crucial element in doing so.

Janelle Hughes: Definitely. And in thinking about all of this, I really believe it's the perfect time to delve into our topic a bit more. During the webinar that we hosted, we started this presentation off with an engaging question asking what key partners education agencies have been collaborating with to support students and families experiencing homelessness.

And this poll question had a variety of responses, but a few really stood out to us. We're going to play that audio for you now.

Janelle Hughes (Recorded): Before we get started with diving into the discussion, let's get started with a poll question that will help us understand some of the [00:08:00] collaborations that are being taken to support students and families with this topic.

Has your school or school district collaborated with key partners to support students and families experiencing homelessness during the COVID-19 pandemic? And if you answer yes, if you could provide details about the key partners with which you've collaborated. And if no, what key partners you would like to collaborate with in the future?

And thank you. I—it looks like so far, most participants have been collaborating to provide those supports. And I’m seeing that some of those partners include local churches and food pantries, Feeding America, the Women’s Crisis Center, the Salvation Army. And I’m seeing that those who have not had those collaborations in place are noting that they would like to do so with the social service agency, homeless school liaison. I also see the housing [00:09:00] authority and an extension office, the department of social services and health. Thank you so much, everyone, for sharing. I’m also seeing regional and homeless—regional and local, Homeless Coalition, United Way, Big Brothers and Big Sisters, YMCA, faith-based organizations, local food pantries.

Wow, so many great examples. I’m going to give you a moment to continue responding, and I just want to also share that we’ve also seen a lot of great state and local examples of collaboration efforts around supporting students and families, and we’ve really been excited to see that. We’ve seen Web pages developed on SEA [state education agency] and LEA [local education agency] sites that offer key information to students and families, including information on McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act and information on available programs and charitable organizations, guidelines around how to receive assistance, as well as just additional resources for school-based homeless and displaced youth [00:10:00] liaisons.

So, as the impact of COVID-19 continues to shift, incorporating support for students and families experiencing homelessness and those that might be displaced during a pandemic into education agencies, Continuity of Operations Annexes [are] really essential for ensuring that there are comprehensive plans in place to provide those supports that are needed.

Thank you so much everyone for sharing—really great information shared.

Janelle Hughes: We were so surprised, but also excited to hear so many different organizations listed within this poll, such as United Way and Feeding America, to name a couple. We were mostly excited to know that these collaborations are taking place and were in place before the COVID-19 pandemic.

Amanda Everett: Yes, that is exciting to know. And in mentioning collaboration and COOP planning, it’s almost impossible not to consider reopening. [00:11:00] Right now, most schools and school districts are open or either planning for reopening, whether that’s completely virtual, in person, or a combination of the two. It’s definitely something that’s on everyone’s mind as education agencies want to ensure that students, staff, and their families are safe during this unprecedented time.

Within the webinar, Kenya Haynes from the National Center for Homeless Education provided helpful considerations for education agencies that are planning reopening. Her first consideration was regarding communication. Let’s check out what Kenya had to say.

Kenya Haynes (Recorded): Some considerations that you should make as you're planning for reopening and reentry into your school systems in the fall.

And the first one I would like you to consider is outreach. One of the things that you will see is that—or that we are expecting—is that we're going to see some pretty large increases in the [00:12:00] numbers of students who are experiencing homelessness from 19—the 19–20 school year to the 20–21 school year.

And so you need to be thinking about how is your system going to locate these families who are experiencing homelessness. Perhaps those families were known to your system, and then also some families who may be experiencing homelessness for the first time.

Earlier we went through the definition of homelessness, the education definition, and you'll notice that it might be broader than what you expected, and so there are going to be families who don't know what services are available to them, and so it's really important that you're sharing resources out in your community.

Are you going to be placing posters throughout the community? Will you work with your local media to do public service announcements? How are you going to proactively reach out to families who might be in need of services and might not know [00:13:00] where—what those services are and where to turn?

Amanda Everett: Kenya raises a lot of excellent points regarding outreach to students experiencing homelessness.

Outreach is vital to ensuring that students are receiving the resources that are available to them. In addition to outreach, there are also so many other considerations to be mindful of when planning reopening.

Janelle Hughes: That is so true. And in thinking about reopening and now that a lot of schools, as you mentioned, Amanda, are open, but having to create plans that allow them to pivot—you know, reopening considerations. There are so many planning considerations that can be a bit cumbersome, but starting with policy review can be a good way to really engage the process.

Kenya also raises a lot of interesting points around how policy review can help ensure that this student population is not overlooked during planning for [00:14:00] reopening.

Kenya Haynes (Recorded): Continuing with policy, if you're looking at a virtual model or a hybrid model, is there a plan to train parents on whatever that platform is?

In the spring, things happened so quickly that there wasn't a lot of support for parents. And I think you also need to look at, throughout your system, is the online platform consistent through all the grade levels?

I had an opportunity to hear from a superintendent, and one thing that they realized is that their elementary school was using one online platform, the middle school was using another, and the high school was using still a third online platform. So, in addition to just trying to help your students access education, they were also having to learn three separate platforms for all their children to access education. And one of the changes that they are making for fall is switching to a single platform K-12, so that that doesn't happen again.

What are the procedures in [00:15:00] place if a student became ill at school and their caregiver doesn't have transportation? What are your plans if a student has to quarantine? And I think this last one is really particularly important: When you're doing your policy review, are you including families and young people who are experiencing homelessness in that review?

You want to make sure that they have a voice. They might also have a different perspective on how those policies might have some impacts that you haven't thought of. And you want to make sure that you're making decisions with rather than decisions for these young people.

Amanda Everett: One particular quote from that clip stood out to me. Kenya said, "We want to make decisions *with* this population and not *for* this population."

That's so powerful, because it's difficult to know the best way to support someone without hearing from them. It's important that these students have a voice, [00:16:00] especially as it relates to their care and their education.

Janelle Hughes: That stood out to me, also. I mean, having a voice is so critical.

For those listening, when you have a chance to visit our Website, rems.ed.gov, to hear the full webinar where Kenya and others share additional considerations for reopening schools, supporting homeless and displaced students and families, and incorporating these efforts into school emergency operations plans. We have covered quite a lot related to COOP planning and supporting homeless students and families today.

While we weren't able to cover everything, if you have any questions regarding these topics, or any additional school safety or preparedness topics, please do not hesitate to reach out to us via our toll-free phone line, 1-855-781-7367 or send us an email to info@remstacenter.org, and we will be [00:17:00] happy to provide technical assistance in response to your inquiry.

As a reminder, every state has a state coordinator for homeless education and every district has a local education liaison. Visit the National Center for Homeless Education's Website to access

information on your state and local coordinators and liaisons. We also encourage you to contact the National Center for Homeless Education's helpline at 1-800-308-2145 or send them an email at homeless@serve.org.

Thank you for tuning in today.