

**Written Testimony from Dr. James F. Lane**  
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**U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Education and Labor**  
**Early Childhood, Elementary, and Secondary Education Subcommittee Hearing**  
**(5/19/21):**  
***Picking up the Pieces: Strengthening Connections with Students Experiencing***  
***Homelessness and Children in Foster Care***

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**Introduction**

Good morning, Chairman Sablan, Ranking Member Owens, and Members of the House Education and Labor Committee's Subcommittee on Early Childhood, Elementary, and Secondary Education.

I am Dr. James Lane, Virginia's State Superintendent of Public Instruction, and I am pleased to have the opportunity to be here to share a bit about the student experience in Virginia during COVID-19, specifically how the pandemic has uniquely impacted our youth in foster care and students experiencing homelessness.

**Overview of the Impact of COVID-19**

The societal value and importance of our public school system is well-established, but I believe that for many of us, one of the most marked insights to come from the COVID-19 pandemic is just how critical a role our schools play in every aspect of our students' and families' lives. Schools are more than the educational experiences they provide; they serve as safe havens, as a reliable source of food, connection, and stability, and much more. This is particularly the case for some of our most vulnerable learners, namely our youth in foster care and students who are experiencing homelessness. The pandemic has also shone a bright light on the everyday, heroic efforts of teachers, principals, school counselors, and other school staff and their commitment to doing anything necessary to meet the needs of their students.

When schools closed in March of last year to help mitigate the spread of COVID-19 - albeit necessary for the public health and safety of our communities - the ripple effect of the decision disproportionately affected certain students. Notably, this includes those students in foster care or experiencing homelessness and housing instability who depend on our schools for vital wraparound services. Schools are essential for this population; the classroom is much more than a learning environment, it is a place of safety, routine, personal space, friendships, and support.<sup>1</sup> For a child, the classroom may be the only place where they can experience quiet, interact with others their age, and be recognized for success. And though our school divisions were quick to stand up their remote and virtual learning programs, our students without stable housing, reliable access to devices or broadband, or difficult home environments felt the effects of the pandemic in the most dramatic ways as it eliminated their connection to these vital services and supports, educational and otherwise.

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<sup>1</sup> Oakley & Kling, 2000; referenced in Stronge, J. H. & Reed-Victor, E. (Eds.) (2000). *Educating Homeless Students: Promising Practices*. Eye on Education: New York.

Meanwhile, families in Virginia, and around the country, have suffered from the economic repercussions of the pandemic, losing jobs, steady sources of income, and housing as a result. [Data from the January 2021 Point in Time](#) count show that the number of people experiencing homelessness in the Richmond, Virginia region increased by 53 percent year-over-year, from 546 people in January 2020 to 838 people in January 2021. This was the largest recorded number of people experiencing homelessness in the region since 2014 and has been attributed directly to the COVID-19 pandemic, ensuing financial crisis, and significant reduction in rental vacancies. And, we find similar trends across the state. Implicit in these numbers are that more students have lost their stable home environments, are transient, unsheltered, or have had to double-up in their housing arrangements. Virginia responded quickly in the pandemic to try and alleviate housing instability, and was one of the first states in the nation [to create a statewide rent and mortgage relief program](#) with federal Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act funds distributing more than \$83 million to families in the Commonwealth, the majority of which include children. Despite federal and state efforts to stabilize housing, homelessness continues to be a major challenge for families and students.

Not only did school closures in March have a direct academic, social, and emotional impact on youth in foster care and students experiencing homelessness, but the systems that support these students have also been tested in unprecedented ways. The demands of resourcing and providing meaningful support in remote environments is compounded by the difficulty of identifying students in need of such support. Remote learning has changed the ways schools and students engage with one another, and in some cases, this can disguise some of the tell-tale signs that students are struggling with more than just changes to instructional modalities and classroom environments. In fact, Virginia has seen a dramatic 85 percent decline in referrals of incidents of child abuse and neglect, a corresponding drop in the number of children entering foster care, as well as a 14 percent decrease in student homelessness despite evidence to the contrary from local partners, pediatricians, and others.

The ongoing impact of the pandemic also exacerbated conditions for families already under immense stress and pressure. Foster parents, foster-to-adopt families, and kinship caregivers, also referred to as resource families, are critical partners in child welfare and reunification processes but have been strained by the transition to remote learning for their foster care placements. Resource families, like many others, have struggled to secure and sustain childcare for their remote learners. Some have been reluctant to take on additional placements out of COVID-related health concerns. The stress, trauma, and logistical constraints of the pandemic have also increased the instances of conflict, sometimes requiring a child or family to leave a host home without other options in place.

It is for these reasons, in addition to the profound academic needs, that Virginia has worked to offer safe in-person learning to students since last summer. Virginia's preK-12 reopening guidance has been grounded in safely bringing back first those students most disproportionately impacted, including young learners, students with disabilities, and dual language learners and safely expanding beyond that to provide opportunities for all students to receive in-person instruction. This has been made possible only with the federal pandemic relief packages targeted to PreK-12 schools (CARES, CRF, CRSSA, ARP) to help divisions cover all manner of health and safety costs as well as educational technology and student support services.

Although our divisions have sought to significantly expand their in-person offerings throughout the year, there has been and continues to be great variation in the willingness of families to return to in-person learning. While a new Virginia law passed during our 2021 legislative session requires that all divisions offer full time in-person instruction next year, early data indicates continuing hesitancy from some families.<sup>2</sup> A recent poll conducted by the L. Douglas Wilder School for Government and Public Affairs at Virginia Commonwealth University indicates that 73 percent of parents are willing to send their children back to school next year, however, there are stark differences based on participant demographics. For example, 77 percent of parents making \$100,000 or more a year are willing to send their children back, but only 60 percent of parents making \$50,000 or less are comfortable doing so. Additionally, parents of color are two - three times less willing to send their students back as compared to their white counterparts. Therefore, as operational plans are made for the 2021-2022 school year, the Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) and our divisions will be working diligently to implement and communicate the efficacy of strong public health measures in place to protect students and staff alike. Direct outreach from schools to individual families to discuss and address concerns will be necessary in order for many parents to feel comfortable returning their children to the school environment.

Because of the broad-reaching impact of the pandemic and the resulting effects on children in foster care and students experiencing homelessness, there is an urgent and pressing need to maximize our current resources and be innovative in our approaches. New federal investments have been and will continue to be critical to ensuring that all of these children are both back in school in-person and connected to the services that we know will help them thrive. I would like to present some of the ways in which the VDOE, our state educational agency, and Virginia's local school divisions supported these students before the pandemic, innovated and adapted to the pandemic, worked to serve students in-person throughout the year under challenging circumstances, as well as reflect on some opportunities for us to further such critical work with the help of additional federal funding.

### **Virginia Background and History of Supporting Youth in Foster Care and Students Experiencing Homelessness**

Even prior to the pandemic, VDOE has worked to build strong networks and infrastructure for providing key student services to our vulnerable student populations. Through partnerships with other state agencies, institutions of higher education, and community-based organizations, VDOE seeks to help meet a range of needs for foster care students and students experiencing homelessness across the state through targeted outreach and service offerings.

#### *Youth in Foster Care*

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<sup>2</sup> [Senate Bill 1303](#) (2021)

Children and youth in out-of-home care average one to two residential placement changes per year, a rate of mobility greater than their peers not in foster care.<sup>3</sup> For these children and youth, a change in home placement frequently results in a change in school placement which is another very significant life event for our students. Virginia has long been recognized by federal technical assistance partners and other states for its leadership in strong interagency coordination at the state level to support the educational stability of students in foster care. VDOE works with other state agencies, such as the Virginia Department of Social Services (VDSS), to implement provisions of the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 (Fostering Connections) and the Title I, Part A provisions in the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) on behalf of our students in foster care. Further, joint guidance from Virginia's cross-agency partnerships focus on keeping students in the same school to provide continuity in education and maintain important relationships at school. This also provides stability during a traumatic time for the child as well as improving educational and life outcomes.

At the local level, VDOE collaborates with local child welfare agencies to help determine and meet the best interest determinations for students in transition. Additionally, interdisciplinary teams that represent education, social services, and community agencies work together to ensure case management and support for students still of school age and beyond.

Recognizing the volume of students in the foster care system, Virginia has invested in programs like the Children's Services Act Fostering Futures to ensure that youth in foster care who reach the age of 18 still have access to the services needed to facilitate a successful transition into adulthood for these youth. This work has been reinforced by legislation recently passed by the Virginia General Assembly to support and streamline enrollment for foster care students who have aged out of the system and are navigating the transition independently.<sup>4</sup>

#### *Students Experiencing Homelessness*

VDOE helps to ensure enrollment, attendance, and school success for students experiencing homelessness through public awareness efforts across the commonwealth and subgrants to local school divisions. A partner in this work is [Project HOPE](#), based at one of Virginia's public research universities, William and Mary. Through our statewide collaborative partnership with Project HOPE, VDOE is able to fund activities throughout the school year, including early childhood education, mentoring, tutoring, parent education, summer enrichment programs, and domestic violence prevention programs. Local school divisions are also able to employ federal and state funding to develop customized programs to meet the needs of homeless children and youth in their area. Local Homeless Education Programs supplement this effort, providing emergency services, referrals for health services, transportation, school supplies, and ease any barriers related to obtaining school records as available.

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<sup>3</sup> [Fostering Connections and the Every Student Succeeds Act: Joint Guidance for School Stability of Children and Youth in Foster Care Fostering Connections](#) (2017)

<sup>4</sup> [Senate Bill 275](#) (2020) and [House Bill 368](#) (2020)

[Virginia's ESSA Plan](#) sets out a framework for these initiatives and details the ways in which VDOE and Project Hope identify students, assess needs, support students and staff, as well as facilitate access to services as part of meeting the requirements of the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, Title IX, Part A of ESSA, for the education of homeless children and youth program. In service of the work outlined in Virginia's ESSA Plan, Virginia's McKinney-Vento liaisons have been indispensable to our efforts and success with providing for students experiencing homelessness. For more than 20 years, Virginia has had a McKinney-Vento liaison in each of its 132 local school divisions. Liaisons must be well-trained and readily accessible to families seeking help. Having a dedicated liaison and single point of contact in our local school divisions also means there is always someone on hand who understands each family's individual circumstances, which is invaluable to those our liaisons serve. Liaisons are also advocates for the success of our students and many have deep bonds to and relationships within their communities which further promotes their ability to link their students with the academic and social supports they need, inside and outside of school.

In addition to their direct service responsibilities, liaisons are a resource for state leadership and help to inform statewide policy and offer input on the policies and practices of the VDOE and Virginia Board of Education. For example, our liaisons have offered feedback and insight into the implementation of the state accreditation system since the 2018-2019 academic year, bringing a unique lens and perspective on how these changes have impacted and improved student experiences for those experiencing homelessness.

#### *Resourcing this Work*

Even before the increased demands of the pandemic, many of the services and support Virginia has been able to offer to foster care children and students facing homelessness relied, in part, on federal funds. Title I funding for the improvement of academic achievement for the disadvantaged, Title IX funding under the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), SNAP for Women, Infants, and Children, and the John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Program, among others, have made these programs possible.

### **Adapting our Approach during COVID-19**

#### *At the State-Level*

Virginia families, like those around the country, have been dramatically impacted by the pandemic. Job losses have led to housing instability and increases in rates of homelessness. These stressors are often linked to child abuse and neglect, which directly impacts the number of children entering the foster care system. The cascading effects of these experiences and trauma are a reminder of the need for long term, sustainable investments in services and supports for vulnerable families and students. However the school building closures in March 2020, coupled with students choosing or being required by their division to learn virtually this past year, have meant that school personnel have had a harder time quickly identifying students and families in need.

In light of COVID-19 and its repercussions for Virginia's public education system, Virginia has been fortunate in our ability to leverage existing capacity and strong resources to respond quickly and thoughtfully to ongoing and evolving pandemic conditions. We have also sought to amplify our support for Virginia's vulnerable learners and are working to ensure this augmented support carries into future years as students and families work through the ramifications of the pandemic.

Communication and information sharing has been a linchpin for our approach to supporting divisions in their work around foster care youth and students experiencing homelessness. Early in our response, VDOE convened stakeholders and work groups to develop guidance directed at serving students in foster care and homeless youth. This included developing and regularly updating user and family-friendly resources like our [Frequently Asked Questions page](#) and providing subject-specific guidance materials to practitioners in the field.

In response to some of the challenges we observed in facilitating foster care transitions, VDOE and VDSS utilized existing processes, such as notification forms and procedures for notifying schools when a child or youth in care is placed in a new residence during the school closures, and conducted joint training of school divisions and local departments of social services on this process. Staff from the VDOE and VDSS joint team have continued to meet through the pandemic and provide information and resources to local departments of social services. This guidance has ensured that the policies, practices and procedures ensure student safety, align with best interest determinations, and allowed access to remote learning opportunities. VDOE has also encouraged divisions to coordinate the provision of positive, proactive student engagement in learning when distance became a barrier to participation through a student's home school.

VDSS has worked to provide virtual family visitation for children and youth in foster care. Though a lack of access to technology poses a barrier for some, virtual visitation has largely been successful and many reports have found that families have maintained greater connection than prior to the pandemic. VDSS has also made various guidance changes to accommodate the realities of the pandemic, including working to provide adjusted payments to foster parents if children test positive for COVID-19 to help pay for treatment, identifying family-based foster homes that are willing to take children who have tested positive for COVID-19, and converting in-person trainings to virtual trainings for foster and adoptive parents. Family reunification hearings have also been made virtual and initial feedback from families has been positive, as the online hearings proceed at a slower pace and attending from home, as opposed to visiting a courtroom, is more comfortable for families.

Specific to our students experiencing homelessness, the office of the state coordinator for McKinney-Vento, based at William and Mary, created short videos with an overview of the McKinney-Vento program with a pandemic lens which liaisons could share with school staff. Videos were also paired with one-pagers focused on different staff roles (administrators, teachers, counselors, etc.). Similar resources were developed for early childhood providers. Our office of the state coordinator and our school nutrition staff stayed in contact with our liaisons to make sure they were aware of the changing rules for school meals and the issuance of pandemic electronic benefit transfers (P-EBT) to families, supported through federal dollars and is a lifeline for many.

To disseminate these resources and offer technical assistance, the office of the state coordinator began offering biweekly check-ins with our school division McKinney-Vento liaisons providing national and state updates and giving liaisons across the commonwealth a platform to ask each other questions and share challenges and successes. These meetings continue and have now begun focusing on the new America Rescue Plan-Homeless Children and Youth (ARP-HCY) funds.

Throughout the year, we have prioritized serving our most vulnerable learners in-person and ensuring students continue to receive necessary wrap-around services needed to thrive in such challenging circumstances. This has included continuing to prioritize foster care children and students experiencing homelessness in VDOE guidance and initiatives. For example, the agency developed [Social Emotional Learning Quick Guides](#), which were even recognized by the U. S Department of Education's Safer Schools and Campuses Best Practices Clearinghouse, that focused on supporting students in marginalized populations including homeless and foster youth. VDOE addressed these students through its comprehensive guidance for vulnerable learners in its [Recover, Redesign and Restart](#) document which was a comprehensive plan to move Virginia learners and educators forward through the pandemic and its impact. The VDOE has also developed resources for local school divisions through the [Virginia Leading Engaging Assessing Recovering Nurturing and Succeeding](#) (L.E.A.R.N.S.) taskforce to assist Virginia Educators in navigating uncertain times and specifically addressing learning loss for this population of learners.

As the 2021-2022 school year approaches, Virginia's local divisions are preparing to offer an in-person option for students per the new legislative mandate, but many families remain hesitant to send their students back in-person. The reasons vary, but include public health conditions, a student or family member's own vulnerable health status, or uncertainty or discomfort with the division's mitigation strategies. Therefore, because many of Virginia's schools will likely still have some hybrid and/or remote learning options for the 2021-2022 school year, VDOE has also developed additional guidance on setting benchmarks for success in virtual learning environments as well as when and how to engage students who may not thrive in the remote setting. These benchmarks will help divisions ensure that students disproportionately impacted by the pandemic and remote learning are appropriately placed in an environment next year that addresses all their instructional needs.

#### *At the Local-Level*

In Virginia, our local school divisions are responsible for the day-to-day supervision and oversight of our public schools. The effects of the pandemic not only impacted our students but placed a tremendous strain on our school divisions as they sought to find innovative and new ways to serve their students. Virginia's local school divisions have been exemplary in their response to the pandemic and exhausting their resources to support students under such unprecedented and challenging circumstances.

For our students in foster care, divisions have partnered with the local departments of social services in the joint decision-making process when one of their students moves into a new school division. These established pathways of communication were integral in supporting youth in foster care especially in facing new and unanticipated obstacles for maintaining consistency and stability for these children and youth.

McKinney-Vento liaisons have also mobilized to provide support to students experiencing homelessness in new and expanded ways. Securing meals has been among the many ways school division staff and McKinney-Vento liaisons provided for families during the pandemic. Liaisons have worked diligently since last March to guarantee students still receive their school meals and have gathered donations and food to meet broader family needs. Liaisons have attached flyers to meals served, which are a meaningful reminder to students and families that the liaison is still there to provide assistance despite school closures and remote learning. Other administrative and support staff positions have played an important role as well. One transportation director even drove well into another school division just to make sure a student had food they needed. Flexible federal pandemic relief funds have been essential to the success of such programs.



One outstanding local example in Virginia was with Richmond City Public Schools (RPS) and its liaison, which have been diligent in supporting its students and families in meeting a range of housing needs. The liaison partnered with a local shelter and was awarded a local Robins Foundation grant for a housing navigator as well as funding to cover first month's rent and security deposit for families connected to their McKinney-Vento Program. This school year, RPS has been able to connect about 30 families with 70 children to permanent housing and the success of the program has prompted its expansion into Henrico and Chesterfield counties. They created a housing guide with a step-by-step guide to best market a potential renter to a landlord and offers monthly group housing coaching open to all families. In their outreach, RPS has been thoughtful in considering needs beyond just housing and have sought to provide necessities such as diapers and formula needed for young children in the family. Liaisons have also helped families obtain important legal documents by hosting services like Department of Motor Vehicles Connect and birth certificate drop offs on a routine basis. This is one such example of how existing infrastructure funded by the McKinney-Vento resources have been essential in responding to the growing need created by the pandemic. However, it also illustrates that these innovative responses are emblematic of how communities, particularly those most fiscally stressed, have had to dedicate their own limited resources in the absence of sufficient state and federal funding.

In addition to helping students meet some of their essential needs, McKinney-Vento liaisons sought to procure computers for students who were homeless, find low-cost internet service, and create hot spots and other Wi-Fi access. They made sure students in a motel or other crowded spaces had a lap desk and noise-cancelling headphones to prevent distractions and were taught to use a virtual background to avoid feeling stigmatized by their surroundings. Liaisons reached out to parents, teaching them how to use the technology with some even hosting training sessions in their cafeterias when schools were closed during March 2020.

#### *Funding a New Approach*

As one might imagine, the scale and magnitude of this work during the pandemic has required a significant investment. Much of VDOE's and local school division's response to COVID-19 has been made possible through additional federal and state funding sources intended for pandemic relief and are indicative of the ongoing need for federal support, without which, essential programs would be forced to scale back or end. Both the CARES and the Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations (CRRSA) Act included earmarks for preK-12 education and Title I schools through their respective Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Funds (ESSER I and II Funds). Local school divisions are encouraged to reserve Title I, Part A funds for students experiencing homelessness whether or not they attend a Title I school. Uses for these funds have helped scale up programs that provide student support services, including personnel costs for homeless liaisons or other school social worker and administrative positions, transportation, professional development, and school supplies are most common. Among the initiatives undertaken with the state discretionary set-asides was an effort to make social emotional learning screeners available to divisions to help better assess the impact of the pandemic on social-emotional well-being and respond effectively to students who need the additional support.

Early in its response, Virginia created a statewide rent and mortgage relief program with CARES ACT funds. As of February 2021, the program has distributed more than \$83 million to families, many with children and students, across the Commonwealth. Virginia has also been able to maintain its rent relief program with the help of an additional \$524 million in federal funding through the Emergency Rental Assistance (ERA) program included in the federal stimulus package and will assist households and landlords with rent payments to avoid eviction.



Even with federal funding, need has outpaced new resources and required the state and local school divisions to find creative funding solutions for critical initiatives. VDOE has been able to leverage existing funds to support more divisions. For example, funding through McKinney-Vento and Title IX, Part A of ESSA is the main vehicle for supporting students experiencing homelessness but in a normal year, competitive grants only reach about 35 school divisions. The office of the state coordinator awarded non-subgrants via McKinney-Vento funding to school divisions that would not normally receive subgrants, increasing the number of divisions receiving direct funding at a time when it was needed most. VDOE has also been able to repurpose funds appropriated to the state educational agency and generally used for travel expenses related to training and federal program monitoring to support virtual platforms for meeting with families and services providers this past year. VDSS has directed local departments of social services to use federal funds through the John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Program to continue awarding stipends to help young adults maintain housing, and is actively working to increase access to SNAP, WIC and unemployment benefits for these individuals.

Virginia has also been fortunate that many of our school communities have been incredibly responsive to supporting its schools. In rural Southampton County, local sorority chapters donated to Southampton County Public Schools McKinney-Vento Program and we received stories that the liaison's office was overflowing with items to distribute to their families. Meanwhile, Spotsylvania County Public Schools orchestrated one-to-one parent training for their families living in the local motels. Roanoke City Public Schools is collaborating with their United Way and has funds donated by the community they can use to assist families who are experiencing or are on the verge of homelessness. This gives them a way to help families and students with non-education needs, such as paying an electric bill, providing funds to prevent an eviction or assisting with obtaining permanent housing. The liaison has gotten creative with other funders who paid off some judgments that cleared the way for families to access stable housing options.

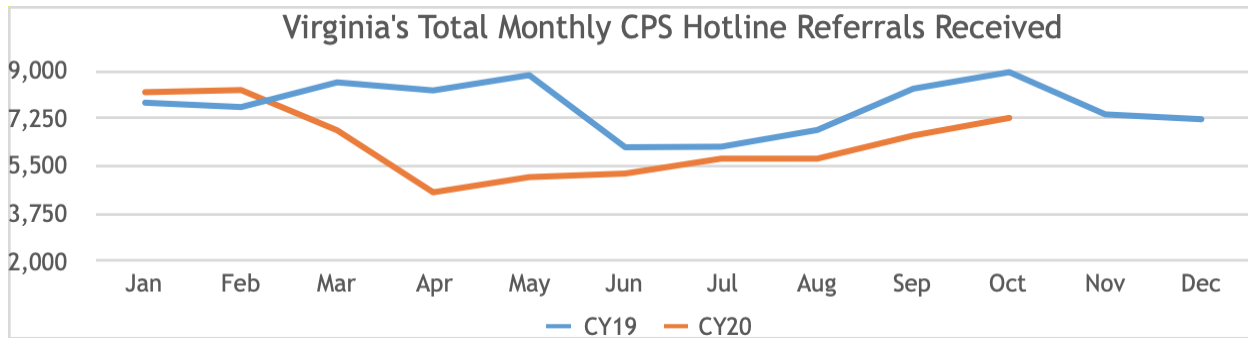
While these funding solutions are exemplary of spirit and innovation, they are not sustainable on their own and need to be supplemented by federal funding sources like the ARP-HCY. And, as we continue to observe the compounding impacts of the pandemic, both direct and indirect, on divisions and students, the ongoing need to resource programs and initiatives that help address long-term burdens are and will continue to be necessary.

## **Ongoing Challenges**

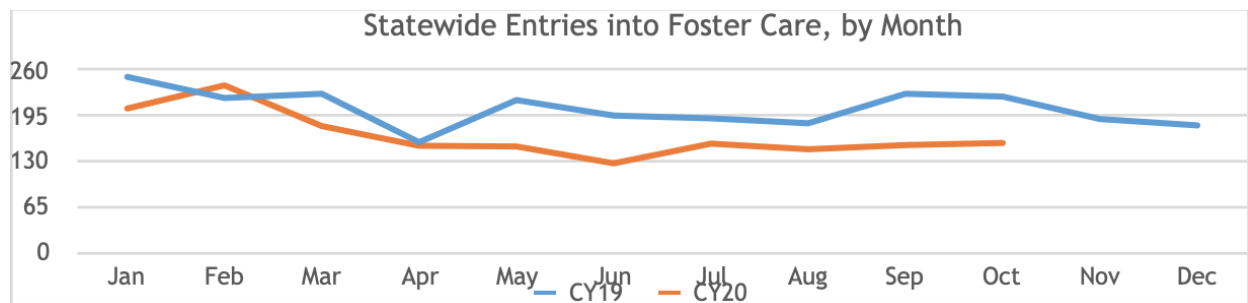
The pandemic created new sets of challenges for our students, families, and schools as well as brought to the forefront disparities that already existed in the system. Despite our best efforts to adapt and respond, there have undoubtedly been challenges and many persist as it relates to foster care youth and students experiencing homelessness. And, while some of these issues were more pronounced in remote educational environments, the ongoing transition to in-person learning has not itself resolved these widespread challenges. State and local leaders are planning for the long-term implications of the disruptions the pandemic created for families and communities, and will need sustained flexible financial resources in order to truly address the full impact of the pandemic on these vulnerable students.

### *Declines in the Number of Child Abuse and Neglect Reports*

The foster care system in Virginia remains operational and effective at identifying and tracking the whereabouts of this particular subset of students already in foster care, but the remote academic environment has made it difficult to recognize other signs and signals of student distress. Virginia has seen a reduction in the incidents of abuse and neglect reported to Child Protective Services statewide. VDSS reported the number of calls to the Child Abuse and Neglect Hotline and differences in reporter sources as the referrals from school personnel decreased by over 85percent.

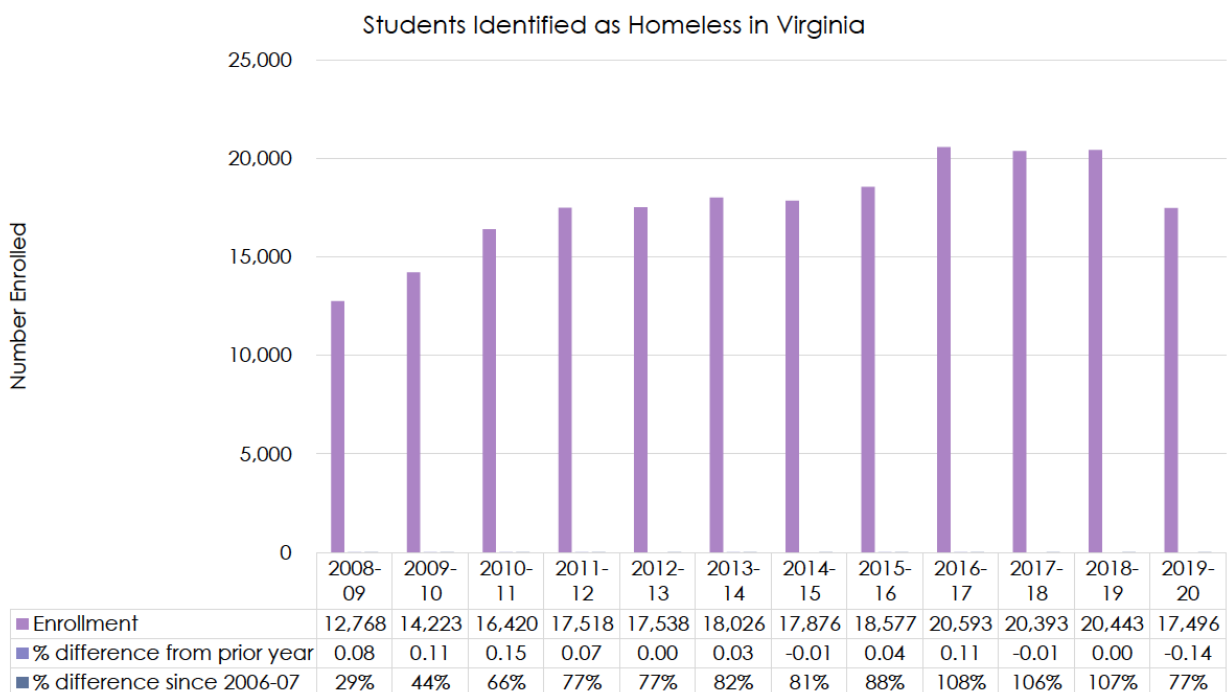


Because of the decrease in the number of calls to the CPS Hotline, there was also a decrease in the number of investigations and family assessments as well as children entering foster care as compared to 2019.



#### *Declines in the Number of Students Identified as Experiencing Homelessness*

The number of students identified as experiencing homelessness decreased by 14 percent in 2019-2020 as compared to the previous year. McKinney-Vento liaisons have also reported continued low identification rates as the 2020-2021 academic year began.



What normally would be considered a promising trend, this data is a cause for concern. In the remote environment, educators are limited in the ways they can observe and meaningfully engage with their students on a routine basis, making it more difficult to detect red flags such as absenteeism, withdrawal, etc. thus reducing their ability to identify issues that lead to mandated reports of instances of child abuse and neglect.

VDOE and VDSS have circulated resources regarding how to identify concerns in a virtual environment to assist educators in their roles as mandated reporters. Additionally, VDOE has offered guidance to divisions on how they might rethink their attendance tracking and monitoring practices in a way that prioritizes connection, and student well-being within the hybrid and virtual environments. For example, VDOE recommended schools consider how to utilize different instructional personnel across the week, so teachers have a shared responsibility and workload for outreach but each student has a meaningful engagement with a teacher everyday. Additionally, we offered suggestions for ways to track engagement in remote and hybrid environments so any need for intervention was quickly identified.

However, school divisions continue to affirm these challenges, many reporting increases in absenteeism rates and having had trouble reaching vulnerable student populations, especially our families experiencing homelessness for the first time. They have shared instances of disconnected phones, unanswered communications, and even students having moved without a need or ability to inform the division. In cases where staff or a liaison may have followed up with a home visit under normal circumstances, quarantine and other safety factors have limited this type of outreach over the last year. The difficulty identifying these issues limits a teacher or divisions ability to intervene and respond.

The impacts of remote learning on our foster care youth and students experiencing homelessness are felt in the classroom as well. The same systemic concerns, like access to the necessary devices, reliable broadband, basic needs, familial supports, that can contribute to student disengagement or absence from the classroom also create subpar remote learning environments.

Additionally, absenteeism itself has detrimental effects on student outcomes. Virginia's state accreditation model recognizes the causal link between absenteeism and student outcomes. A necessary prerequisite for learning is being present to get the content and inversely, absences cause gaps in exposure to content and understanding as well as erode key relationships with teachers and peers. Though, as Superintendent of Public Instruction, I have been able to offer some relief to school divisions in waiving our state accreditation system this year, our disengaged students, notably foster care children and students experiencing homelessness, are at risk of missing opportunities to develop the critical knowledge, skills, and abilities they need to be successful. And, because the length of time away from the classroom increases the difficulty of reassimilating, these students and their educators will need to work harder to recover from learning loss and build new connections.

Remote learning presents a unique set of challenges, but even as communities have reopened and divisions heeded the Governor's call to transition back to in-person learning, many of these challenges for our vulnerable learners will remain an obstacle. Efforts to re-engage those students with their coursework must be redoubled if those students are to ultimately succeed academically. Virginia's recent experience with addressing absenteeism and truancy as a state accreditation consideration will provide a sound foundation for many divisions. However, schools will likely need to leverage federal financial resources to scale those efforts and ensure all students are meaningfully engaging with their academics as we transition out of the pandemic further.

This need for additional support comes at a time in Virginia when there are already teacher shortages and the strain of the past fifteen months have deterred some teachers from returning to their classrooms or their careers. Anecdotally, divisions are reporting that they are struggling to fill summer school positions and the increased positions necessary to provide tailored instruction to students as they return full time in person next fall. In order to provide sound, evidence-based remediation and instructional support, as well as social, emotional, and mental health support to students who have experienced significant traumas over the last year, schools will need to leverage federal resources for additional staff positions. However, workforce shortages and significant burnout may inhibit the ability of schools to do so successfully. Virginia fully intends to use some of the state set-aside from our federal pandemic relief funds to support statewide efforts to recruit and retain teachers and support staff in the wake of the pandemic.

The effect of absenteeism and teacher shortages on student success are particularly relevant examples of both the real-time consequences of the pandemic but also examples of the legacies that the pandemic will leave behind long after the public health crisis. We continue to do our best in anticipating the long-term impacts of COVID-19 for students and educators and address those concerns, like learning loss, head on. But, an ongoing challenge of this work will be ensuring the resources keep up with the need and dedicating adequate resources to those who need them the most.

## **Opportunities**

Educators in Virginia have done incredible work over the past year to find and create solutions to these challenges, bringing students safely back to school in-person, while also tackling issues of access to broadband, meal services, social services, mental health supports, virtual connection to support networks, etc, for homeless and foster youth. We know more work lies ahead and recognize there are a number of opportunities for us to both innovate with existing state and federal resources and invest in those priorities we will know will make a difference in our schools and students' lives.

A silver lining of the pandemic has been the growth and transformation in the way we leverage technology. As an agency, technology has helped us streamlining our communications to divisions and creating efficiencies in how we share information more and offer technical assistance. For example, as additional sources of federal funding have come online, VDOE has been able to quickly and effectively support divisions in deploying funds to support critical initiatives and also get a better understanding of division needs and priorities so that the agency can offer meaningful guidance. For instance, as the COVID-19 relief funds (ESSER I and II) were being released, the VDOE state coordinator held multiple virtual listening sessions with liaisons and other stakeholders to identify needs and meaningful ways the funds could be used. Later, the state coordinator was included in VDOE presentations to school division leaders when the funds and uses were being explained. Additionally, VDSS has used technology to provide virtual connections and family visitations with foster youth. This increased connectivity will continue to be invaluable as we hear from our local partners on forthcoming grant funding and support, such as the ARP support for homeless children and youth.

In our classrooms, technology has been a source of continuity and innovation for our educational system, allowing students to continue learning even when social distancing and logistical challenges limited the ways we could safely return to the classroom. On school days that would have been missed in the past, divisions are able to bring the classroom, including teachers and peers, to the student. Technology has also expanded our opportunities for connecting students with services, like telehealth, helping to keep students safe and healthy. Even in its limitations, remote learning and the technology that has supported it has been especially critical for providing as many supports and services to foster care youth and students experiencing homelessness as possible. Federal funding sources will continue to help bridge gaps in making sure students have the devices and connectivity they need to benefit from these enhancements.

While technology and virtual resources continue to evolve and expand what our schools can offer their students, for those like our youth in foster care and students experiencing homelessness, there is no substitute for the in-person learning experience. It is an important component of restoring safety and stability for these kids and VDOE has been an advocate for returning to in-person learning, while allowing school divisions flexibility to make decisions based on the nuances of their community and local health factors. With updated guidance from CDC and the Virginia Department of Health (VDH), most students that want to have begun transitioning back into the classroom in Virginia. But even after every hesitant families return and every school division returns to full in-person learning next year, there will still be significant logistical and operational needs to maintain safe and healthy learning environments. Whether a small or large division, these operational expenses can be burdensome and the federal pandemic relief funding (CARES, CRF, CRSSA, and ARP) allow divisions to reopen their doors safely and successfully. Once back in the classroom, we know that the lasting trauma of the pandemic will not immediately recede. All students will need additional instructional and wraparound supports to be successful in moving forward.

Trauma will be particularly palpable for those students who were already subject to instability. Prior to the pandemic, Virginia struggled to secure sufficient funding to meet all the requests from school divisions when McKinney-Vento funds were awarded on a competitive basis. In order to address significant new need, the American Rescue Plan (ARP) provided \$800M in direct funding to support students experiencing homelessness and will increase from \$1.7 million last year to an additional \$13 million above our normal McKinney-Vento award, allowing us to reach many more families and communities across the Commonwealth and continue our creative endeavors for improving outreach.

As noted earlier, only 35 percent of divisions receive funding through McKinney-Vento when awarded competitively. Though we have extended the reach of these funds already, the ARP will help to sustain division programs and efforts. This will be crucial in supporting liaisons and allowing them to do more of their work, better. And, because of the flexibility in allowable uses, this additional federal funding provides an opportunity to scale new, creative support programs that had formerly relied on local grants such as the Richmond example where families are not only connected with housing options, but the financial assistance necessary to secure it.

As more guidance from the U.S. Department of Education becomes available, more of our potential programming options will continue to take shape. A priority for the agency will be to build out new and existing training opportunities for divisions and staff in the provision of important student services. For our local school divisions additional hiring has been a common theme for how they are considering the deployment of funds. This might include the hiring of navigators to assist our families in accessing all the extra resources out there, employing recent graduates with lived experience to be near-peer mentors for our older high school students, or bringing on additional student services personnel to assist in wrap-around case management. Divisions are also exploring partnerships with the available runaway and homeless youth programs in Virginia to create more host homes for our older unaccompanied youth. We have heard from other divisions thinking about providing bilingual mental health for their newcomers who meet our definition and others are interested in having their McKinney-Vento materials translated. Additionally, there is interest in finding more opportunities for engaging our impacted youth voice, ensuring their voice and ideas are heard, and that funds are used to reach our underserved students.

Funding from the ARP will not only allow us to mend the gap and provide resources to programs and initiatives that have been under-resourced, but it is also an opportunity for us to shift our thinking from reactive to proactive, addressing the now alongside planning for the ongoing implications. VDOE is in the process of setting up a tracking and evaluation process for any funds based on the allowance for wraparound support like housing. This will help us show how these funds directly improve the lives of our families and students and we can capture creative ideas that might be fundable. This will also potentially be a resource to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, providing evidence-based data on the use and effectiveness of certain programming. Expansion of McKinney-Vento services have also highlighted a number of lessons-learned in terms of programming and supporting students.

## **Conclusion**

I thank you for your time today and the opportunity to share some of the ways in which Virginia school leaders are striving to meet the vast and growing needs of our vulnerable learners, including our students experiencing homelessness and youth in foster care. As you have heard this morning, much of VDOE's and local school division's response to COVID-19 has been made possible through additional federal funding sources intended for pandemic relief.

Though we have much to be optimistic about as we begin to emerge from the pandemic, we are certain that the various trauma and impacts of the last year will ripple through the lives of students, families, communities, and schools for years to come. Both foster care and homelessness numbers are lagging indicators and we will be identifying students and families in crisis for many more months or even years. I hope it has been clear today that Virginia has experienced and committed leaders who have demonstrated their ability to strategically leverage resources and innovate to meet the growing demand for services amidst very challenging circumstances. However, the scale and nature of these challenges will require continued, sustained and flexible resources to ensure that states can be responsive to and ensure that supports for these students and their families continue long after the pandemic has passed. On behalf of Virginia's students and school leaders, thank you for the significant federal investments that have been made to date in our schools and students, and for your consideration of continued future investments to meet the significant and long-term need.