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THE TASSEL IS WORTH THE HASSLE: A CASE STUDY OF STUDENTS EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS GRADUATING HIGH SCHOOL

A Dissertation

Presented to the

The Faculty of the School of Education

The College of William and Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

By

Martha Crockett

May 2024

Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my mom and dad. Thank you for all the opportunities and support you have given me throughout my academic career. I love you so much.

"Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance,
and endurance produces character, and character produces hope,
and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts
through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us." Romans 5: 3-5

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Second, I would like to acknowledge Dr. Patricia Popp, for the time and energy she has invested in me as both my supervisor and as a committee member. Thank you for introducing me to the needs of students experiencing homelessness and igniting my passion for helping these children and youth. I now know it was no coincidence that I was placed at Project Hope, and I am so appreciative of the mentorship and care you have shown me.

Third, I would like to acknowledge Dr. Megan Tschannen-Moran. I will forever remember the warm welcome and the connection to Project Hope, as well as the permission to "play in the sandbox" while developing research interests. Thank you for teaching me the importance of good scholarship and research skills and for cheering me on during each phase of this program.

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Abstract

The purpose of Education for Homeless Children and Youth (EHCY) program in the *McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act* (2015) is to protect the educational rights of students experiencing homelessness across the United States. Despite the coordinated efforts of State and Local Educational Agencies to carry out these mandates and ensure equitable academic opportunities, students in unstable living conditions are graduating high school at lower rates than their housed peers both in Virginia and throughout the nation. This study investigated the facilitating factors and barriers that influence the ability of students experiencing homelessness to graduate high school. The research questions addressed facilitating factors and barriers, as well as the perceived impact of a high school diploma and recommendations for various educators and other stakeholders, using Resiliency Theory as a background theoretical framework. In this single-site case study, I interviewed six high school graduates and eight school district personnel within a selected school district in Virginia, through two researcher-developed instruments, the High School Graduate Semi-Structured Interview and the School District Personnel Semi-Structured Interview. Results revealed that all participants understood the value of the diploma as a measurement of personal success and a predictor of future options and opportunities. Additionally, relationships fostered through good communication and small community settings played a critical role in helping students feel supported and connecting them to the services they needed to be successful. Teachers and counselors, as well as McKinney-Vento staff, were vital to ensuring students' basic, emotional, and academic needs are met. The results of this study are significant, in terms of providing scholars and practitioners insights on next steps to closing the high school graduation gap between stably and unstably housed students.

THE TASSEL IS WORTH THE HASSLE: A CASE STUDY OF STUDENTS EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS GRADUATING HIGH SCHOOL

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Background

In the United States, homelessness is a critical social issue that negatively affects students' engagement in school and, consequently, academic achievement (Buckner, 2008; Miller, 2011; Pavlakis et al., 2017). Despite the creation and implementation of the Education for Homeless Children and Youth (EHCY) program in the *McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act* (2015), whose purpose is to ensure equitable educational opportunities for students experiencing homelessness, this population is graduating high school at lower rates than their domiciled peers (Atwell, 2021; Hatchimonji et al., 2021). In the 2018-19 school year, the national graduation rate for students who experienced homelessness was 68% compared to 86% for the general population (Atwell, 2021; National Center for Homeless Education, 2022). This discrepancy is of concern, considering the high school diploma serves as a significant predictor of adult autonomy, personal health and well-being, labor market participation, and the ability to contribute positively to society (Haycock, 2010; Kull, Morton, et al., 2019; Lansford et al., 2016; Maynard et al., 2015; Ross & Wu, 1995; Vilorio, 2016; Yamarik, 2011; Zajacova & Lawrence, 2018). To narrow this achievement gap, educators, policy makers, and the community at large need to develop a better understanding of what factors are simultaneously facilitating and hindering the ability of students experiencing homelessness to graduate high school.

McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act

Subtitle VII, Part B of the *McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act* (McKinney-Vento Act), most recently reauthorized as Title IX, Part A of the *Every Student Succeeds Act* (2015), is the primary federal legislation related to the education of children and youth experiencing homelessness. According to this statute, homelessness is defined as the lack of a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence, with examples including stays in emergency or transitional shelters, bus or train stations, and motels or campgrounds when alternative adequate accommodations are not available, as well as instances of being doubled-up with friends or family due to the loss of housing, economic hardship, or similar reason, such as violence in the home (McKinney-Vento Act, 2015). Further, state and local educational agencies are required to oversee the review and revision of all educational policies that may affect these students, the identification of students who meet the definition of homelessness, and the delivery of full and equitable opportunities for these students to succeed in school (McKinney-Vento Act, 2015). While the *McKinney-Vento Act* has had profound formative influence in terms of support services offered and student outcomes achieved since its inception in 1987, educational stakeholders continue to explore ways in which implementation efforts can be improved (Ausikaitis et al., 2015; Hallett et al., 2015; Miller, 2011; Miller et al., 2015; Pavlakis et al., 2017; Stone & Uretsky, 2016).

Impact of Homelessness on Student Well-Being and Achievement

Homelessness directly affects the well-being of students, as this phenomenon itself is traumatic (Brumley et al., 2015; Coates & McKenzie-Mohr, 2010; Hatchimonji et al., 2021; Shinn et al., 2008; K. Tyler & Cauce, 2002) and escalates the likelihood of cumulative risk (Cutuli, 2018; Masten et al., 2015; Murphy & Tobin, 2011; Thistle-Elliot, 2014). Researched

consequences of homelessness on children's physical health include lack of prenatal care and immunization delays, increased rates of respiratory infections, skin problems, nutritional deficiencies, and chronic illness (David et al., 2012; Edidin et al., 2012; Masten, 1992; Murphy & Tobin, 2011; Rafferty & Shinn, 1991; Wynne et al., 2013). Tolls on children's mental health, which can be related to maltreatment, loneliness, depression, anxiety, and behavioral problems, also have been documented (Coates & McKenzie-Mohr, 2010; Fantuzzo & Perlman, 2007; Kidd & Shahar, 2008; Rafferty & Shinn, 1991; Swick & Williams, 2010). In particular, young people experiencing homelessness have higher rates of posttraumatic stress disorder than their peers in the general population (Bender et al., 2010). Additionally, mortality rates for these youth can be up to 40 times that of the general population, for which suicide and drug overdose have been identified as the leading causes of death (Kidd & Shahar, 2008). The acute adversities associated with homelessness, which can vary from disruption of routines, loss of housing or possessions, or substance abuse to domestic violence and sex trafficking, collectively threaten the ability of students experiencing homelessness to function both in school and at home (Cutuli, 2018; Flatley et al., 2022; Murphy & Tobin, 2011).

Homelessness can negatively interfere with student academic engagement, in terms of attendance, discipline, and support services (Miller, 2011; Murphy & Tobin, 2011; Stone & Uretsky, 2016). Attendance alone is a key mechanism through which homelessness can deter students from opportunities to learn (Murphy & Tobin, 2011; Stone & Uretsky, 2016). In some cases, homelessness can relate to the delivery of fewer special education services (Masten, 1992; Rubenstein et al., 2022). In others, students may be inappropriately identified for services, based on trauma or residential mobility (Ingram et al., 2017). Generally, students experiencing homelessness have increased rates of grade retention, lower rates of literacy and math

achievement, and poor to average grades (Cutuli et al., 2013; Fantuzzo et al., 2012; Murphy & Tobin, 2011). Youth experiencing homelessness are also more likely to be suspended, expelled, or drop out of school (Edwards, 2020; Erb-Downward & Blakeslee, 2021; Murphy & Tobin, 2011).

In broad terms, scholars have discovered negative relationships between student homelessness and academic outcomes (Cutuli et al., 2013; de Gregorio et al., 2022; Fantuzzo et al., 2012; Herbers et al., 2012; Kull, Morton, et al., 2019; Miller, 2011; Obradović et al., 2009; Pavlakis et al., 2017). Typically, studies on this group's performance in school have largely focused on three strands: psycho-social and academic profiles, combination of homelessness and other socio-demographic factors, and individual differences within samples of children experiencing homelessness (Stone & Uretsky, 2016). Researchers also have investigated the effects of overlapping factors, such as the timing and duration of homelessness (de Gregorio et al., 2022); vulnerabilities associated with poverty (Evans, 2004; Masten et al., 2015); chronic adversities or traumatic events (Coates & McKenzie-Mohr, 2010); and elevated health problems (Murphy & Tobin, 2011; Wynne et al., 2013) on these students' experiences at school and in turn their likelihood to succeed. Overall, the variety of conflicting findings and implications on the relationship between homelessness and academic achievement in this body of research illuminate the heterogeneous nature of the homeless experience and outcomes, according to the multitude of unique variables involved in students' personal situations (Miller, 2011; Obradović et al., 2009). However, more recently, there has been a paradigm shift from a deficit-focused to a strengths-based perspective, which highlights resilience and abilities to overcome adversity, rather than risk factors and negative outcomes (Bender et al., 2007; Clemens et al., 2018; Cronley, 2017; Masten et al., 2014; Masten et al., 2015).

Significance of a High School Diploma

Although homelessness can adversely influence a variety of academic milestones across the span of K-12 schooling, one of the most significant consequences is high school graduation (Kull, Morton, et al., 2019; Murphy & Tobin, 2011). In particular, results of the Voices of Youth Count national survey conveyed that youth who did not complete high school were 4.5 times more likely to experience homelessness than their peers who did complete high school, and the greatest risk factor for unaccompanied homeless youth was not completing high school (Kull, Morton, et al., 2019). Leaving the public school system without a high school diploma can increase the likelihood of limited future opportunities in the labor market, which in turn perpetuates cycles of inequality and poverty (Bjerk, 2012; Oreopoulos, 2007; Sweeten et al., 2009). Conversely, more education is associated with better health and lower levels of morbidity and disability, explained through better work and economic conditions, social-psychological resources, and healthy lifestyles (Haycock, 2010; Ross & Wu, 1995; Zajacova, 2012; Zajacova & Lawrence, 2018). In fact, "few medical interventions can match the impact of education on life expectancy" (Haycock, 2010, p. 116). There are also noteworthy distinctions between the continuing education, employment, and health outcomes of high school graduates versus General Education Development (GED) certificate recipients (Boesel, 1998; Cameron & Heckman, 1993; J. H. Tyler, 2003; Zajacova, 2012). Actually, outcomes for individuals who complete the GED resemble more closely those for high school dropouts than high school graduates (Zajacova, 2012). Given these and many other related factors, it is abundantly clear that a high school diploma is vital to the future of all students, including those experiencing homelessness.

Status of Homeless Education in Virginia

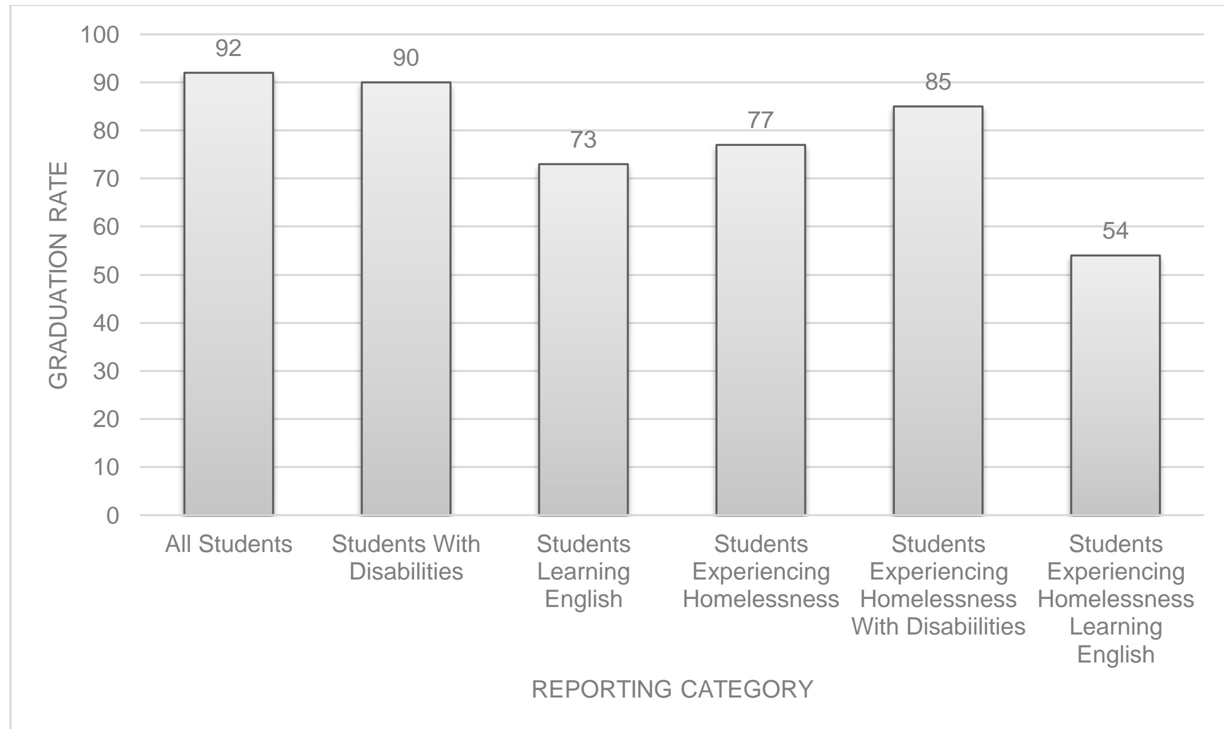
The Virginia Department of Education (2022d) collects and reports a variety of data on public education, encompassing topics such as enrollment, demographics, student achievement, finances, school climate, staffing and safety. In terms of graduation data, all students are assigned to graduation cohorts equivalent to four years in high school for which graduation and dropout rates are calculated based on longitudinal student-level data, accounting for student mobility, retention, and promotion patterns (Virginia Department of Education, 2022c). The Virginia On-Time Graduation Rate is the state's official graduation rate, which depicts the percentage of students who earn any Board of Education-approved diploma within 4 years, including students receiving special education services or learning English whose educational plans allow additional years in high school (Virginia Department of Education, 2022a). This rate differs from the Federal Graduation Indicator, a stricter measure used for federal accountability, representing the percentage of students who earn only Standard, Advanced Students, or International Baccalaureate diplomas within four years (Virginia Department of Education, 2022a). Given its ability to capture a wider range of student demographics and backgrounds, in addition to diverse pathways and timelines to the high school diploma, the Virginia On-Time Graduation Rate has been selected as the achievement standard for this study. When data concerning students experiencing homelessness are presented throughout, they convey students who encountered housing instability any time in the four years, not strictly in the senior year.

In the 2021-22 school year, 1,091 out of 98,722 high school seniors across Virginia were identified as experiencing homelessness (Virginia Department of Education, n.d.-a). According to Virginia On-Time Graduation rate data (Virginia Department of Education, n.d.-a) presented in Figure 1, 92% of the general population, in contrast with 77% of students experiencing

homelessness, earned high school diplomas that year. 90% of students with disabilities, and 85% of students experiencing homelessness with a disability, graduated. These rates, which are both higher than the one for students solely experiencing homelessness, could be explained by a number of factors, related to personalized instruction and services offered by a team of school personnel, additional time allowances, or credit allowances, articulated in Individualized Education Programs (IEPs), that would ultimately contribute to the school stability and achievement of these students (Virginia Department of Education, 2022b). Graduation rates were lower for students learning English, with the graduation rate being 73%. For students experiencing homelessness and learning English, the graduation rate was only 54%.

Figure 1

Virginia On-Time Graduation Rates, 2022



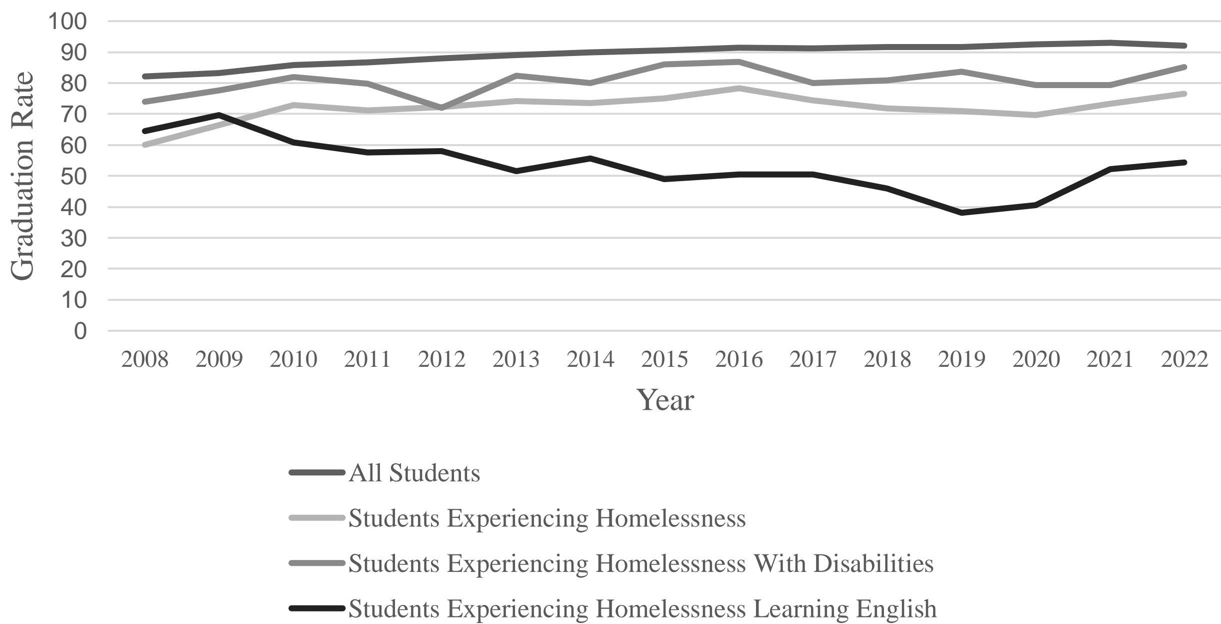
Note. Sourced from Virginia Department of Education (n.d.-a)

In addition to this recent snapshot, longitudinal state data (Virginia Department of Education, n.d.-a) reveal the ongoing discrepancy in high school graduation rates among reporting categories comparing stably and unstably housed students (Figure 2). Although there is variation across achievement for students experiencing homeless and those who also have a disability or are learning English, students in all three groups have graduated at lower rates than the general population since the Virginia Department of Education began reporting this data in 2008. Because of the greater cumulative risk students experiencing homelessness endure (Cutuli, 2018; Masten et al., 2015; Murphy & Tobin, 2011; Thistle-Elliot, 2014), they need support ranging from proper identification and screening to holistic care without stigma in order to

increase their chances of a successful transition into adulthood (Masten, 2014; Miller, 2011; Pavlakis et al., 2017; Tobin & Murphy, 2013).

Figure 2

Virginia Longitudinal On-Time Graduation Rates, 2008 –2022



Note. Sourced from Virginia Department of Education (n.d.-a)

Statement of Purpose

In Virginia, students experiencing homelessness are graduating high school at lower rates than their peers in stable housing (National Center for Homeless Education, 2022; Virginia Department of Education, n.d.-a), which can present both short- and long-term barriers to successful transitions from childhood into adulthood. These youth have greater levels of cumulative associated risk due to the lack of comfortable and secure home environments (Cutuli, 2018; Masten et al., 2015; Murphy & Tobin, 2011; Thistle-Elliot, 2014). In addition to

graduation rate data collected by the Virginia Department of Education (n.d.-a), a growing body of research (Ausikaitis et al., 2015; Aviles de Bradley, 2008; Hallett et al., 2015; Miller, 2011; Miller et al., 2015; Pavlakis et al., 2017; Stone & Uretsky, 2016) underscores past shortcomings of McKinney-Vento implementation efforts, in terms of comprehensively meeting the needs of students experiencing homelessness. The vulnerabilities and stigma associated with homelessness (Murphy & Tobin, 2011; Toolis & Hammack, 2015; Wynne et al., 2013) also make it challenging for these students to be properly identified and receive services to which they are entitled under the *McKinney-Vento Act* (2015). Ultimately, these collective barriers result in unfavorable repercussions related to high school graduation and adult outcomes (Arnold & Doctoroff, 2003; Cobb-Clark & Zhu, 2017; Foster & Miller, 2007; Miller, 2011). Because "few events have the power to affect life in negative directions more than homelessness" (Murphy & Tobin, 2011, p. 33), educational stakeholders need to not only understand the challenges to these students' personal and academic success, but also remedy them, as mandated by the *McKinney-Vento Act* (2015; Paradise & Cause, 2002).

The purpose of this single-site case study was to explore the factors that contributed to the successful high school graduation of students who experienced homelessness in Bethany City (pseudonym) in Virginia. Bethany City presents itself as one of 24 out of 131 school districts across the state with a 2022 Virginia On-Time Graduation Rate of 68% or above for students experiencing homelessness (Table 1). To increase the number of high school diplomas awarded to students who have experienced homelessness, educational stakeholders need to honor the voices of individuals with lived expertise (Edwards, 2021; Ozer & Piatt, 2017; Thompson et al., 2016; Zhang et al., 2020) and understand the impact of adult involvement at the local level (Miller, 2011; Murphy & Tobin, 2011; Wynne et al., 2013). Therefore, semi-structured

interviews with graduates from the Bethany City Classes of 2022 and 2023, as well as with school district personnel, were conducted as a means of understanding the unique combinations of factors related to environments, resources, people, and personal characteristics and skills that enabled the students in this single-site case to successfully earn their high school diplomas. Using this school district as an exemplar can provide ideas to both scholars and practitioners for new avenues of research and intervention development.

Table 1

2022 Virginia On-Time Graduation Rates of Students Experiencing Homelessness in Selected School Districts (68% or above)

District	On-Time Graduation %	No. of On-Time Graduates
Albemarle County	90	*
Arlington County	92	11
Bedford County	82	*
Chesapeake City	82	18
Chesterfield County	78	45
Fauquier County	90	*
Frederick County	88	21
Hampton City	100	11
Henrico County	70	35
Loudoun County	76	87
Montgomery County	73	*
Newport News City	91	20
Norfolk City	87	26
Patrick County	90	*
Portsmouth City	68	13
Prince William County	86	43
Richmond City	89	25
Roanoke City	83	24
Stafford County	80	12
Virginia Beach City	78	35
Williamsburg James City	90	18
Winchester City	70	*
Wise County	84	21
York County	75	15

Note. Sourced from Virginia Department of Education (n.d.-a)
* < 10 graduates

Theoretical Framework

This study operated under the Resilience Theory framework, which describes students' abilities to reach successful outcomes by overcoming adversities through a variety of coping skills and environmental supports (Masten, 2018; Rosen et al., 2019; Shean, 2015). This framework aligns with a general shift in research on youth homelessness away from deficit-focused toward competence-focused approaches (Cronley & Evans, 2017; Masten, 2011; Thompson et al., 2016). Resilience can be defined as, "the capacity of a dynamic system to adapt successfully to disturbances that threaten system function, viability, or development" (Masten et al., 2014, p. 6). It is a combination of personal attributes, such as good executive function skills (Masten et al., 2015), self-esteem (Kidd & Shahar, 2008), and street smarts (Thompson et al., 2016), and environmental factors, including a community of peers or animal companion (Bender et al., 2007) and mentorship or connectivity to supportive organizations (Raleigh-Duroff, 2004; Shean, 2015). More specifically, academic resilience centers on the capacity to overcome adversity that threatens educational outcomes (A. J. Martin, 2013). Because the purpose of this study was to understand the firsthand perspectives of high school graduates who experienced homelessness and the school district personnel who supported them, it was appropriate to ground their success stories in this theoretical framework.

Research Questions

Several research questions guided this investigation:

1. What facilitating factors do graduates who experienced homelessness in high school and school district personnel within a selected school district identify as critical to earning a high school diploma?
    a. School-based factors

    b. Non-school-based factors

2. What barriers to earning a high school diploma do graduates who experienced homelessness in high school and school district personnel within a selected school district identify?
    a. School-based barriers
    b. Non-school-based barriers
3. What is the perceived impact of earning a high school diploma on the lives of students who have experienced homelessness, according to graduates who experienced homelessness in high school and school district personnel within a selected school district?
4. What recommendations do graduates who experienced homelessness in high school and school district personnel within a selected school district have for teachers, administrators, and other school personnel regarding helping students experiencing homelessness with high school access and success?

Significance of the Study

Given the well-researched connection between childhood disadvantage and adult outcomes (Arnold & Doctoroff, 2003; Cobb-Clark & Zhu, 2017; Foster & Miller, 2007; Miller, 2011), it is imperative for educational stakeholders to offer students experiencing homelessness the educational, health, and mental health services needed to counteract the cumulative vulnerability and risk these youth encounter (Cutuli, 2018; Masten et al., 2015; Murphy & Tobin, 2011; Thistle-Elliot, 2014). According to the most recent federal data from the 2019-20 school year, public schools across the United States identified 1,280,886 students experiencing homelessness (National Center for Homeless Education, 2021a), which represents 2.5% of all

students enrolled in public schools (National Center for Education Statistics, 2021). Specifically in Virginia, 17,496 students, or 1.3% of the total student population, experienced homelessness in that school year (National Center for Homeless Education, 2021a). Even though this group of students comprises a small percentage of the total public school population at both the national and state levels, society has made a commitment to supporting these children and youth, as expressed in the *McKinney-Vento Act* (2015).

This single-site case study has the potential to contribute to both scholarly and practitioner efforts concerned with the intersection of student homelessness and educational outcomes. First, because the participants included high school graduates themselves, it honored the voices and expertise of these remarkable youth, addressing a current gap in the literature (Edwards, 2021; Thompson et al., 2016; Ozer & Piatt, 2017; Zhang et al., 2020). Second, educators and adults in the community, who could speak to the strengths and weaknesses related to the implementation of the *McKinney-Vento Act* (2015), comprised the rest of the participants, therefore responding to another gap in the literature (Ausikaitis et al., 2015; Aviles de Bradley, 2008; Hallett et al., 2015; Miller, 2011; Miller et al., 2015; Pavlakis et al., 2017; Stone & Uretsky, 2016). Also, this study was situated in a growing body of literature around resilience, reflecting a paradigm shift from deficit-focused to strength-based investigations and interventions (Bender et al., 2007; Clemens et al., 2018; Cronley & Evans, 2017; Masten et al., 2014; Masten et al., 2015; Thompson et al., 2016). Finally, the emphasis on the high school diploma highlights a narrow yet important aspect of academic achievement that homelessness can negatively impact (Miller, 2011; Murphy & Tobin, 2011). Ultimately, the results of this study can serve as a foundation for specific recommendations and implications for educational

leaders and community stakeholders committed to increasing high school graduation rates of students experiencing homelessness.

Definitions of Terms

Doubled Up. "Children and youths who are sharing the housing of other persons due to loss of housing, economic hardship, or a similar reason…" (42 U.S.C. § 11434(a)(2)(B)(i), 2015).

Education for Homeless Children and Youth (EHCY) Program. Federal program under Subtitle VII-B of the *McKinney-Vento Act* whose purpose is to protect the educational rights of students experiencing homelessness and to provide services needed to enroll in and attend school, as well as to engage in equitable opportunities for success (McKinney-Vento Act, 2015).

Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). Federal law signed by President Obama on December 10, 2015, reauthorizing the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act* (ESEA) of 1965, whose purpose is to provide quality education to all students.

Federal Graduation Indicator Graduation Rate. "Used for federal accountability which expresses the percentage of students in a cohort who earned only a Standard, Advanced Studies, or IB diploma within four years of entering high school for the first time" (Virginia Department of Education, 2022a).

Homeless Education Liaison or McKinney-Vento Liaison. Designated individual responsible for coordinating local level services for students experiencing homelessness as outlined in the *McKinney-Vento Act* (42 U.S.C. § 11432(g)(1)(J)(ii), 2015).

Homeless Children and Youths. Individuals who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence, including:

(a) Children and youths who are sharing the housing of other persons due to loss of housing, economic hardship, or a similar reason; are living in motels, hotels, trailer parks, or camping grounds due to the lack of alternative adequate accommodations; are living in emergency or transitional shelters; or are abandoned in hospitals;

(b) Children and youths who have a primary nighttime residence that is a public or private place not designed for or ordinarily used as a regular sleeping accommodation for human beings;

(c) Children and youths who are living in cars, parks, public spaces, abandoned buildings, substandard housing, bus or train stations, or similar settings;

(d) Migratory children who are living in the situations described above (42 U.S.C. § 11434(a), 2015).

Local Educational Agency. Public board of education or authority in a city, county, township, school district, other political subdivision of a state, or combination of school districts or counties responsible for supervising public elementary and secondary schools (20 U.S.C. § 1401 (19)(a), n.d.).

McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, Subtitle VII-B. A federal law reauthorized under *Every Student Succeeds Act* (2015) that requires the provision of policies to protect the rights of students experiencing homelessness, while providing an equitable educational environment and school stability for them (42 U.S.C. § 11431 et seq., 2015).

Project HOPE-Virginia. The Virginia office for the state coordinator of homeless education under the mandate of the *McKinney-Vento Act* that supports local school districts and facilitates programs and services for children and youth experiencing homelessness on behalf of the Virginia Department of Education (Project HOPE-Virginia, n.d.).

Resilience. “The capacity of a dynamic system to adapt successfully to disturbances that threaten system function, viability, or development” (Masten et al., 2014, p. 6).

State Educational Agency. State level government organization responsible for supervising public elementary and secondary schools (20 U.S.C. § 1401 (32), n.d.).

State Coordinator. Designated individual responsible for coordinating services for students experiencing homelessness as outlined in the *McKinney-Vento Act* at the state level (42 U.S.C. § 11432(f), 2015).

School of Origin. "The school that a child or youth attended when permanently housed, or the school in which the child or youth was last enrolled, including a preschool…[and] the designated receiving school at the next grade level for all feeder schools” (U.S. Department of Education, 2018, p. 23).

Substandard Housing. “The setting in which the family, child, or youth is living lacks one of the fundamental utilities such as water, electricity, or heat, is infested with vermin or mold; lacks a basic functional part, such as a working kitchen or working toilet; or may present unreasonable dangers to adults, children, or persons with disabilities” (U.S. Department of Education, 2018, p. 6).

Unaccompanied Youth or Unaccompanied Homeless Youth. “A homeless child or youth not in the physical custody of a parent or guardian” (42 U.S.C. § 11434a (6), 2015).

Virginia On-time Graduation Rate. “Virginia’s official graduation rate which expresses the percentage of students in a cohort who earned any Board of Education-approved diploma within four years of entering high school for the first time and allowances for special education and English Learners whose educational plans allow for additional years in high school” (Virginia Department of Education, 2022a).

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

As highlighted in Chapter 1, homelessness is a complex issue with a variety of negative health, social, and educational implications for children and youth across the United States. The purpose of this chapter is to inform the research questions and methods delineated in Chapter 3, related to the facilitating factors and barriers that influence the ability of students who experience homelessness to graduate high school. This review of related literature is divided into the following sections: (a) Resilience Theory; (b) Understanding Homelessness; (c) Homelessness at School; (d) Examination of the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act; and (e) Significance of a High School Diploma. First, Resilience Theory is offered as a theoretical framework for this study, serving as the foundation for the exploration of skills, resources, people, and environments that influence the personal and academic success of students experiencing homelessness, despite unfavorable circumstances. Next, a general overview of the structural causes and individual factors that contribute to adult homelessness in the United States and a synopsis of the effects of homelessness on K-12 students in the American public school system are provided. Additionally, the contextual background and mandated provisions of the Education for Homeless Children and Youth (EHCY) program, as part of the *McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act* (2015), are articulated. Finally, an explanation of the significance of a high school diploma, including risk and protective factors as well as adult outcomes, is shared.

Resilience Theory

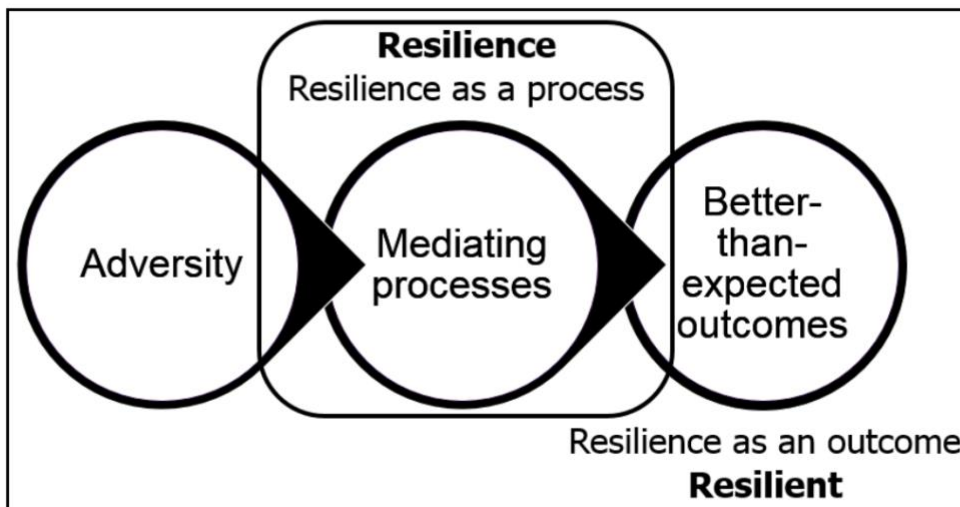
The overlapping nature of individual characteristics and environmental supports delineated in Resilience Theory presents a promising framework for understanding the unique combinations of personal strategies and McKinney-Vento services employed by students experiencing homelessness to graduate high school. Typically, society characterizes children and youth experiencing homelessness in terms of their deficiencies, which can undermine their capacity for coping, internal resilience, and self-understanding (Thompson et al., 2016; Toolis & Hammack, 2015). Given the stigma around homelessness, these students are at risk for developing personal narratives attributing their experiences to their own personal failures rather than structural disadvantages and injustices (Toolis & Hammack, 2015). However, a number of researchers are learning and sharing that these students are actually making meaning of their circumstances and developing self-affirming identities, through resilience skills, including self-esteem, individual strength and coping strategies, positive life perspective, external social supports, and hopes for the future (Kidd & Shahar, 2008; Thompson et al., 2016; Toolis & Hammack, 2015; Zhang et al., 2020). Nevertheless, resilience is greater than a singular, stable characteristic or trait that individuals themselves possess (Masten, 2011; Masten, 2018; Shean, 2015). Rather, it "arises from dynamic interactions involving many processes across and between systems" (Masten, 2018, p. 16), as people are embedded in a variety of networks, such as families, schools, and communities. The diagram displayed in Figure 3 helps to convey the combination of processes and outcomes at individual and systems levels that Resilience Theory entails (van Breda, 2018).

When children and youth face extreme and complex adversities that threaten their immediate well-being and long-term development, it is the responsibility of "all those concerned,

including scientists, professionals, and humanitarians, as well as families and communities, to confront challenging issues" (Masten, 2011, p. 494). To understand the ability of students who have experienced homelessness to graduate high school, the interactions, processes, and systems in which these youth have been involved, in addition to their personal qualities and skills, must be explored. Therefore, this section outlines the history and research applications of Resilience Theory, as a way of creating the foundation for the research design of this single-site case study. First, a definition of resilience and background information on Resilience Theory are provided. Then, a more specific description of academic resilience in the context of student homelessness, as well as the importance of centering youth lived expertise in response strategies and policies, is offered.

Figure 3

van Breda's View of Resilience as Process and Outcome



Note. Adapted from Adrian D. van Breda's model. From "A critical review of resilience theory and its relevance for social work," by A. D. van Breda, 2018, Social Work, 54(1), p. 4. Reprinted with permission.

Definition of Resilience

The concept of resilience has been explored by researchers in a variety of fields interested in learning how complex systems respond to major threats, surprises, and disasters (Masten et al., 2014). According to the dictionary, resilience is "the capability of a strained body to recover its size and shape after deformation caused especially by compressive stress; an ability to recover or adjust easily to misfortune or change" (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). Actually, the word comes from the Latin "resilere," which means to jump back or recoil, and can be further broken down into "re" meaning again and "salire" meaning to jump (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). Dr. Ann Masten (2014), a clinical psychologist and professor whose research focus is competence, risk, resilience, and human development, and her colleagues define resilience as, "The capacity of a dynamic system to adapt successfully to disturbances that threaten system function, viability, or development" (p. 6). This definition captures her belief, which she shares with other scholars (Shean, 2015), that resilience is a combination of personal traits or characteristics and external, environmental supports interacting within dynamic systems that enable individuals to respond and adjust to situations that threaten their well-being (Masten, 2018). In particular, Masten (2014) makes a simplistic, intriguing claim that, "resilience arises from ordinary resources and processes" (p. 3).

Background of Resilience Theory

Resilience science emerged in the aftermath of the Great Depression and World War II, as a means of understanding and helping survivors of the war, particularly children who were facing perilous conditions involving trauma, injuries, sickness, and hunger (Masten, 2018; Masten et al., 2014). As research on mental health and disasters—specifically the Buffalo Creek, West Virginia flood of 1972 and the Australian Bushfire of 1983—expanded, scholars began to

show interest not only in risk factors, but also in response pathways and outcomes (Masten et al., 2014; Shean, 2015). Initially, scholars labeled the influences that promoted positive adaptation as invulnerability or stress resistance but later landed on the term resilience, which they continue to apply to research on both individuals and families (Masten, 2018). Three pioneers with lived experience in this field include Norman Garmezy, an American soldier who served in the infantry in Europe and observed the Battle of the Bulge firsthand; Emmy Werner, a survivor of World War II and beneficiary of international relief efforts; and Michael Rutter, a British child evacuated to safety in the United States during the war (Masten et al., 2014; Shean, 2015). In succession, other significant contributors include Suniya Luthar, a professor emerita whose research focuses on individuals affected by mental illness and poverty, resilience, and affluent communities in Arizona; Ann Masten, a clinical psychologist and professor who studies competence, risk, resilience, and human development in Minnesota; and Michael Ungar, a social worker, family therapist, and professor in Nova Scotia, whose research centers around on the resilience of marginalized children and families, as well as mental health challenges of adults at home and in their workplace (Shean, 2015; Ungar, n.d.).

Key Research Contributions. These six key theorists have made both unique and collective contributions to the field of resilience that shape current understandings and research efforts, as well as emphasize the dynamic nature of resilience, which involves the interactions of internal and external factors that enable individuals to overcome threatening disturbances (Masten, 2018; Shean, 2015). In particular, Garmezy, whose initial research focused on schizophrenia and mental illness at Duke University in the 1950s shifted to stress resistance, competence, and resilience in the 1960s, is often credited as the founder of resilience research (Shean, 2015). He developed an ecological view of resilience and identified individual factors

(temperament, positive responsiveness to others, and cognitive skills); familial factors (family cohesion and warmth; presence of a caring adult); and support factors (supportive adults at school or in the community) as critical components of resilience (Shean, 2015). Concurrently, Werner, whose career began in Minnesota in the 1950s, produced evidence that not all children succumb to adverse life events and generated lists of protective factors at the individual, family, and community levels (Emerson, 2012; Shean, 2015). Like others, she constructed an ecological view of resilience and emphasized change is possible with the right resources and hope (Emerson, 2012; Shean, 2015). Rutter's career in London took off in the 1970s, involving studies on epidemiology and autism, risk and protective factors, and child psychology (Sinha, n.d.). He has attributed resilience in children to their environments and ordinary adaptations, more than any individual psychological traits or superior functioning qualities (Shean, 2015).

Continuing on, Luthar, who began studying affluent groups of children and youth at Yale University in the 1990s, investigated characteristics related to social competence and identified a positive relationship between resilience and an internal locus of control and social expressiveness (Luthar, 1991). Additionally, she found that high intelligence could act as a vulnerability for students with high stress based on an increased sensitivity to issues in the environment, which contradicted prior research that had labeled high intelligence as a protective factor (Shean, 2015).

Around the same time, Masten and colleagues in Minnesota were conducting a longitudinal study on perinatal hazards, as well as parental and psychosocial disadvantages and loss, from which they determined psychosocial resources were a key variable in the promotion of resilience (Shean, 2015). Since then, other highlights of Masten's work include the production of two criteria of resilience: a measure of positive adaptation and conditions that threaten or disrupt positive adaptation, as well as two models for resilience, the Variable-Focused and Person-

Focused Approaches (Masten, 2014). Finally, Ungar's research emerged in the early 2000s, focusing on international communities, which enabled him to identify seven tensions, or interrelated pathways, of resilience (access to material resources, relationships, identity, power and control, cultural adherence, and cohesion) that can exist in all cultures and be resolved in culturally relevant ways (Ungar et al., 2007). The four principles he has attributed to resilience are decentrality (putting focus on the environment rather than the child); complexity (focusing on simple relationships that influence resilience); atypicality (openness to processes not typically considered resilient); and cultural relativity (situating positive growth culturally and temporally; Shean, 2015).

Protective Factors of Resilience. In addition to developing the concept, models, and frameworks of resilience, these scholars and researchers have produced lists of various protective factors that promote adaptation to adversity and reduce harm (Masten, 2018; Shean, 2015). Garmezy categorized protective factors at the individual, familial, and support levels, which were part of three models he created to explain resilience: Compensatory Model, Protective vs. Vulnerability Model, and Challenge Model (Shean, 2015). Rutter included mental features, social relationships, and turning point experiences where new options for constructive change become available as protective factors (Shean, 2015). Luthar distinguished these factors as belonging to three categories: protective-stabilizing (stability contributes to competence despite increasing risk); protective-enhancing (possibility of engaging with stress and increasing competence simultaneously); and protective but reactive (general advantages except under high stress; Shean, 2015). Similar to other theorists, Masten produced a list of protective factors that operate in response to risk, at individual, family, and community levels with ascending cumulative effects (Shean, 2015).

Academic Resilience Among Students Experiencing Homelessness

Because the focus of this study is high school graduation, it is appropriate to acknowledge the niche of academic resilience, which contextualizes the construct of resilience and reflects the possibility of positive educational outcomes despite adversity (Cassidy, 2015). Academic resilience is defined as "a capacity to overcome acute and/ or chronic adversity that is seen as a major threat to a student's educational development" (A. J. Martin, 2013, p. 488). Researchers of youth homelessness have conducted over 20 studies exploring academic resilience and found that faith, relationships, self-esteem, and school all can contribute to positive educational outcomes (Cronley & Evans, 2017). In particular, Cassidy (2015) has developed the Academic Resilience Scale, for the purpose of measuring academic resilience according to students' cognitive-affective and behavioral responses to academic adversity. Another research team conducted a qualitative study, exploring the role of the *McKinney-Vento Act* (2015) in fostering educational environments that promote resilience (Clemens et al., 2018). They found critical incidents, philosophy of services, community and school collaboration, and relationships with families all contributed to the interplay of systems in a bioecological framework resulting in student resilience (Clemens et al., 2018). More generally, the profound shift in Resilience Theory toward a dynamic systems framework, which opens possibilities of defining and modeling the complexity of adaptation and development at multiple levels, has the potential to enable scholars and practitioners to better understand the construct of resilience, its nuances in terms of academic resilience and other subcategories, and its translation into new practices and policies (Masten, 2018).

Lived Expertise of Youth Experiencing Homelessness

Research on homelessness has historically focused on the perspectives of homeless caretakers and service providers through survey research techniques (Snow & Anderson, 1993), resulting in experience-distant representations (Geertz, 1983), rather than experience-near representations from individuals with lived expertise (Timmer et al., 2019). In terms of youth experiencing homelessness, observations have typically framed this subpopulation "as either criminals—at fault—or clients—at risk," rather than as individuals with voices who can serve as valuable sources of insight into barriers and strategies used to survive and create social change (Toolis & Hammack, 2015, p. 61). Honoring youth voices not only aligns with the shift to resilience-based research and therefore fills a current gap in the literature but also uplifts the agency and strength of these individuals and enables them to resist dominant narratives and stigma about homelessness (Toolis & Hammack, 2015). Additionally, the ways in which youth can articulate their resilience and hope, despite the extreme trauma and marginalization they incur, should create a sense of urgency for community stakeholders, including policy makers and educators, to carryout necessary changes (Mohan & Shields, 2014; Thompson et al., 2016; Zhang et al., 2020). Although typologies, comparative studies, and group strategies can all contribute to efforts to reduce homelessness among youth, trauma-informed, personalized accounts that recognize the attributes and ideas of these students also enhance the effectiveness of response strategies (Zhang et al., 2020).

Understanding Homelessness

Contributors to homelessness can span individual, family, community, and public policy levels, which makes it difficult to both address and remedy this complex public health and social welfare issue that has fluctuated in size and severity since the 1970s (Giano et al., 2020). It is

important to consider “the source of the problematic conditions” (Rosen et al., 2019, p. 283), as these are the circumstances in which students and their families live. Although homelessness has often been depicted as older people on the streets oftentimes struggling with substance abuse or mental illness, this phenomenon can manifest in a variety of residential statuses, family situations, and social contexts (Hallett & Skrla, 2017). Over the last few decades, the composition of the homeless population has changed, and families with children, up to 90% headed by single mothers, now account for a higher proportion of the population than in the past (Hodge et al., 2012; Phipps et al., 2019).

Scholars and practitioners cannot develop a comprehensive picture of the effects of homelessness on children and youth without including the variety of factors that cause parents and guardians to find themselves in unstable living situations. The economic and residential statuses of parents experiencing homelessness can limit their ability to fulfill their parental responsibilities and to have positive relationships with their children (Holland & Branham, 2016). Even though school district personnel in schools and in central offices have limited abilities related to regulations and funding to provide assistance to families in unstable housing, it is imperative for them to develop a thorough understanding of the challenges the students and their families as a whole face.

Efforts to understand homelessness have fallen into several categories: the individualist approach, focusing on the personal responsibility of individuals to ensure their success; the structural approach, which addresses factors that impact housing and income opportunities; and the “politics of compassion” approach, which contrasts “old” and “new” homeless as flawed people doomed to homelessness versus victims who deserve society’s help (Timmer et al., 2019, p. 5). Even though structural forces do influence both the production and reproduction of

homelessness, it is impossible to capture the concrete lived experience of this phenomenon without also considering individual factors that increase susceptibility (Colburn & Aldern, 2022; Timmer et al., 2019). Therefore, this section provides an overview of structural causes of homelessness, including the availability, or lack thereof, of affordable housing, changes to welfare programs, and the COVID-19 pandemic, and individual factors related to homelessness, including poverty and unemployment, mental health and substance abuse, domestic violence, race, and gender and sexuality.

Structural Causes of Homelessness

While individual circumstances or shortcomings, such as such as substance abuse, illiteracy, or laziness, can provide narratives around unstable housing experiences, they are not the actual causes of homelessness (Colburn & Aldern, 2022; Timmer et al., 2019). Social and economic forces, which capitalism and structural racism have sustained overtime, are responsible for creating disparate housing outcomes for historically marginalized groups (Versey & Russell, 2023). In *The State of Homelessness in America*, the Trump Administration's Council of Economic Advisors attributed the variation in rates of homelessness across the country to high housing costs, conditions more conducive to sleeping outdoors, significant shelter capacity, and overrepresentation of people at risk for homelessness in any given community (Council of Economic Advisors, 2019). Despite the compelling nature of these cultural and environmental arguments, "homelessness is a direct result of how we construct and operate our cities" (Colburn & Aldern, 2022, p. 120). In particular, the impacts of insufficient affordable housing, shortcomings of cash assistance programs, and the COVID-19 pandemic are described below.

Lack of Affordable Housing. Access to affordable housing, which has been affected by discrimination, redlining, segregation, and natural disasters and pandemics (Versey & Russell,

2023), is the root cause of the structural problems that result in homelessness (Colburn & Aldern, 2022). When affordable housing options are not available, people face eviction, instability, and homelessness (National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2017). Before the COVID-19 pandemic, one in four renters spent over half their income on housing, and one in four families in poverty spent over 70% of their income on rent (Desmond, 2016). In a typical year, according to a more restrictive definition of homelessness, landlords across the United States filed 3.6 million evictions (Eviction Lab, 2018), and 552,830 people were experiencing homelessness, unsheltered or in shelter programs, on a single night in 2018, (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2018). In Virginia, 24% of renter households are extremely low-income, meaning their income is below the poverty guideline or 30% of their area median income (National Low Income Housing Coalition, 2024). Based on discrepancies between stagnant wages and rising housing costs, coupled with an affordable housing shortage and the surge and aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, many low-income renters still find themselves in precarious situations, vulnerable to eviction or homelessness (Rodriguez et al., 2021; Versey & Russell, 2023).

These challenges disproportionately affect people of color, especially African Americans and Indigenous people, because of long-standing historical and structural racism (National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2023). Ethnic minority households comprise 39% of the rental market (Joint Center for Housing Studies of Harvard University, 2020), and Black homeownership is 38%, in comparison with White homeownership at 65% (Choi et al., 2019). Although Black renters comprise 20% of total renters, almost 33% of eviction filings are against them (Himmelstein & Desmond, 2021). Black women are at the highest risk for housing instability and face higher rates of homelessness and poor health outcomes tied to residential insecurity (Bullock et al., 2020). These gaps among profiles of renters and homeowners

communicate inequities of housing access according to race and gender, as well as reflect the role of policy in determining residential stability (Versey & Russell, 2023).

Cash Assistance Programs. Although a variety of public cash assistance programs were implemented over the course of the 20th century, discriminatory policies and dwindling funds hindered the ability of relief to reach families in need (Floyd et al., 2021; Shrivastava & Thompson, 2022). In particular, this welfare system excluded Black families through a variety of harmful practices, including ignoring applications, altering benefits during farming seasons, and creating inequitable suitable home policies (Shrivastava & Thompson, 2022), in addition to false narratives about Black women, specifically in terms of their parenting abilities (Floyd et al., 2021). In 1935, the Aid to Dependent Children program was introduced as the first federal cash aid program for children, under the *Social Security Act* (Shrivastava & Thompson, 2022). It was renamed the Aid to Families with Dependent Children program in 1962, and the number of families, specifically Black families, who received help tripled over the next 2 decades (Shrivastava & Thompson, 2022). However, in the 1990s, several waivers were introduced that could prevent entire families from receiving funds if the parents did not meet the work requirements, and the reach of relief efforts decreased. (Shrivastava & Thompson, 2022).

Congress repealed the Aid to Families with Dependent Children program in 1996, and the following year introduced the Temporary Assistance to Needy Families program, for the purpose of offering monthly cash assistance payments and related services to low-income families with children in order to help them achieve economic self-sufficiency (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2022). The Temporary Assistance to Needy Families program has not had the same reach as its predecessor (Floyd et al., 2021; Schott et al., 2021), as only 21 out of every 100 families in poverty receive assistance, compared to 68 out of 100 under Aid to

Families with Dependent Children (Shrivastava & Thompson, 2022). The declining reach of this program can be attributed to states' abilities to impose eligibility restrictions, the reallocation of grant funding for other state budget purposes, and the determination of inadequate benefit levels (Schott et al., 2021). Other limitations include its lack of reliability in small states, underreporting of income which distorts official poverty estimates, and inability to capture systemic anomalies (Shrivastava & Thompson, 2022).

COVID-19 Impact. The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted already problematic occupational, social, economic, and health systems (Versey & Russell, 2023), which resulted in negative consequences not only for individuals already experiencing homelessness but also for those precariously housed, specifically in low-income populations and in communities of color (Benfer et al., 2021; Rodriguez et al., 2021). Congress passed several economic relief packages, including the *American Rescue Plan Act* (2021), allocating over $55 billion to rental assistance, as well as other funds to unemployment benefits and direct stimulus payments, as a means of alleviating pandemic induced challenges (Versey, 2021). Even though these efforts represented some of the most significant government-led attempts to address economic hardship, they were unable to sustain economic and residential stability for families in need due to their temporary nature (Versey, 2021).

Given most federal policies and funding have historically been directed to the prevention of homelessness rather than disaster response, shelter employees and service providers experienced gaps in communication, resources, and outreach options throughout the pandemic (Nichols & Mays, 2021). Economic hardship, increased rates of domestic violence, and release of prisoners without adequate transition support are all examples of factors that contributed to increased demand for homeless shelter services (Rodriguez et al., 2021). Additionally, it was

difficult for individuals to practice COVID-19 prevention guidelines, such as social distancing and mask wearing, in congregate settings including homeless shelters, doubled-up living situations, and frontline workplaces (Benfer et al., 2021; Gemelas et al., 2022; Rodriguez et al., 2021). Needless to say, the pre-existing housing crisis, the absence of legal and economic support, and the loss of wages due to pandemic response strategies contributed to economic hardship and housing precarity, which resulted in increased rates of domestic displacement, as well as in COVID-19 infections and deaths among marginalized communities (Benfer et al., 2021).

Individual Factors

Various intersections of individual factors and the structural causes described above both increase the likelihood of occurrences of homelessness and account for the associated lived experiences of parents and guardians, as well as children in their care (Colburn & Aldern, 2022; Fraser et al., 2019; Fusaro et al., 2018; Giano et al., 2020; Herring et al., 2020; E. J. Martin, 2015; National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2017; Olivet et al., 2021; Phipps et al., 2019; Polcin, 2016). Generally speaking, these personal predictors can be categorized as sociodemographic factors, adverse life events, criminal behavior, and psychiatric problems (Nilsson et al., 2019). Certain identity characteristics, such as male, unmarried, older in age, non-White, and LGBTQ+, have been connected to higher rates of homelessness, as they can overlap with interpersonal relationships and social discrimination and in turn disrupt stable housing (Colburn & Aldern, 2022). Additional documented risk factors include poverty and unemployment, mental health, substance abuse, and domestic violence (Nilsson et al., 2019; Zhao, 2023). To illustrate some of the family circumstances and environments in which students

experiencing homelessness find themselves, a brief overview of adult individual factors is provided in the sections that follow.

Poverty and Unemployment. Given the fundamental connections between employment, housing, and health (van der Noordt et al., 2014), the causal relationship between poverty and/ or unemployment and homelessness is an intuitive explanation of the phenomenon (Colburn & Aldern, 2022). According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2024), the official poverty rate in 2021 was 11.6%, with 37.9 million people in poverty. The U.S. Department of Labor (2023) has reported that as of June 2023, 6 million Americans are unemployed, and the unemployment rate has ranged from 3.4% to 3.7% over the previous 15 months. In low-income families, one or both parents are typically unemployed or employed but lacking the necessary qualifications to earn livable wages, which makes it difficult to afford housing and basic needs (National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2017). Not surprisingly, correlations between homelessness, water and food insecurity, and transportation also emerge, which produce negative effects on the social well-being and health of individuals and families who are unable to drink tap water, bathe regularly, and travel to work (Allegrante & Sleet, 2021; Schwartz, 2023). Additionally, there is a relationship between incarceration and homelessness, stemming from various policies that prevent people with criminal records to obtain housing or work and from the over policing of inner-city neighborhoods and move-along orders for people on the streets (Herring et al., 2020).

Mental Health. The correlation between mental health and homelessness, regardless of age or gender, is not only well documented and substantial, but also bi-directional (Chang et al., 2018; E. J. Martin, 2015; Nilsson et al., 2019; Zhao, 2023). Mental illness—especially in the form of depression and bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, and anxiety disorders (Tarr, 2018)—is one of the top-reported causes for homelessness of single adults, affecting up to 25-33% of the

homeless population, in comparison with 6% of the general population (Giano et al., 2020; Marcus et al., 2021; E. J. Martin, 2015). In particular, veterans often experience mental health problems and substance abuse due to lack of social support, loneliness, and barriers to medical treatments, which can contribute to chronic homelessness (Hamilton et al., 2011; Nilsson et al., 2019; Tsai & Rosenheck, 2015). Women who experience homelessness are at greater risk for mental and physical health issues, such as depression and anxiety, than the general population and receive more lifetime diagnoses of affective and anxiety disorders, post-traumatic stress disorder, and schizophrenia compared to women who are stably housed (Phipps et al., 2019). Mental health issues can contribute to the heterogeneous pathways to homelessness; inversely, homelessness can exacerbate mental health issues and drug use, which, in turn, can reduce the likelihood of exiting homelessness (Fraser et al., 2019). Because of the frequent overlap of mental illness with other individual factors, such as poverty, victimization, or incarceration, re-establishing housing stability is often achieved in combination with other support services that promote good health, sense of purpose, and community involvement (Kerman et al., 2018).

Substance Abuse. People experiencing homelessness use drugs and alcohol at higher rates than the general population, with around one-third having acute alcohol and/ or drug problems and two-thirds having lifetime histories of drug or alcohol use disorders (Polcin, 2016). Substance abuse can have a variety of negative consequences, including strained relationships, financial struggles, or loss of employment, for individuals, which can contribute to the occurrence of homelessness (Zhao, 2023). However, this activity is more often a result and way of coping with the stresses of homelessness (National Coalition for the Homeless, 2017; Nilsson et al., 2019). In addition to untreated mental illness, some of the reasons people experiencing homelessness are involved in substance abuse include self-medication, a lack of social support,

trauma, co-occurring physical health conditions, and easy access to substances (Mosel, 2023). Substance abuse often co-exists with mental illness, which can lead to difficulty in locating treatment facilities, and stable housing (National Coalition for the Homeless, 2017).

Domestic Violence. Domestic violence is a leading cause of homelessness in both direct and indirect ways (Jasinski et al., 2002; Pavao et al., 2007; Phipps et al., 2019; Tischler et al., 2007). Survivors of domestic violence are four times more likely to encounter housing instability than individuals who have not been victims of domestic violence (Adams et al., 2018; Pavao et al., 2007). These experiences of homelessness can have adverse effects on the mental health and well-being of both women and their children, as well as contribute to future relapses of residential insecurity (Kirkman et al., 2015; Murray, 2011). Survivors of domestic violence face a variety of interrelated structural and personal challenges to rebuilding their lives, from addressing safety concerns and healing from trauma to locating affordable housing, which can be scarce (Sullivan et al., 2019). Additionally, intentional actions that abusers and ex-partners take to prevent victims from attaining new residences include destroying their credit, stealing money, or harassing them at work (Adams et al., 2018; Sullivan et al., 2019). Therefore, re-establishing stable housing for victims requires comprehensive services to address safety, trauma, community connections, and other interrelated issues to prevent extended periods or re-entry into homelessness (Adams et al., 2018; Chiaramonte et al., 2021; Sullivan et al., 2019).

Race and Ethnicity. Adult Americans of color, especially people who are Black/African American and American Indian/Alaska Native, are disproportionately represented among people experiencing homelessness, which can be attributed to racial discrimination, social inequities, and a lack of economic opportunities (Allegrante & Sleet, 2021; Olivet et al., 2021). For example, African Americans represent 13% of the general population, but comprise 37% of

people experiencing homelessness and 49% of families with children experiencing homelessness (National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2023). Results from one research study align with findings in the *2016 Annual Homeless Assessment Report*, suggesting that Black male adults are over three times more likely than White male adults to experience at least one instance of homelessness (Fusaro et al., 2018; U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2016). Poverty is a major cause of these disparities, as Black and Latinx groups are overrepresented in poverty rates at 10.8% and 7.6% respectively (National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2017). Moreover, people of color encounter barriers to housing, resulting from a variety of factors including criminal justice histories, landlord and employer discrimination, and inadequate collaboration among homeless service providers and other welfare agencies (Olivet et al., 2021). In addition to general stressors of homelessness, such as limited social support, inadequate sleep, and financial insecurity, people of color experiencing homelessness have also reported instances of perceived discrimination, which negatively affects their quality of life (Wrighting et al., 2019).

Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity. Adult LGBTQ+ individuals are more likely to experience homelessness than non-LGBTQ+ individuals, as this collective group comprises 20-40% of the homeless population, in comparison with 5-10% of the general population (Fraser et al., 2019). More specifically, sexual minority adults are twice as likely as the general population to experience homelessness, and 71% of these instances happen for the first time in adulthood (Wilson et al., 2020). Transgender adults report higher rates of homelessness than sexual minority and cisgender straight people (Wilson et al., 2020). These rates can be explained through the intersections of LGBTQ+ identities with other individual factors, including poverty, ethnicity and racism, and substance and sexual abuse (Fraser et al., 2019). In addition to these

proximate causes, systems failures, such as foster care and sexual abuse, and negative experiences during homeless periods, such as survival sex and sex work, physical ill health and Human Immunodeficiency Virus, and shelter inaccessibility, contribute to the vulnerability of LGBTQ+ individuals to entering and remaining in homelessness (Fraser et al., 2019).

Homelessness at School

Descriptions of the structural causes and individual factors of adult homelessness not only illustrate the family situations in which some students find themselves but also point to the future circumstances in which other students might end up. To improve high school graduation rates and adult outcomes for children and youth who experience or are at risk for homelessness, it is crucial for scholars and practitioners to understand the unique impacts of this phenomenon on K-12 education. John Dewey (1907) attributed social significance to schools and conceived them as "instrumentalities…[for] a genuine form of active community life, instead of a place set apart in which to learn lessons" (p. 27). In this sense, schools can serve as a source of continuity and comfort, as well as stability, affirmation, and hope, for students experiencing the trauma and chaos of residential instability and associated stressors (Murphy & Tobin, 2011; National Center for Homeless Education, 2018). As further upheld by the tenets of Resilience Theory that outline dynamic interactions among and across processes and systems (Masten, 2018), homelessness impacts school communities: in terms of student experiences and outcomes, which are described in this section, and in terms of policies and procedures under the EHCY program in the *McKinney-Vento Act* (2015) that mitigate risk and promote success, which are described in the next section. First, the educational definition of homelessness and the context of homelessness in school, in addition to an explanation of Unaccompanied Homeless Youth, are offered. Then, an overview of the effects of homelessness on students, in terms of access to early childhood,

school engagement, attendance and discipline, academic achievement, physical health, and social and emotional well-being, is provided. Finally, the distinct impacts of the intersections of race and homelessness, as well as sexual orientation and gender identity and homelessness, for students are reported.

Educational Definition of Homelessness

For state and local personnel to identify and provide services to students experiencing homelessness in the public school system, they must first understand the educational definition of this phenomenon, which differs from those used by other agencies. Under Subtitle VII-B of the *McKinney-Vento Act* (2015), homelessness is defined as:

> individuals who lack fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residencies (within the meaning of section 103(a)(1) of this title) (42 U.S.C. § 11434a(2)(A));
>
> and includes—(i) children and youths who are sharing the housing of other persons due to loss of housing, economic hardship, or a similar reason; are living in motels, hotels, trailer parks, or camping grounds due to the lack of alternative adequate accommodations; are living in emergency or transitional shelters; or are abandoned in hospitals (42 U.S.C. § 11434a (2)(B)).

Other circumstances that meet the definition include unsuitable accommodations, such as cars, parks, public spaces, abandoned buildings, substandard housing, buses, or train stations (42 U.S.C. § 11434a(2)(B)(iii)). Additionally, migratory children as defined in Section 6399 of Title 20 who are living in any of the above circumstances meet the definition (42 U.S.C. § 11434a(2)(B)(iv)). Individuals who meet the definition of homeless and are not under the physical custody of a parent or guardian are referred to as unaccompanied youth (42 U.S.C. § 11434a(2)(6)).

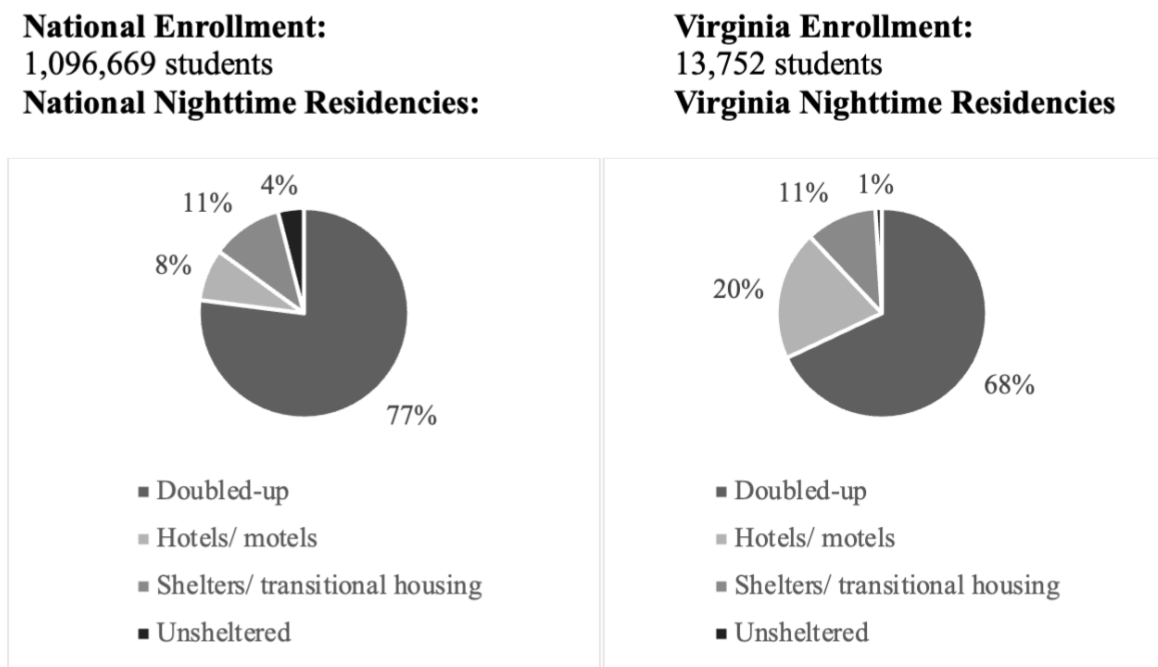
Homelessness in a School Context

Based on the variety of negative consequences for students experiencing homelessness compared to their stably housed peers, it is critical for educators to know who and where these children and youth are. The number of students without residential stability continues to increase, due to fluctuating social and economic conditions since the Great Recession of 2008 (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.). However, there is evidence that many of these students are not identified and therefore do not receive the educational supports to which they are entitled (Ingram et al., 2017). Shame, fear, and stress often accompany the trauma of housing insecurity and high mobility, which can make youth and families reluctant to self-identify (Cumming & Gloeckner, 2012; Hallett & Skrla, 2017). Structural factors, including under-allocated resources and funds, unmanageable caseloads for McKinney-Vento liaisons, and ineffective provision of information, also limit efforts to identity students experiencing homelessness (Shephard et al., 2021). Further, the COVID-19 pandemic negatively impacted the ability of school personnel to identify students and connect them with services, which resulted in dramatic drops in homeless enrollment data (National Center for Homeless Education, 2021a). Nevertheless, in the 2020-21 school year, 1,096,669 students enrolled in public schools were identified as experiencing homelessness (Figure 4), of whom 94,363 were unaccompanied homeless youth (National Center for Homeless Education, 2021a). In terms of primary nighttime residence, 77% were doubled-up (e.g., living with another family or friends), 8% were in hotels/ motels, 11% were in shelters or transitional housing, and 4% were unsheltered (National Center for Homeless Education, 2021a). That year, there were 13,752 students identified as experiencing homelessness in public schools in Virginia (Figure 4), of whom 1,368 were unaccompanied homeless youth (National Center for Homeless Education, 2024). The nighttime

residencies of Virginia students comprised 68% doubled-up, 20% in hotels/ motels, 11% in shelters or transitional housing, and 1% unsheltered (National Center for Homeless Education, 2024).

Figure 4

Comparison of 2020-21 National and Virginia Homeless Student Enrollment and Nighttime Residencies



Note. Sourced from National Center for Homeless Education (2024)

Unaccompanied Homeless Youth

Although most school-age children do live with their families, schools also serve unaccompanied youth who meet the definition of homelessness and are not under the physical custody of a parent or guardian (McKinney-Vento Act, 2015). These children and youth are often categorized as: runaway (those who have left home by choice); throwaway or pushout

(those who have been told to leave home); street youth (those living on the street); and abandoned (Aviles de Bradley, 2011; Murphy & Tobin, 2011; Zhang et al., 2020).

Unaccompanied homeless youth encounter adversities, in terms of their physical housing, general stability, predictability, and well-being (Aviles de Bradley, 2011). In particular, 60-80% of youth living in homeless shelters or transitional housing report experiences of parental physical or sexual abuse (Aviles de Bradley, 2011). It can be difficult to identify and serve unaccompanied homeless youth based on their self-perceptions of the need to evade police and avoid detection, which also results in a lack of research on this subpopulation and the ways in which the *McKinney-Vento Act* (2015) is able to benefit them (Ausikaitis et al., 2015). However, it is important to note that even though these youth often leave home due to circumstances outside of their control, they are still “intelligent, independent, and socially adaptive amid highly adverse conditions” (Miller, 2011, p. 311).

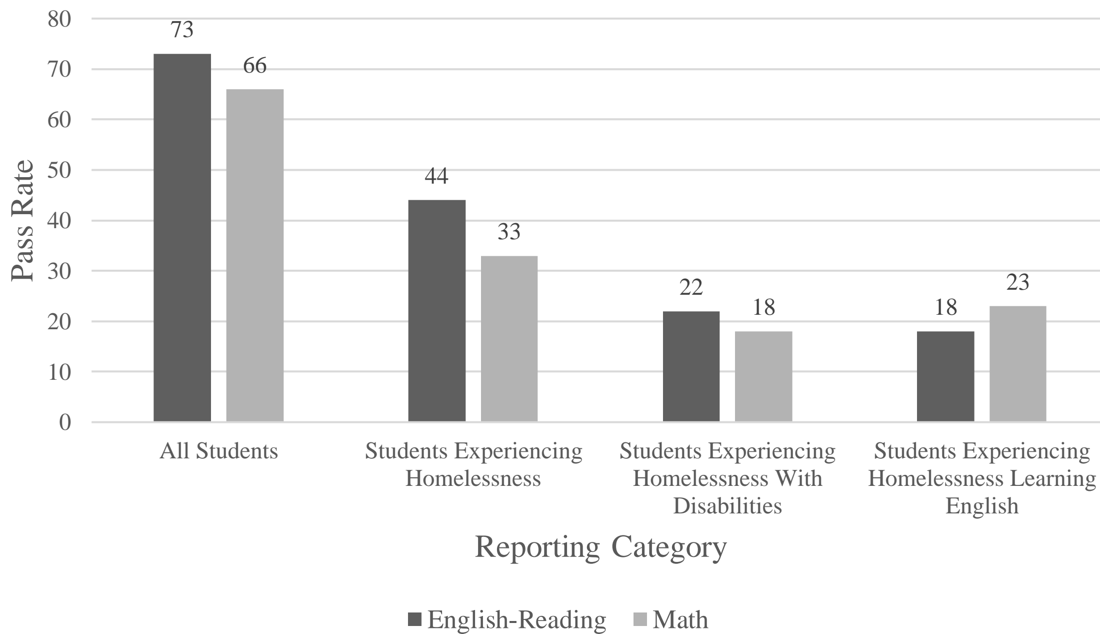
Effects of Homelessness on Students

Children are the most vulnerable group of the overall homeless population (Burt et al., 2001; Coates & McKenzie-Mohr, 2010). They experience serious short- and long-term threats to their well-being, including educational underachievement, health problems, hunger and poor nutrition, developmental delays, and psychological problems (Miller, 2011; Murphy & Tobin, 2011; Rafferty & Shinn, 1991). Generally speaking, students experiencing homelessness do have worse academic outcomes, in comparison with stably housed peers both in the general population and in poverty (Masten et al., 1993; Miller, 2011; Obradović et al., 2009). For example, Figure 5 captures variations among student reporting categories in achievement on Virginia’s Standards of Learning standardized assessments. Some researchers have found variability in the academic trajectories of students experiencing homelessness, particularly in

terms of their resilience, which could be due to a combination of more protective factors and resources and lower cumulative risk (Huntington et al., 2008; Masten et al., 2008; Miller, 2011; Obradović, 2010; Obradović et al., 2009). Descriptions of how homelessness manifests for students at school in terms of their physical health, social and emotional well-being, and academic achievement are provided in the following sections. The particular ways in which homelessness intersects with race and with sexuality and gender identity among children and youth, as compared to adults, are also explained.

Figure 5

Virginia Standards of Learning Pass Rates, 2022



Note. Sourced from Virginia Department of Education (n.d.-c)

Early Education. Children experiencing homelessness often start school behind their peers, specifically missing opportunities to build foundational skills and abilities, and that initial gap continues to widen over time (Cutuli et al., 2013; Fantuzzo & Perlman, 2007; Herbers et al., 2012; Obradović, 2010; Tobin & Murphy, 2013). In particular, preschool children in unstable residential situations are four times more likely than their housed peers to experience developmental delays, including those related to language, reading, personal and social development, and motor skills (Medcalf, 2008; Shinn & Weitzman, 1996). Early education and early reading skills specifically are significant predictors of success or problems for students in poverty and residential mobility (Herbers et al., 2012; Manfra, 2019). For example, in one study, socioeconomic risk and oral reading ability in first grade were found to be predictors of reading and math achievement in Grades 3-8, as well as moderators of later growth in reading achievement (Herbers et al., 2012). Additionally, a systematic literature review revealed that children experiencing homelessness have lower school readiness skills and academic achievement in comparison with the general population, despite inconclusive findings on differences in performance between housed and unhoused low-income students (Manfra, 2019). Protective factors related to positive outcomes for students experiencing homelessness include good school attendance, high quality parenting, self-regulation, and early education (Manfra, 2019).

School Engagement. Homelessness can affect students' engagement at school in a variety of ways, ranging from poor attendance to learning obstacles, teacher and peer relationships, and feelings of disconnection and isolation (Fantuzzo et al., 2013; Pavlakis et al., 2017; Tobin, 2016; Tobin & Murphy, 2013). Highly mobile and unstably housed students change school more frequently than their domiciled peers (Buckner, 2008), which impacts their ability to

keep up with curriculum and teacher expectations, complete work on time and remain focused, and maintain friendships with peers (Fantuzzo et al., 2012; Masten et al., 1993; Pavlakis et al., 2017; Tobin & Murphy, 2013). Additionally, residential mobility creates a variety challenges and stressors for students and families, including disruption in educational experiences and development of relationships, heightened stress levels, and reduced feelings of ownership (Buckner, 2008; Herbers et al., 2011; Masten, 1992; Obradović et al., 2009; Rafferty et al., 2004). Other factors related to poverty, such as limited resources, low parental education or single parenting, inconsistent caregiver support, and exposure to violence, are detrimental to engagement and in turn achievement (Huntington et al., 2008; Masten et al., 2014; Miller, 2011; Rog & Buckner, 2007). Consequently, academic achievement gaps range from low performance and disproportionate referrals for special education services to grade retention and ultimately school dropout (de Gregorio et al., 2022; Hynes, 2014; Rafferty & Shinn, 1991; Tobin & Murphy, 2013).

Attendance and Discipline. Absenteeism and suspensions are key predictors of poor academic outcomes for students experiencing homelessness (Buckner, 2008; Miller, 2011). Students experiencing homelessness are twice as likely as their domiciled peers to be chronically absent from school, which is often due to health problems, such as colds, asthma, and dental problems, mental health challenges, and competing priorities, including family responsibilities or work (da Costa Nunez, et al., 2012; National Center for Homeless Education, 2017b; Tobin & Murphy, 2013). Additionally, housing instability itself, in the form of eviction or foreclosure, and high mobility, which can impact transportation, can keep students from school (National Center for Homeless Education, 2017b). Estimates that students who change schools at least once during a school year are four times more likely to be chronically absent than students who

remain in the same school have emerged from research conducted by the Utah State Office of Education (Utah Education Policy Center, 2012). These absences are correlated with short-term outcomes, such as lower standardized test scores, lower grade point averages, and higher rates of grade retention and dropping out, and longer-term outcomes, such as lower likelihood to enroll in post-secondary education programs and higher likelihood to experience poverty and be involved in the criminal justice system (National Center for Homeless Education, 2017b).

Students experiencing homelessness are disciplined in the form of suspension and expulsion at higher rates their domiciled peers, which reduces their opportunity to learn (Murphy & Tobin, 2011). In particular, Black students are suspended at higher rates and have less academic success than other racial groups (Edwards, 2020). Racial hostility, manifested through low academic expectations and higher discipline rates, has been found to negatively affect the identification of students experiencing homelessness and the delivery of McKinney-Vento services (Edwards, 2020), as well as contribute to low high school graduation rates for Black students (Howard, 2013). Researchers in Michigan found connections between greater economic and housing instability and higher rates of disciplinary action, as 16% of students experiencing homelessness and 18% of students who formerly experienced homelessness, in comparison with 4% of stably housed students and 11% of stably housed, economically disadvantaged students, had faced disciplinary action within the last 8 years leading up to their study (Erb-Downward & Blakeslee, 2021). Other concerning findings from the same project include percentages of students suspended or expelled by race: for students currently experiencing homelessness of whom 24% were Black, 13% White, 12% Hispanic, 3% Asian, and 12% other race/ethnicity in comparison with students who had never experienced homelessness of whom 10% were Black, 3% White, 4% Hispanic, 1% Asian, and 5% other race/ethnicity.

Academic Achievement. Three decades of research communicate the wide variety of negative academic outcomes associated with homelessness, including lower achievement in terms of grades and standardized tests, and ultimately lower graduation rates (Brumley et al., 2015; Buckner, 2008; Cutuli et al., 2013; Fantuzzo et al., 2012; Miller, 2011; Murphy & Tobin, 2011; Pavlakis et al., 2017; Obradović, 2009). Some explanations for achievement gaps between students experiencing homelessness and other advantaged and disadvantaged students involve the consideration of both risk and protective factors, as well as the timing and duration of homeless episodes (de Gregorio et al., 2022; Masten et al., 2015; Miller, 2011). However, research findings on these outcomes are inconsistent, as other examples of empirical evidence do not communicate differences based on residential status but rather propose attendance, school mobility, lack of resources, or shelter instability as mediators (Cowen, 2017; Deck, 2017; Rafferty & Shinn, 1991; Tobin, 2016). In order to explain these varying findings on academic achievement, a number of researchers have developed and advanced a Continuum of Risk Hypothesis, which places homelessness in the context of poverty and attributes the variability of poor outcomes to the extent that co-occurring risks are present, but have not yet empirically investigated it (Buckner, 2008; Cutuli et al., 2013; Masten et al., 1993; Obradović et al., 2009; Rafferty et al., 2004). Although an overall consensus on the impacts of homelessness on academic achievement does not exist, it is helpful to consider assorted studies and findings as a means of understanding the significance and variety among the disruptions homelessness can cause for children and youth.

Physical Health Effects. Across the homeless population, children are more susceptible than adults to physical health problems (Wynne et al., 2013). Chronic health issues can begin even before birth as a result of inadequate prenatal care and preterm birth (David et al., 2012;

Masten, 1992; Rafferty & Shinn, 1991; Rouse & Fantuzzo, 2009) and have negative effects on school attendance and consequently academic achievement (National Center for Homeless Education, 2017b). Children born to teen mothers and mothers with lower educational attainment are more likely to experience homelessness (Coker et al., 2010; Swick & Williams, 2010). As they grow up, these children often do not have access to adequate primary and preventive care, on-time immunizations, and proper nutrition (Coker et al., 2010; Rafferty & Shinn, 1991). Additionally, low quality housing can exacerbate health vulnerabilities, due to conditions like exposure to lead concentration in lead-based paint (Kerker et al., 2011; Rafferty & Shinn, 1991). Common disorders among students experiencing homelessness include upper respiratory infections, minor skin ailments, ear disorders, chronic physical disorders, and gastrointestinal disorders (Rafferty & Shinn, 1991). Examples of infectious diseases are influenza, whooping cough, and tuberculosis (Murphy & Tobin, 2011; Wynne et al., 2013), and sample skin diseases are scabies, lice, and bed bugs (Karbanow, 2004).

Social and Emotional Effects. Similar to physical health, social and emotional well-being are important factors in the ability of students experiencing homeless to not only be present at school, but also to participate actively and effectively. A growing body of research indicates there is an important relationship between social and emotional learning processes and school success, which can serve as a protective factor and create resilience among homeless highly mobile students (Cutuli & Herbers, 2014; Durlak et al., 2011; Havlik et al., 2014; Masten et al., 2015; Moffitt et al., 2011). Therefore, it is important to acknowledge not only the ways in which homelessness can negatively impact these processes, including self-management, social awareness, growth mindset, and self-efficacy, but also the opportunity for promoting them and in turn mitigating negative effects.

Adversity creates deficits in regulatory abilities, in terms of emotional control, as well as social functioning (Lafavor, 2018; Obradović, 2010). Youth experiencing homelessness face stressful experiences that are both wide-ranging and severe; on average, these students can have up to 11-12 different forms of traumatic events before and during their homelessness (Coates & McKenzie-Mohr, 2010). Almost one-third of students who experience housing instability also incur substantial cases of maltreatment (Fantuzzo & Perlman, 2007; Swick & Williams, 2010), which negatively affects their mental well-being and academic achievement (Romano et al., 2015). The most common psychological problems among children and youth in unstable housing include depression, anxiety, and behavioral problems (Rafferty & Shinn, 1991). One study in particular found that over 40% of teens experiencing homelessness struggle with depression, in comparison with 28% of their housed peers, and are three times more likely to attempt suicide than housed teens (Institute for Children, Poverty & Homelessness, 2017). These adolescents often experience loneliness, as they receive little social support and can feel alienated from family or the larger society, and they can feel emotional distress, in terms of "being trapped," where they are unable to cope effectively (Kidd & Shahar, 2008, p. 164). Youth experiencing homelessness incur higher rates of posttraumatic stress disorder and victimization than their housed peers in the general population (Bender et al., 2014). Teens experiencing homelessness have higher rates of unwanted sexual activity (23% compared to 9% of housed teens) and of being deliberately hurt by someone they were dating (27% compared to 9% of housed teens; Institute for Children, Poverty & Homelessness, 2017). Additionally, mortality rates, specifically due to suicide and drug overdose, are up to 40 times higher for youth experiencing homelessness than for their classmates in the general population (Kidd & Shahar, 2008).

Conversely, a variety of protective factors can alleviate the negative effects of homelessness on students' well-being. For example, a supportive school climate, where students feel safe, have caring relationships, and participate meaningfully, can reduce risk of peer victimization and violence (Thapa et al., 2013), specifically for homeless youth (Moore et al., 2018). In one study, researchers found student safety and high expectations had a significant association with reduced school victimization, depression tendency, and suicidal ideation (Moore et al., 2018). Peer and teacher social support is also a promising prevention and intervention approach for fostering resilience, as it encourages positive emotional responses while mitigating negative ones and improves youths' affect state and ability to respond to adversity (Griffin et al., 2019). More specifically, student perceptions of teacher support and school connectedness are associated with better emotional health (Kidger et al., 2012).

Impact of Race and Ethnicity. A developing body of research provides evidence that negative consequences associated with homelessness are not only more pronounced for youth who come from minority racial and ethnic backgrounds than for White youth, but also distinctive from the general challenges adults incur (Aviles de Bradley, 2015a, 2015b; Edwards, 2020; Gonzalez et al., 2021; Morton et al., 2018; Page, 2017; Reck, 2009). Given the disadvantages adults of color encounter, such as structural barriers to affordable housing, discrimination, and personal stressors (Olivet et al., 2021; Wrighting et al., 2019), students in these families are also susceptible to drawbacks at home, which can affect their experience at school. Compared to White peers, youth of color—particularly Black and Hispanic youth—are at increased risk for homelessness and spend longer in periods of homelessness, which also makes them more likely to re-enter after exiting (Gonzalez et al., 2021; Morton et al., 2018). Black youth have an 83% increased risk for homelessness, compared with Hispanic youth at 33%, LGBTQ youth at 120%,

and unmarried parenting youth at 200% (Gonzalez et al., 2021). Although there is limited research on the overlapping effects of homelessness and race on students in the public school system, initial qualitative findings communicate the ways in which race and racism can negatively impact students' ability to be identified, receive McKinney-Vento services, and succeed academically (Aviles de Bradley, 2015a, 2015b; Edwards, 2020).

The intersection of race and other marginalized identities with homelessness can further increase risk and adverse outcomes for young people. For example, Black LGBTQ youth have 4 times the prevalence of homelessness in comparison with White cisgender heterosexual peers (Gonzalez et al., 2021). Black LGBTQ youth are at higher risks for mental health struggles, including substance abuse and mood disorders, which can be in response to increased instances of harassment from police and community members, as well as increased sexualization and invisibility (Reck, 2009). They also have more challenges exiting homelessness than White LGBTQ youth in similar circumstances (Page, 2017).

Impact of Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity. For youth, sexual orientation and gender identity also have a significant relationship with homelessness, as LGBTQ+ individuals are more likely than their cisgender peers to experience homelessness and associated repercussions (Morton et al., 2018). To this point, youth homelessness among LGBT people (focusing on ages 10-29) has received more attention from advocates and public policy experts than LGBT adult homelessness (Wilson et al., 2020). Sexual and gender minority students are at more than double the risk to become homeless than their heterosexual cisgender peers and have over twice the rate of early death among youth experiencing homelessness (Morton et al., 2018). This group is disproportionately represented, comprising 30-40% of youth receiving homeless services, among all youth who are experiencing homelessness (Cochran et al., 2002;

Salomonsen-Sautel et al., 2008). These students can experience stigma and discrimination from family members who do not accept their identities (Morton et al., 2018), as well as from clients and staff in emergency shelters (Abramovich, 2012). They are also at increased health risks, including greater rates of substance use, a greater number of substances used, and negatively associated outcomes like Human Immunodeficiency Virus or Viral Hepatitis, than heterosexual cisgender peers experiencing homelessness (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2008; Cochran et al., 2002; Salomonsen-Sautel et al., 2008; Santa Maria et al., 2018). Reported mental health outcomes also include increased suicidal ideation and more severe depressive symptoms (Gattis, 2013); increased anxiety (Gangamma et al., 2007); and higher rates of post-traumatic stress disorder (Whitbeck et al., 2004).

Examination of the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act

Given the variety and severity of the negative consequences of homelessness that students encounter both at home and at school, it is important to understand the ways in which local and state educators and personnel are able to offer protection, relief, and stability to these children and youth. The Education for Homeless Children and Youth (EHCY) program (McKinney-Vento Act, 2015) acts as the bridge between adversities students in unstable housing face and supports schools can provide, which ultimately affects the ability of these youth to graduate high school. Therefore, this section provides an overview of both the social circumstances and the evolution of the *McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act* (2015), as well as the key features and services provisioned under the EHCY program. First, the 1980s United States setting is described as a means of contextualizing the initial legislative efforts to support people experiencing homelessness, with a focus on the *Stewart B. McKinney Homeless Assistance Act of 1987*. Next, the law's reauthorizations and key EHCY tenets under the *No*

Child Left Behind Act (2001) and *Every Student Succeeds Act* (2015) are provided. Information about the roles of the state and local educational agencies and services related to immediate enrollment and school stability are also included. Finally, limitations to the full implementation the *McKinney-Vento Act* (2015) are reported.

Social Context of the McKinney-Vento Act

In the early 1980s, chronic homelessness began to grow across the United States, with Southern California as a focal point of conversation (Solutions for Change, 2023). An influx of gentrification resulted in the displacement of 23% of downtown residents in major cities, including Boston, Cincinnati, Richmond, Seattle, and Denver (Solutions for Change, 2023). The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development was unable to offer affordable housing in and around cities, as the organization's budget decreased from $29 billion in 1976 to $17 billion in 1990 (Solutions for Change, 2023). Additionally, stigmatized health issues including mental health and HIV/AIDS created disproportionate risks for homelessness among vulnerable populations (Solutions for Change, 2023). To organize emergency relief and preventative measures and long-term solutions to homelessness, the *Homeless Persons' Survival Act* was introduced in both houses of Congress in 1986. Even though Congress only enacted parts of this proposal into law, two other important acts were adopted the same year: *the Homeless Eligibility Clarification Act of 1986* as part of the *Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986*, which removed barriers for individuals experiencing homelessness to access existing programs, and the *Housing Act*, which created the Emergency Shelter Grant Program.

Stewart B. McKinney Homeless Assistance Act

In 1986, Title I of the *Homeless Persons' Survival Act*, articulating the provision of emergency relief services for shelter, food, mobile health care, and so forth, was introduced as

the *Urgent Relief for the Homeless Act*. President Ronald Regan signed it into law on July 22, 1987, and it was renamed the *Stewart B. McKinney Act*, after the death of its chief sponsor U.S. Representative Stewart McKinney, a Republican from Connecticut. The original act contained 15 programs, organized into nine titles, providing services, such as emergency shelter and transitional housing, job training, health care, and education, to individuals experiencing homelessness. In particular, all states were required to provide children a free and appropriate public education and change any residency requirements that might delay their enrollment. Additionally, each state was given instructions and funding to establish a state coordinator whose role would be ensuring these students' rights were met, as well as spreading awareness about the needs of this population.

The first amendment to the statute in 1988 included minor changes expanding the eligible activities and modifying the distribution of McKinney funds. Then in 1990, revisions included the review of policies that acted as enrollment barriers and the promotion of academic achievement for students experiencing homelessness. Accordingly, states were then given more funds and allowed to use them for educational services. The amendments in 1992 addressed shelter and housing provisions, including the creation of low-cost shelters, the Rural Homeless Housing Assistance grant program, and the establishment of the Access to Community Care and Effective Services and Support program. Under the *Improving America's Schools Act*, Congress again amended the education portion of the *Stewart B. McKinney Act* in 1994. At that time, Local Educational Agencies were given more flexibility in spending funds, preschoolers were awarded rights to a free and appropriate public-school education, and parents' voices were recognized in the school placement process.

No Child Left Behind Act Reauthorization. In 2000, President Bill Clinton renamed the act, the *McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act*, as a means of honoring the recently deceased co-sponsor, Bruce F. Vento. The next year, the EHCY program was reauthorized under the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001*, with the acknowledgement that over one million children and youth a year were experiencing homelessness. The reauthorization strengthened expectations for the state coordinator to collaborate with McKinney-Vento liaisons to improve accountability, increased funding, promoted more spending flexibility, and mandated a liaison in every Local Educational Agency. Additionally, the revisions enumerated a specific list of circumstances that qualified as homeless and prohibited school districts from segregating students experiencing homelessness in separate schools.

Every Student Succeeds Act Reauthorization. The EHCY program was most recently reauthorized under the *Every Student Succeeds Act* in 2015. In this iteration, the identification of children experiencing homelessness and the removal of barriers to school enrollment were emphasized. Additionally, the non-regulatory guidance outlined procedures to enable students' participation in online learning, magnet schools, career and technical information, advanced placement courses, and summer schools were put into place (U.S. Department of Education, 2018). The provision of preschool services for young children experiencing homelessness was also strengthened (U.S. Department of Education, 2018). To support these initiatives, collaboration between school district personnel and community service providers, as well as increased opportunities for local and state professional development, were required (U.S. Department of Education, 2018).

The EHCY Program

The EHCY program is one of the 15 programs outlined in the *McKinney-Vento Act* (2015). The purpose of this program is to ensure that children and youth experiencing homelessness have equal access to the same free, appropriate public education, including a public preschool education, as their stably housed peers (McKinney-Vento Act, 2015). Additionally, according to Congressional policies in the EHCY program, states must revise policies, laws, or regulations acting as barriers to educational attainment of students experiencing homelessness; homelessness is not an adequate reason for the separation of students experiencing homelessness from domiciled peers; students experiencing homelessness must receive access to educational services offered to domiciled students in order to enable them to meet state academic standards (McKinney-Vento Act, 2015). To ensure the enactment and enforcement of these policies, Congress created the roles of State Coordinator for Homeless Education in 1987 and Local Educational Agencies Liaison in 2001 (McKinney-Vento Act, 2015).

State Coordinator for Homeless Education. To receive McKinney-Vento funds, each state must have a State Coordinator for Homeless Education, who reports directly to the U.S. Secretary of Education (McKinney-Vento Act, 2015). The State Coordinator receives authorized funds from the Secretary and in turn disperses them as sub-grants to Local Educational Agencies that apply for them (McKinney-Vento Act, 2015). Additionally, the State Coordinator ensures all Local Educational Agencies and McKinney-Vento liaisons are in compliance with the legislative requirements through a formal monitoring process, in addition to document and data reviews, interviews, phone calls, and so forth. (McKinney-Vento Act, 2015). The State Coordinator's responsibilities include:

- Gathering reliable, valid, and comprehensive information on homeless children and youth and making it publicly available;
- Developing and enacting a State McKinney-Vento plan;
- Collecting and transmitting data to the Secretary of Education, for the purpose of assessing the educational needs of homeless children and youth in the state;
- Providing comprehensive education and services to homeless children and youths, in collaboration with educators and school personnel, service providers, local educational agency liaisons, and community organizations;
- Providing technical assistance and conducting monitoring of local agencies, in addition to offering professional development opportunities and responding to inquiries from parents and guardians. (U.S. Department of Education, 2018)

Homeless Education/McKinney-Vento Liaison. Every Local Educational Agency is required to appoint an individual as the district's homeless, or McKinney-Vento liaison, whether or not they receive McKinney-Vento funding (McKinney-Vento Act, 2015). This individual collaborates with the State Coordinator and school personnel to provide services and advocate for families experiencing homelessness in order to ensure the academic success of their children (U.S. Department of Education, 2018). The McKinney-Vento liaison's responsibilities include:

- Identifying homeless children and youth through efforts of school personnel and outreach activities;
- Offering homeless children and youth full and equal opportunities to succeed in school;
- Ensuring homeless children and youth have access to educational services;

- Providing referrals for additional services, including health care, dental, mental health, housing, etc.;
- Informing parents and guardians of their educational rights and related opportunities;
- Publicly posting the educational rights of homeless children and youth;
- Providing professional development and support to school personnel;
- Assisting unaccompanied youths. (U.S. Department of Education, 2018)

McKinney-Vento Act Services

In addition to the requirements for State and local educational agencies, the EHCY program enumerates certain services to provide students with a stable school environment, the ability to attend special programs and extracurricular activities, and access to transportation, as well as guidelines on dispute resolution and law enforcement (McKinney-Vento Act, 2015; U.S. Department of Education, 2018).

Identification. One of the central tenets of the *McKinney-Vento Act* (2015) is the identification of children and youth who are experiencing homelessness; for school personnel to provide these students with services, they must know who they are (National Center for Homeless Education, 2008). McKinney-Vento liaisons and school personnel use a variety of strategies to identify students, including:

- Asking parents about current housing situations during enrollment;
- Sending home letters with information on the rights of students experiencing homelessness and steps for self-identification;
- Coordinating with service providers and community organizations, as well as truancy officers and local hotel and motel managers;

- Posting outreach materials in areas that low-income families and youth in high-risk situations frequent. (National Center for Homeless Education, 2008)

It can be challenging to identify students experiencing homelessness for a variety of reasons including lack of awareness of children's educational rights and the laws that protect them, social stigmas around homelessness, or fear of child welfare involvement (Ausikaitis et al., 2015; Cunningham et al., 2010). Rural and suburban areas with fewer shelters and services also make it harder to locate students who could benefit from McKinney-Vento services (Cunningham et al., 2010). Research suggests student self-reporting is not an effective method for identification; for students and parents to feel safe, they must have someone at the school level whom they trust (Cumming & Gloeckner, 2012). Recommended identification strategies for McKinney-Vento liaisons and other school district personnel include raising awareness about the definition of homelessness and rights of eligible students, conducting community assessments to collect data on poverty and housing trends, and conducting training and outreach for school staff and community members (National Center for Homeless Education, 2021b).

Public Notice and Immediate Enrollment. School districts are required to ensure public notices are posted in areas, including schools, shelters, libraries, and social service organizations, that families and unaccompanied youth experiencing homelessness frequent (McKinney-Vento Act, 2015). These notices give guardians and children the ability to self-identify and understand their rights under the *McKinney-Vento Act* (2015). Once students are identified, they have the right to be immediately enrolled in school and bypass requirements for mandatory paperwork, such as prior academic records, immunizations, proof of guardianship, birth certificates, or proof of residency (McKinney-Vento Act, 2015).

School Stability and School of Origin. Ensuring school stability, which involves keeping students in the school of origin when in their best interest, is one of the vital responsibilities of local and state personnel implementing the EHCY program. School of origin is defined as the school that the child or youth attended when last permanently housed or the school in which the child or youth was last enrolled (42 U.S.C. 11432(g)(3)(G), 2001). Students have the right to continue attending their school of origin until the end of an academic year in which they obtain permanent housing, and if students become homeless between academic years, they can continue attending their school of origin the following year (McKinney-Vento Act, 2015). Local Educational Agency responsibilities include keeping children and youth in the school of origin, unless that goes against the wishes of the guardian or unaccompanied homeless youth; informing parents of their rights under the *McKinney-Vento Act*; providing transportation to the school of origin; and providing written notice of the Local Educational Agency's school selection decision and the right to appeal if a disagreement occurs (McKinney-Vento Act, 2015).

Best Interest and Dispute Resolution. Throughout the decision-making process, McKinney-Vento liaisons must take a student-centered, holistic approach to ensuring student stability, well-being, and success—or best interest (McKinney-Vento Act, 2015; U.S. Department of Education, 2018). When determining best interest, the school of origin should be prioritized, unless it is against the wishes of the guardian or unaccompanied youth, and then ensure transportation for the student (McKinney-Vento Act, 2015). Additionally, other factors that could affect academic achievement, safety and health, and other children in the family must be weighed (U.S. Department of Education, 2018). When a decision is made for the student to attend a school other than the school of origin when that is the preference of the parent or the unaccompanied youth, the Local Educational Agency must provide written explanation of the

reasons for the determination and the right to appeal to the guardian or unaccompanied homeless youth (McKinney-Vento Act, 2015). Each state is required to have procedures in place to handle disputes related to eligibility, school selection, or enrollment (McKinney-Vento Act, 2015), and Local Educational Agencies are required to enroll students in their school of choice if a dispute does occur until resolved (U.S. Department of Education, 2018).

Extracurricular Activities and Special Programs. Providing students experiencing homelessness equitable opportunities to succeed includes offering access to extracurricular activities and academic programs in the school districts (McKinney-Vento Act, 2015; U.S. Department of Education, 2018). In the non-regulatory guidance, State Educational Agencies and Local Educational Agencies are encouraged to coordinate with athletic directors and coaches to increase awareness about the challenges students experiencing homelessness face and work together to create policies that expedite participation, such as coordinating physicals, providing equipment, and waiving fees (U.S. Department of Education, 2018). When there are waitlists for academic programs, such as charter and magnet schools, career and technical schools, and online schools, students experiencing homelessness should be given priority (U.S. Department of Education, 2018).

Transportation. School districts must provide transportation services to students experiencing homelessness for the purpose of ensuring school stability, prioritizing the school of origin, and enabling full participation in school and related activities (McKinney-Vento Act, 2015). Additionally, transportation arrangements must be made quickly to accommodate immediate enrollment and school attendance (U.S. Department of Education, 2018). Strategies for providing efficient transportation include collaboration among local/ neighboring McKinney-Vento liaisons, electronic forms and databases to coordinate requests and agreements, flexible

bus routes, funding for public transportation or gas vouchers (National Center for Homeless Education, 2017a). Transportation is not only a vital piece of the EHCY program, but also a complicated, daunting, and expensive one (Sparks, 2014; Wynne et al., 2013) and can become an obstacle to education (Ausikaitis et al., 2015; National Network for Youth, 2008). Transportation barriers can include uninformed parents, absence of local transportation policies, complicated and costly routes to schools, and limited financial and staff resources (Mizerek & Hinz, 2004).

Funding. Each year, the U.S. Department of Education determines state allocations according to a formula aligned with states' Title I funds and then distributes funding to State Educational Agencies, who in turn use a competitive grant process to determine which Local Educational Agencies receive funding in the form of subgrants (McKinney-Vento Act, 2015). States can reserve up to 25% of their funds for state-level activities, such as training of Local Educational Agencies and McKinney-Vento liaisons, interagency collaboration, and technical assistance (McKinney-Vento, 2015). As of 2021, President Biden signed the *American Rescue Plan Act* into law, which included $800 million (compared to the approximately $80 million annual state McKinney-Vento allocation) to support the specific needs of homeless children and youth via the American Rescue Plan Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief–Homeless Children and Youth Fund (Office of Elementary & Secondary Education, 2021). State Educational Agencies and Local Educational Agencies are required to use these funds to identify students experiencing homelessness and provide wraparound services to ensure their full participation in school activities.

Limitations of the McKinney-Vento Act

Despite the good intentions and evolving reach of the *McKinney-Vento Act* (2015), several critics have expressed their beliefs that this legislation has yet to reach its full potential in

terms of implementation (Havlik et al., 2020; Mullins et al., 2016; National Center for Homeless Education, 2018). Some scholars assert the *McKinney-Vento Act* (2015) is primarily focused on access to school, including enrollment and transportation, rather than the quality and continuity of their educational experiences once they are enrolled (Stone & Uretsky, 2016). Additionally, McKinney-Vento liaisons can find it difficult to carry out their full responsibilities, as they are often tasked with these responsibilities in addition to the full-time roles in the schools, which negatively impacts efforts to identify students and deliver services (Mullins et al., 2016). In some situations, liaisons have limited professional knowledge or necessary skill sets to navigate student issues and family concerns, and in others, they do not have decision-making authority (Havlik et al., 2020; National Center for Homeless Education, 2018). More generally, all school staff need access to training opportunities, helping students meet their basic needs, and securing school enrollment and transportation (Havlik et al., 2020; National Center for Homeless Education, 2018).

Significance of a High School Diploma

The association between more education and improved personal and professional outcomes is well-documented in the literature (Haycock, 2010; Lansford et al., 2016; Maynard et al., 2015; Ross & Wu, 1995; Vilorio, 2016; Yamarik, 2011; Zajacova & Lawrence, 2018). As people attain more education, they become more likely to be employed with access to more fulltime, fulfilling work opportunities, to experience less economic hardship, to be engaged in more supportive relationships, and to have more positive health lifestyles, which can include more exercise and regular doctor visits and less drinking and smoking (Ross & Wu, 1995). Succinctly stated, people with more education live healthier, longer lives due to health knowledge and behaviors, income and resources, and social and psychological factors (Haycock,

2010). Because students experiencing homelessness are already at significantly greater cumulative risk levels than their housed peers in terms of school experiences and adult outcomes (Cutuli, 2018; Masten et al., 2015; Murphy & Tobin, 2011; Thistle-Elliot, 2014), it is especially important to consider both the barriers and rewards related to this population's ability to earn a high school diploma. Therefore, this section details the positive association between education and health, the positive adult outcomes related to a high school diploma, the consequences of the General Education Development (GED) certification and high school dropout, and finally, risk factors to dropout and protective factors to graduation.

Positive Association between Education and Health

Given the negative consequences of homelessness on adults in society and on children and youth in the K-12 public school system described in the previous sections, it is crucial for scholars and practitioners to not only understand the general benefits of more education but to also ensure students in unstable housing are able to access them. Hundreds of researchers have conducted studies documenting "the gradient" linking more schooling with better health and longer life (Zajacova & Lawrence, 2018, p. 275). They have discovered connections between education and nearly all health outcomes, including general health, chronic conditions, and functional limitations and disabilities, which can be explained largely through economic, health-behavioral, and social-psychological mediating mechanisms (Lee et al., 2016; Raghupathi & Raghupathi, 2020; Ross & Wu, 1995; Zajacova & Lawrence, 2018). More specifically, they have explored the causal effect of education on health through natural experiments and twin design and have demonstrated that attainment, mainly measured in completed years of schooling, does contribute to better health across a variety of contexts and outcomes (Zajacova & Lawrence, 2018). Most research from 2000-2020 relies on three broad theoretical perspectives to

conceptualize the relationship between education and health: Fundamental Cause Theory, which attributes health inequalities to variation in social resources, such as education, money, and prestige; Human Capital Theory, which identifies increased productivity as a return on educational investment; and Signaling or Credentialing Perspective, which addresses discrepancies in health according to 12 versus 16 years of schooling (Raghupathi & Raghupathi, 2020).

Positive Adult Outcomes Related to the High School Diploma

The high school diploma is a significant predictor of positive adult outcomes, related to participation in post-secondary education, higher income and more employment opportunities, and healthy living practices related to nutrition, exercise, and healthcare services (Hatch et al., 2022; Haycock, 2010; Lansford et al., 2016; Levin et al., 2007; Maynard et al., 2015; Ross & Wu, 1995; Zajacova, 2012). Students experiencing homelessness need to be aware of this noteworthy correlation, which has the potential to offset the misfortune they encounter. Although the knowledge and cognitive skills required for a high school diploma and the GED are similar, adult health outcomes, attributed to income, employment status, and smoking, are significantly better for high school graduates than GED recipients (Zajacova, 2012). Students who stay in school to earn their high school diplomas have opportunities to develop skills and acquire knowledge that equip them to increase employment prospects and income, while decreasing risks for chronic health conditions and premature death (Haycock, 2010; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, n.d.). They also cultivate noncognitive characteristics, like persistence in reaching goals, self-efficacy, or the ability to delay gratification, which improve social behavior and planning, health related decision-making, and contributions to labor market outcomes (Heckman, 2008; Heckman & Rubenstein, 2001; Heckman et al., 2006; Masten et al., 2005). It is

particularly important for students experiencing homelessness to develop these skills as one aspect of their ability to overcome challenges associated with residential instability (Kidd & Shahar, 2008; Thompson et al., 2016; Toolis & Hammack, 2015; Zhang et al., 2020).

Consequences of the GED and High School Dropout

Adult outcomes of earning a GED certification are actually more closely aligned with dropping out of school than with earning a high school diploma (Zajacova, 2012). This difference underscores the importance for educators and local and state personnel to promote the high school diploma over the GED to students experiencing homelessness, especially considering the widespread evidence that they are already prone to lower academic achievement, dropout, and other negative results (Miller, 2011). The GED has been offered since 1943, originally designed as an alternative credential for United States veterans returning from World War II who wanted to take advantage of the GI Bill (J. H. Tyler, 2003). However, historically and currently, the majority of GED holders do not enroll in college at the same rates as their traditional high school graduating peers, and they only complete some college credits, if any (Boesel, 1998; Rossi & Bower, 2018; J. H. Tyler, 2003). These decisions could be a result of factors, such as noncognitive skills, social capital, motivation, lack of transportation, and college characteristics and warrant further exploration, considering the increased benefits of earning a degree from a community college or university (Rossi & Bower, 2018). Researched GED disadvantages include worse labor market and health outcomes, as well as "lower college completion rates, higher attrition from the military, higher crime rates, and higher rates of substance abuse" (Zajacova, 2012, p. S284). In another study, the team found that the GED certification had no significant effect on employment or earnings for women and only had an increase in earnings for men in the second year after the test but not subsequent years (Jepsen et

al., 2016). Given these documented outcomes, it is clear that the GED does not have the same authority in predicting adult success as a high school diploma and therefore is not the most meaningful credential for students experiencing homelessness to seek.

There are well-documented social and economic consequences for students who drop out of high school, and they are increasing as the workforce continues to demand more educated employees (Rumberger, 2011). Students can drop out of high school for a variety of reasons, which one researcher categorizes into push factors, such as suspension, bad grades, or moved away, and pull factors, including needing to work or take care of family (Bjerk, 2012, p. 2). He found students who felt pulled out filled their time with human capitol building activity and were less likely to be idle, which recuperated some of the human capital and soft skills classmates who stayed in school developed. However, in general, young adults who do not complete high school face a variety of consequences including unemployment, making less money when employed, suffering from mental health issues, and being involved in criminal activity and jail time (Rumberger, 2011; Zajacova, 2012). In one study, negative consequences of dropping out of high school included: 4 times as likely to receive government assistance, twice as likely to have been fired at least 2 times, 3 times as likely to have been arrested since age 18, twice as likely to have used illicit drugs in the last 6 months, and twice as likely to report poor health (Lansford et al., 2016). Students experiencing homelessness need to be aware of these considerable drawbacks, as they are already at increased chances of dropping out of school (Miller, 2011).

Risk Factors to High School Dropout

Risk factors related to home and school environments that reduce the likelihood of high school graduation can begin in early childhood and continue into adolescence (Ensminger & Slusarcick, 1992; Lansford et al., 2016; Lee et al., 2016; U.S. Department of Health and Human

Services, n.d.). Poor academic achievement is the strongest predictor of school dropout, but engagement in deviant behavior, bonds with antisocial peers, and a family background in poverty are also factors that can increase students' decisions to leave school early (Battin-Pearson et al., 2000). Generally speaking, individual level factors associated with higher dropout rates include behavioral and emotional problems, poor mental and physical health problems, less positive well-being, substance abuse, teen pregnancy and early parenthood, and involvement in criminal activity (Christenson & Thurlow, 2004; Maynard et al., 2015; Shuger, 2012). These stressors are documented challenges that students experiencing homelessness in particular encounter (Bender et al., 2014; Coates & McKenzie-Mohr, 2010; Cutuli & Herbers, 2014; Moffitt et al., 2011).

School climate factors, including lack of teacher interest in students, student perceptions of unfair disciplinary systems, high rates of violence and safety issues, and physical and verbal abuse toward LGBTQ+ students, also contribute to higher dropout rates (U. S. Department of Health and Human Services, n.d.). In one study, researchers identified lower family socioeconomic status (as early as kindergarten); peer rejection in elementary school; treatment for emotional, behavior, or drug problems; and becoming a young parent as factors that negatively influenced both high school completion and adult outcomes (Lansford et al., 2016). Results from another study highlighted a link between third-grade reading skill level and likelihood of graduating high school, as 23% of students with below-basic reading skills did not finish high school on time or at all, and 26% of students with below-basic reading skills who also lived in poverty for at least a year between Grades 2-11 did not finish high school on time or at all (Hernandez, 2011). Students in unstable housing are at higher risks for these documented barriers because they have worse school engagement (Tobin & Murphy, 2013) based on factors

like developmental delays in early education (Manfra, 2019) and effects of poverty (National Center for Homeless Education, 2017b).

Protective Factors Leading to High School Graduation

Given the increased risks for some students experiencing homelessness to drop out of high school (Miller, 2011) alongside the ability to develop agency and resilience of other students in similar circumstances (Toolis & Hammack, 2015; Zhang et al., 2020), it is critical for scholars and practitioners to understand pathways to graduation for both the general student population and this subpopulation. Protective factors to graduation can include both family and school circumstances, as well as individual skills and strategies (Cambron et al., 2017; Haycock, 2010; Rosen et al., 2019). Generally speaking, higher family socioeconomic status, which can be measured by family income or parental education, is associated with increased student academic achievement (Ensminger & Slusarcick, 1992; Haycock, 2010; Newcomb et al., 2002). Better educated parents are able to raise healthy children through higher paying jobs, with benefits including insurance and health care and the ability to purchase nutritious food, quality childcare, and homes in health-promoting neighborhoods (Haycock, 2010). Self-regulation and strong academic performance in middle school is a predictor of obtaining a high school diploma, which could be related to self and teacher expectations developed early in school (Cambron et al., 2017). Additionally, resilience is an important personal characteristic, through which students exude self-confidence, composure, and control, use resources, and ask for help (Rosen et al., 2019). School factors that promote resilience include support of friends, high staff expectations of students, effective classroom instruction, and positive student-teacher interactions (Wang, 1997).

Summary

In summary, this chapter provides the foundation upon which the methods of this single-case qualitative study were designed. The purpose of the *McKinney-Vento Act* (2015) is to ensure equitable opportunities for PreK-12 students experiencing homelessness, by providing services to offset the negative effects of homelessness on physical and emotional well-being, as well as the setbacks to full participation in school and subsequent academic achievement. Given the significant role a high school diploma can have in positive adult outcomes, in comparison with the GED or school dropout, it is essential for educational personnel and community stakeholders to develop a better understanding of the factors, in tandem with this federal legislation, that promote and simultaneously prohibit students experiencing homelessness to earn this culminating credential. It is impossible to understand those factors without also considering the structural and individual influences that contribute to adult homelessness, the impact of homelessness on students in the public school system, and the role of resilience in navigating personal and circumstantial challenges.

CHAPTER 3

METHODS

In this qualitative single-site case study, I answered the guiding research questions related to the factors that contributed to the successful high school graduation of students from the Classes of 2022 and 2023 who experienced homelessness in Bethany City School District (pseudonym), Virginia. As described in Chapters 1 and 2, homelessness is a pervasive issue in terms of its negative effects, particularly on the personal and academic well-being and success of children and youth, as well as more generally on adults and society as a whole. Based on the positive association between more education and productive adult outcomes, it is crucial for both scholars and practitioners to mitigate these damaging consequences by not only better understanding the phenomenon of homelessness in the K-12 public school system, but also improving policies and procedures to support students in such circumstances. The purpose of this chapter is to describe the methods that were employed as I conducted the study. This chapter outlines the design of the research, the case site, and the participants. Additionally, it details the data sources and collection methods, as well as the data analysis strategies. Finally, it presents the delimitations, limitations, and assumptions of the study.

Research Questions

The research questions that guided this investigation were as follows:

1. What facilitating factors do graduates who experienced homelessness in high school and school district personnel within a selected school district identify as critical to earning a high school diploma?

a. School-based factors

b. Non-school-based factors

2. What barriers to earning a high school diploma do graduates who experienced homelessness in high school and school district personnel within a selected school district identify?

a. School-based barriers

b. Non-school-based barriers

3. What is the perceived impact of earning a high school diploma on the lives of students who have experienced homelessness, according to graduates who experienced homelessness in high school and school district personnel within a selected school district?

4. What recommendations do graduates who experienced homelessness in high school and school district personnel within a selected school district have for teachers, administrators, and other school personnel regarding helping students experiencing homelessness with high school access and success?

Research Design

Within qualitative inquiry and the constructivist/ interpretivist paradigm, I chose a single-site case study approach as a means of investigating the contemporary, real-world problem of students who experience homelessness graduating high school at lower rates than their domiciled peers. Case study is an appropriate research design for an in-depth investigation of a current phenomenon in an authentic context, particularly in instances where the boundaries of the phenomenon and context overlap (Yin, 2014); thus, it was suitable for this particular undertaking. Given the effectiveness of qualitative inquiry in communicating meaning ascribed

to social or human problems (Creswell, 2013) and making the world visible through an interpretive, naturalistic approach (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011), it enabled me to uplift the voices and lived expertise of high school graduates who experienced homelessness. Although a variety of statistical data can communicate both the longevity and the magnitude of this ongoing gap in academic achievement, they can be limited in their ability to effectively capture the pathways students and other community members navigate together to reach high school graduation. Based on my approach of interacting with graduates and school district personnel to understand each student's unique story, this study fit well under this umbrella of the interpretivist paradigm, which emphasizes negotiated meaning making of an experience or place among participants and researchers (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Single-Site Case Study

I selected single-site case study, whose niche is answering "how" or "why" questions about a contemporary set of events, over which a researcher has little or no control (Yin, 2014, p. 13), as the methodology for this study. Case study entails a spatially bounded phenomenon, observed within a specified amount of time and can be defined as "an intensive study of a single unit for the purpose of understanding a larger class of (similar) units" (Gerring, 2004, p. 342). Another accepted definition posits, "The essence of a case study…is that it tries to illuminate a decision or set of decisions: why they were taken, how they were implemented, and with what result" (Schramm, 1971, p. 6). Because the purpose of this study was to understand how recent graduates who experienced homelessness in one school district earned their high school diplomas, this approach was a fitting choice.

Rationales for selecting a case study approach include a "common" case, which has the potential to explore the context and circumstances of everyday social processes and a

“revelatory” case, which offers the opportunity to observe a previously inaccessible phenomenon (Yin, 2014, p. 50). Additionally, focusing on one unit can provide the opportunity to explore a theoretical framework through empirical evidence generated by participants (Yin, 2014). Given that 801 students experiencing homelessness in Virginia graduated high school in 2022 and 24 school districts achieved on-time graduation rates of 68% or above for this population (Virginia Department of Education, n.d.-a), it can be considered a common occurrence. This approach aligns well with Masten’s (2014) claim that resilience is based on ordinary processes and occurrences. Because Resilience Theory underlines the combination of personal skills and traits with environmental resources and supports, case study offered me an effective way to study both the phenomenon of interest, homelessness, as well as its context, the implementation of the *McKinney-Vento Act* (2015) and other related environmental factors (Masten, 2018; Shean, 2015; Yin, 2014). This process was also revelatory, as quantitative data on high school graduation rates are more prevalent than qualitative stories.

Research Paradigm

This study was grounded in a constructivist/ interpretivist research paradigm, which posits itself on the assumptions that humans construct meaning as they engage with the world, humans make sense of the world according to their own historical and social perspectives, and the basic generation of meaning is always social, emerging from human interactions (Crotty, 1998). The goal of research under this umbrella is to create subjective meaning of the phenomenon at hand, by relying on participants’ views of the situation, negotiated through interactions between the researcher and participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). My aim of developing a deeper understanding of the factors that contributed to the high school graduation of students who experienced homelessness within a single-site case, rather than among the whole

population in Virginia or across the United States, aligned with the intentions of constructivist/ interpretivist perspective (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Case study is one of the research methodologies associated with this paradigm, as its purpose is to gain participants' insights and authentic information about the phenomenon at hand, and its methods of interactive interviews enable the researcher to gather unobservable information, such as thoughts, perceptions, and prejudices (Tuli, 2010; Wellington & Szczerbinksi, 2007). Although the data generated is subjective, the nature of the research under the constructivist/ interpretivist paradigm requires the researcher to maintain an exploratory orientation and observe how the participants' perspectives and behavior patterns unfold within a context (Hammersley, 2013). I have had the opportunity to co-construct new meaning around the pathway to graduation, through interviews with high school graduates who experienced homelessness, as well as with school district personnel in Bethany City.

Case Description and Participant Selection

This section describes the selection processes for the single-site case, as well as for the individual participants, in this study. The combination of three criteria, Virginia-On Time graduate rate, number of graduates, and length of McKinney-Vento liaison employment, were considered when choosing the case (Table 2).

Single-Site Case

This section highlights the selection process for the single-site case, based on criteria displayed in Table 2. Virginia is home to 131 school districts, divided among 8 regions across the state (Virginia Department of Education, 2022e). In 2022, 24 of those districts had Virginia On-Time Graduation Rates for students experiencing homelessness of 68% or above (Table 2; Virginia Department of Education, n.d.-a). Of those, I carefully weighed the total number of

graduates who had experienced homelessness and the length of the McKinney-Vento liaison employment, in alignment with both my strengths-based research approach and my theoretical framework.

High School Graduation Rate. The primary criterion for the site selection was a school district Virginia On-Time Graduation Rate of 68% or above in 2022, shown in Table 2. I chose to use this rate instead of the Federal Graduation Indicator, as it is the state's official rate, capturing the students in a cohort who earned any diploma approved by the Board of Education within four years of starting high school and allowing additional time for students with disabilities or learning English (Virginia Department of Education, 2022a). Because of the emphasis on the high school diploma itself versus other certificates or credentials and its inclusion of varying pathways and timelines, I felt this credential would enable me to uplift the heterogeneous nature of the participants' experiences. Additionally, it would help me explore the factors of time and other traditional or non-traditional aspects of the school, like technology or remote learning, that could be helping or hindering the efforts of students experiencing homelessness in Bethany City to graduate.

Number of Graduates. The secondary criterion was the actual number of 2022 graduates, also shown in Table 2. About half of the 24 school districts had at least 20 graduates. To increase my chances of locating participants and collecting as many interviews as possible in order to capture a diverse case population rather than a sample, I decided to use a district whose graduate count was within that top half regarding the total number of unhoused graduates.

Length of McKinney-Vento Liaison Employment. Finally, the tertiary criterion was the length of time the McKinney-Vento liaison has served the district, as depicted in Table 2. The liaisons in about two-thirds of the 24 school districts have held their positions for at least

three years. Because the liaison plays a critical role in the identification of students experiencing homelessness and the delivery of McKinney-Vento services (National Center for Homeless Education, 2008), I wanted to select a district with a more seasoned liaison who would understand various aspects of McKinney-Vento implementation, as well as one who would have established connections with graduates and other school district personnel.

Table 2

Matrix of the Single-Site Case Criteria

District	Criterion		
	Primary: Graduation %	Secondary: No. of Graduates	Tertiary: Liaison Start Date
Albemarle County	90	*	2021
Arlington County	91	11	2018
Bedford County	81	*	2020
Chesapeake City	81	18	2023
Chesterfield County	78	45	2022
Fauquier County	90	*	2022
Frederick County	88	21	2015
Hampton City	100	11	2014
Henrico County	70	35	2021
Loudoun County	76	87	2022
Montgomery County	73	*	2023
Newport News City	90	20	2000
Norfolk City	86	26	2017
Patrick County	90	*	2023
Portsmouth City	68	13	2023
Prince William County	86	43	2019
Richmond City	89	25	2021
Roanoke City	82	24	2003
Stafford County	80	12	2020
Virginia Beach City	77	35	2020
Williamsburg James City	90	18	2018
Winchester City	70	*	2005
Wise County	84	21	2011
York County	75	15	2023

Note. Sourced from Virginia Department of Education (n.d.-a)
* denotes fewer than 10 graduates

Final Case Selection. After considering the various criteria outlined in the matrix in Table 2 to narrow the selection, I chose Bethany City based on the history and characteristics of the school district related to the education of children and youth experiencing homelessness. Bethany City is an urban school district, whose student population is diverse with the top racial and ethnic representations of Black (40%), White (30%), and Hispanic (19%; Virginia

Department of Education, n.d.-b). Additionally, according to 2022 fall enrollment data, 15% of the student population has identified disabilities, 15% are English learners, and 61% are economically disadvantaged (Virginia Department of Education, n.d.-b).

Bethany City has made a commitment to this subpopulation of students not only through their efforts to effectively and fully implement the *McKinney-Vento Act* (2015), but also through the dedication of the Student Services Team, other educators and administrators, and the community at large. Specifically, the public school system there has created a specific fund used to fill the gaps for families encountering residential instability, once other community resources have been exhausted. In the last 5+ years, over $60,000 has been raised, which has positively impacted hundreds of students and families. Additionally, the McKinney-Vento liaison is committed to supporting and celebrating the high school graduation of the students, as they have organized a celebration dinner for graduates, sponsored by local businesses, and provided iPads to graduates, funded through *American Rescue Plan* funds. More generally, the liaison has grown the McKinney-Vento team in recent years and taken careful efforts to train staff in best practices for identification and services provision (Bethany City McKinney-Vento liaison, personal communication, August 1, 2023).

Student Population Selection

In this study, the student population consisted of high school graduates from the Classes of 2022 and 2023 in Bethany City, Virginia. At the single-site case, the McKinney-Vento liaison, with whom I have built a relationship over the past 3 years, served as the gatekeeper, or individual who is able to provide access to the site and to arbitrate access to potential participants (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). I relied on this individual to contact the Bethany City graduates on my behalf and to share the participant interview invitation (Appendix A) with them.

Additionally, each graduate received a copy of the High School Graduate Participant Consent Form (Appendix B) and the High School Graduate Personal Demographic Questionnaire (Appendix C). To capture the case as fully as possible, I attempted to interview the entire student population, rather than determining a sample. I used On-Time Graduation data from 2022 during the preparation of this study because 2023 data was not yet available. Initially, I intended for my participants to come from the class of 2023. After three separate attempts, each one a week apart, to contact and invite graduates from that year, I was only able to interview three individuals out of the 32 invited. Therefore, with the approval from my dissertation committee chair and the McKinney-Vento liaison, I expanded the participant pool to include the Class of 2022 and made the appropriate notations with the William & Mary Education Institutional Review Committee (EDIRC) and the research committee of Bethany City School District. All graduate participants were members of the school district, experienced homelessness, and had been identified by the school district as experiencing homelessness, earning a diploma, and were at least 18 years old. I verified the following criteria with participants before finalizing interviews with them:

- The participant attended high school in Bethany City, for at least part of their senior year or longer.
- The participant experienced homelessness, according to the definition in the *McKinney-Vento Act* (2015), during any of their time in high school.
- The participant was identified as homeless under the McKinney-Vento Assistance Act (2015).
- The participant earned their high school diploma (not GED) and was a member of the graduating Class of 2023 or 2022.
- The participant was at least 18 years old at the time of the interview.

There were 32 members of the Class of 2023 (Bethany City McKinney-Vento liaison, personal communication, September 12, 2023) and 18 members of the Class of 2022 (Bethany City McKinney-Vento liaison, personal communication, December 4, 2023) who met these criteria. I initially offered $25 for the participation of high school graduates in this study. In addition to expanding the participant pool to include the Class of 2022, I increased the compensation amount to $50. I sent an additional $25 to the three graduates from the Class of 2023 whom I had already interviewed and paid $50 to the three graduates from the Class of 2022 who volunteered.

School District Personnel Selection

Because educators both within the high schools and at the central office have an understanding of the *McKinney-Vento Act* (2015), as well as the authority and resources to support students, their experiences and observations comprise an important aspect of the full picture of the pathways to high school graduation for students experiencing homelessness in this single-site case. I first invited (see Appendix D) and interviewed the McKinney-Vento liaison, as well as the Program Outreach Specialist whose focus is helping high school seniors, given their crucial roles in identifying and supporting students experiencing homelessness. I then used snowball sampling (Creswell & Gutterman, 2019) to identify other adults in the community, asking both the McKinney-Vento liaison and the high school graduates for the names and positions of other teachers, guidance counselors, administrators, coaches, and so forth, who supported their journeys to graduation. Once I received the contact information of new potential participants, I contacted them and shared the school district personnel interview invitation (Appendix D). In addition to the invitation, I sent each potential participant a copy of the School District Personnel Consent Form (Appendix E) and a copy of the School District Personnel

Demographic Questionnaire (Appendix F). I did not offer financial compensation to school district personnel for their participation in the study.

Data Source and Collection

The primary data source of this study was semi-structured interviews with selected high school graduates and school district personnel from Bethany City, which allowed me to gather in-depth data from which I could gain insight on individuals' pathways to graduations, as well as on the roles and observations of the district personnel supporting them. The High School Graduate Semi-Structured Interview Protocol (Appendix G), partially adapted from and informed by Hardie's (2019) dissertation, presented seven questions with probes to explore the significance of and the pathway to the high school diploma. From there, the questions were adapted into six questions for the School District Personnel Semi-Structured Interview Protocol (Appendix H). The connections between the High School Graduate Semi-Structured Interview Protocol and the research questions are displayed in Table 3, and the connections between the School District Personnel Semi-Structured Interview Protocol and the research questions are displayed in Table 4. Both semi-structured interview protocols were reviewed, first, by the dissertation committee and, second, by a panel of experts to increase the instrument's validity, with a focus on evaluating the questions for clarity and understanding. The panel of experts included a high school graduate with lived expertise on homelessness, a former community-parent liaison from a school district outside of the single-case site, and a McKinney-Vento liaison from a school district outside of the single-case site. The results of the panel reviews helped to determine the effectiveness of the interview questions, as well as to ensure sensitivity around the vulnerabilities associated with homelessness.

Table 3

List of High School Graduate Interview Questions Related to the Four Research Questions

Interview Question	Text	Research Question
1	What do you think has been and will be the impact of earning a high school diploma on your life?	Q3
2	What factors inside school helped you achieve high school graduation?	Q1(a)
3	What factors outside of school helped you achieve high school graduation?	Q1(b)
4	What barriers inside school made it harder to reach graduation?	Q2(a)
5	What barriers outside school made it harder to reach graduation?	Q2(b)
6	Can you describe your experience with homelessness and how it impacted your education and graduation?	Q1/ Q2
7	What recommendations do you have for school district personnel regarding helping students experiencing homelessness with their high school education and graduation?	Q4

Table 4

List of School District Personnel Interview Questions Related to the Four Research Questions

Interview Question	Text	Research Question
1	What do you perceive as the impact of a high school diploma on the lives of students experiencing homelessness?	Q3
2	What factors inside school have you observed as helping students experiencing homelessness graduate high school?	Q1(a)
3	What factors outside school have you observed as helping students experiencing homelessness graduate high school?	Q1(b)
4	What barriers inside school have you observed related to students experiencing homelessness graduating high school?	Q2(a)
5	What barriers outside school have you observed related to students experiencing homelessness graduating high school?	Q2(b)
6	What recommendations do you have for school district personnel regarding helping students experiencing homelessness with their high school education and graduation?	Q4

Each participant and I agreed upon a mutually convenient time to meet for the interview, and I conducted interviews with each participant selected for the study via Zoom or telephone. The interviews were semi-structured in nature, which allowed for follow-up questions and probes for clarification and depth (Rubin & Rubin, 2012), and lasted 25-45 minutes. The conversations were recorded with participant permission.

Data Management

I conducted all interviews on Zoom or on the telephone and digitally recorded the audio with each participant's permission. I then transcribed the recordings into word processing software and gave each participant anonymity using pseudonyms that I chose. Audio recordings and transcripts were saved on a password protected computer. All printed documents were stored in a locked filing cabinet. After each interview, I recorded field notes including observational details and my significant impressions of the conversation. The notebook itself was kept in a locked filing cabinet. All sensitive data obtained during this study will be kept for 3 years and then destroyed.

Data Analysis

After considering various case-study analysis approaches described by Yin (2014), I selected two strategies to guide the data coding and thematic analysis segments of this study: working data from the ground up and relying on theoretical propositions. The first strategy involved inductively combing through the data for patterns or concepts from which analytic pathways or relationships could be built, and the second relied on exploring theoretical propositions that had originally influenced the objectives and design of the case study (Yin, 2014). First, I coded inductively, by spontaneously creating original codes as I reviewed the data, rather that deductively entering with a set of a priori codes (Saldaña, 2021). Then I coded a

second time according to the propositions of Resilience Theory, which I grouped into adversity, resilience processes including components of personal strategies and social supports, and better-than expected outcomes (Masten, 2018; van Breda, 2018). Concurrently, I engaged in analytic memoing, which enabled me to work "toward a solution, away from a problem, or a combination of both" (Saldaña, 2021, p. 58). I selected four prompts to carry out and organize my memos: participant routines, rituals, rules, roles, and relationships; possible networks and processes; existing theory; and tentative answers to the research questions (Saldaña, 2021). One of the intended outcomes of case study data analysis is to build an explanation about the case, or stipulate causal sequences related to how and why the phenomenon in question has occurred (Yin, 2014). Case study research results can be even more interesting and beneficial when they reflect theoretically significant propositions (Yin, 2014). Therefore, as I created patterns and categories from the codes and memos, I focused on attempting to build an explanation about the pathways of students experiencing homelessness in Bethany City to high school graduation, which will be shared in Chapters 4 and 5.

Member Checking. To ensure I captured the participants' perspectives in an accurate and authentic manner (Mertler, 2017), I used member checking in my data analysis. After my initial review and examination of the data, I asked a colleague, who is a current school administrator working in a school district outside of the single-case site, to review a sample of the semi-structured interview transcripts in addition to my analysis in order to verify similarities among our observations and findings. Given the potential mobility and vulnerabilities of the graduates and the demanding responsibilities of the school district personnel, I chose to use a reviewer rather than the participants to help ensure the credibility of the study results (Tracy, 2010).

High-Quality Analysis Principles. As part of case study research, Yin (2014) emphasizes the importance of four principles researchers should use as a means of striving for high-quality analysis in case studies: attend to all evidence; investigate all plausible rival interpretations; address the most significant aspect of the case study; and demonstrate familiarity with the prevailing thinking and discourse on the case study's topic. The analytic approach I selected enabled me to thoroughly cover the research questions and incorporate as much evidence as possible into my interpretations. I considered alternative interpretations, whether from previous research, participants, or committee members, into rival interpretations based on available evidence or noted it as a loose end needing to be addressed in a future study. I maintained efforts to keep the high school graduation of students experiencing homelessness at the center of all data collection and analysis efforts, as it was the most significant aspect of my study. Finally, my familiarity on the topic of high school graduation of students experiencing homelessness was evidenced in the review of related literature in this study, past coursework and assignments in my doctoral program, and my work experience at Project-HOPE Virginia.

Table 5

Data Analysis Plan by Research Question

Question	Data Sources	Data Analysis
Q1: What facilitating factors do graduates who experienced homelessness in high school and school district personnel within a selected school district identify as critical to earning a high school diploma? a. School-based factors b. Non-school-based factors	Student and School District Personnel Interviews	Coding, Memos, Emergent Themes
Q2: What barriers to earning a high school diploma do graduates who experienced homelessness in high school and school district personnel within a selected school district identify? a. School-based barriers b. Non-school-based barriers	Student and School District Personnel Interviews	Coding, Memos, Emergent Themes
3: What is the perceived impact of earning a high school diploma on the lives of students who have experienced homelessness, according to graduates who experienced homelessness and school district personnel within a selected school district?	Student and School District Personnel Interviews	Coding, Memos, Emergent Themes
Q4: What recommendations do graduates who experienced homelessness in high school and school district personnel within a selected school district have for teachers, administrators, and other school personnel regarding helping students experiencing homelessness with high school access and success?	Student and School District Personnel Interviews	Coding, Memos, Emergent Themes

Delimitations, Limitations, Assumptions

This section details the boundaries that were set for the study, as well as the constraints related to both the nature of the study and my own notions and subjectivity as the researcher.

Delimitations. The choices I made while creating this study's parameters, in terms of the research design and the participants, defined the nature and characteristics of the study. First, I selected a single-site case study of Bethany City School District, which comprises only one out of 131 school districts in Virginia. I decided to gather information concerning this school district, rather than from one of the other 23 school districts in the state that also met the case selection

criteria or from a collection of districts had I chosen a multi-site case study. In addition to the data I collected, my methods of analysis related to case study, rather than phenomenology or grounded theory, which influenced the approach to generating results. Finally, this study was delimited by the theoretical framework, Resilience Theory, which served as a lens through which I attempted to develop an understanding of the process of earning a high school diploma for students experiencing homelessness in a selected school district.

Next, the participant selection influenced the findings and implications of this study. My decision to include high school graduates, as well as school district personnel, was based on my understanding of the dynamic nature of Resilience Theory and the combination of personal characteristics and environmental factors that enable individuals to adapt in adverse circumstances. However, I could not interview everyone in each graduate's life, such as parents or other family members, nor could I include all school personnel and other community members. Although I attempted to be as thorough as possible in creating a comprehensive depiction of this case, I still only interviewed select members from whom data was gathered. Specifically, I only included high school graduates that not only experienced homelessness in high school, but also were identified under the *McKinney-Vento Act* (2015). This choice excluded the possibility of gathering information from other students who did experience homelessness but did not receive McKinney-Vento services. I was intentional about this based on my use of Resilience Theory, which upholds the importance of environmental supports and resources as part of the process of overcoming adversity. Therefore, I wanted to ensure I would have the opportunity to evaluate the extent to which the implementation of the *McKinney-Vento Act* (2015) influenced the ability of participants to graduate high school. Another important parameter was the requirement of participants to have earned a high school diploma, rather than

a GED certificate. Again, this decision was calculated based on my literature review findings that highlighted the significant distinction in adult outcomes between the two credentials. Another aspect related to participant selection was the inclusion of members of the Classes of 2022 and 2023. Because I only investigated the experiences of the most recent classes, I could have missed out on information or factors that affected members of earlier graduating classes. It is also possible that the COVID-19 pandemic has continued to affect the ability, in positive or negative ways, of students experiencing homelessness to graduate high school. I do not have longitudinal information or data from pre-Covid classes to which I could compare the findings in this study.

Limitations. The first major limitation was my own role in performing the research. I acknowledge that I do not have lived experience with homelessness or with K-12 public schools. My nine years of teaching experience, in addition to my own education as a student, took place in private schools. Therefore, I relied on previous research and the accounts of the participants, as I co-constructed meaning with participants around the facilitating factors and barriers to the ability of students experiencing homelessness to graduate high school within a selected school district.

The next limitation was related to the nature of interviewing participants. Because the participant interviews were conducted on Zoom or on the telephone, I gathered a limited understanding of their experiences and environment, which might have been expanded if I could have visited their community in person. On a related note, participants shared their perceptions and memories from the previous year or farther in the past, which could have been difficult according to the amount of adversity they experienced. More generally, human memory is not perfect; so, the data provided could be skewed, based on mis-remembering or false information.

Finally, the qualitative nature of this study was a limitation. Readers can learn from the stories and general themes produced in this single-site case, but the results cannot be generalized to all high school students experiencing homelessness. Further, in this study I evaluated experiences rather than conducting a true experiment, so I was unable to determine what truly caused the students experiencing homelessness in this single-site case to graduate high school. An experiment of that nature could be harmful to participants, so this was a reasonable and appropriate option to still explore the phenomenon at hand. Another limitation was the urban setting of this school district, which determined the extent to which the strategies for graduation or the implications of the study can be applied in other school districts whose student populations and demographics are different.

Assumptions. I entered this study with particular assumptions about the participants, their personal goals, and the strategies and access to resources they possessed. First, I assumed that the participants valued a high school diploma and believed it would positively influence their lives and success. It is possible that in some sectors of society, a high school diploma is not relevant or meaningful in terms of labor force or cultural opportunities and outcomes. I also assumed that the McKinney-Vento liaison and other educators and other school district personnel are familiar with and actively implementing the *McKinney-Vento Act* (2015) and that those services are making a meaningful difference in the ability of students experiencing homelessness to graduate high school. Related, I assumed that receiving McKinney-Vento services, and therefore being identified as experiencing homelessness versus not, was contributing positively to the ability of students experiencing homelessness to graduate high school. Another assumption I made in terms of my chosen methodology is the value of others' stories. Some might argue that if readers were not from similar circumstances, such as the same school district or same age

group as the graduates, it would not be meaningful to learn about the experiences of the group of high school graduates and school district personnel in this single-site case.

Researcher as Instrument Statement

Peshkin (1994) observed the role of subjectivity in research and noted that, “There is not a one-to-one relationship between my affective state, my biography, and my history and my choice of topic, the conclusions I reach, and so forth” (p. 50). This variety of influences affects not only researchers, but also participants and readers. Before and throughout this study, I have acknowledged my privilege, as I am a White, cis-gender, middle-upper class female, who has attended and worked in private schools most of my life. I have approached this work with an outsider perspective, as I have no personal experience with housing or financial instability. This research was inspired by my role as a graduate assistant at Project-HOPE Virginia and my developing awareness and appreciation for the challenges students in unstable housing face. It was important for me to recognize and control, but not eliminate, the personal perspective I brought to this study and its influence on the research process.

Ethical Considerations

Before data collection began, I submitted this proposal to the EDIRC, as well as to the research committee of Bethany City School District. All participants were asked to sign an electronic participant consent form, which articulated their ability to leave the study at any point without consequence (see Appendices B and E). To protect the participants’ identities, I assigned them pseudonyms for the study. The name of the school district was masked through Bethany School District. All collected data were stored safely and confidentially, and I worked under the supervision of my dissertation chair to ensure that all actions were within EDIRC guidelines.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

The purpose of this single-site case study was to explore the factors that contributed to the successful high school graduation of students who experienced homelessness. The study offered a platform for high school graduates and school district personnel to share their personal experiences and unique perspectives about the navigation of high school and graduation in Bethany City, Virginia (pseudonym). Two researcher-developed instruments were used to collect data in the study: the High School Graduate Semi-Structured Interview and the School District Personnel Semi-Structured Interview. There were 14 participants: six high school graduates and eight school district personnel. I collaborated with the Bethany City McKinney-Vento liaison to invite high school graduates from the Classes of 2022 and 2023 to participate in the study. The McKinney-Vento liaison and graduates made recommendations on supportive school district personnel, whom I then invited to participate in the study.

As highlighted in Chapter 3, using a Resilience Theory framework, the study followed a qualitative approach in conducting a single-site case study. This chapter presents three themes, adversity, resilience process, and better-than-expected outcomes, related to students experiencing homelessness graduating high school. Semi-structured interviews were used to collect observations and insights of high school graduates with lived expertise on homelessness and school district personnel who supported them. The lived experiences of all participants helped contextualize the implementation of the *McKinney Vento Act* (2015) and relay the variety of

personal skills and dynamic interactions across systems used to help students experiencing homelessness overcome adversity and graduate high school.

Interview Participants

This case study focused primarily on 14 interview participants, six of whom are high school graduates and eight of whom are school district personnel from Bethany City. Table 6 displays demographic information about the graduates, including their gender and race, the high school they attended, the year they graduated, and their current occupation. In Bethany City, there are two public high schools, Hill High and Mountain High (pseudonyms), and one alternative school, Clover High (pseudonym), which "was built for students who got behind academically somewhere along the lines and now want to graduate on time with their age group they started with" (Employee C, personal communication, November 9, 2023). Table 7 contains demographic information about the school district personnel, including their gender and race, occupational role, and the location of their work. Employees A and B work with the McKinney-Vento program in central office, and the rest of the employees are spread across the three high schools.

Table 6

High School Graduate Participant Demographics

Graduate	Gender	Race	School	Graduation Year	Occupation
A	M	Black	Clover High	2023	Work
B	F	Black	Clover High	2023	Work
C	F	Black	Clover High	2023	Work
D	M	Black	Hill High	2022	College
E	M	Black	Mountain High	2022	College
F	M	White	Mountain High	2022	College

Table 7

School District Personnel Participant Demographics

Employee	Gender	Race	Occupation	School
A	F	White	McKinney-Vento Liaison	Central Office
B	F	White	Program Outreach Specialist	Central Office
C	F	White	Principal	Clover High
D	M	White	Teacher	Clover High
E	F	Black	Teacher	Clover High
F	F	White	Student Support Specialist	Former Clover High
G	F	White	School Counselor	Mountain High
H	M	White	Technical Education Center Instructor	Mountain High

At the time of the interviews, all six graduates had stable housing and were either working or attending college. Graduate A was working at a corporate organization as a pallet loader and driver and had secured an apartment for himself and his brother after working throughout his senior year of high school. He acknowledged that he would not have been able to secure his job without a high school diploma. Graduate B said she was living with her family and cared for her three nieces and one nephew, which was a motivation for her to get her diploma. She did not describe her occupation. Graduate C was still living locally, working and styling hair. Graduate D was attending a Historically Black University in Virginia and wants to become a software developer. Graduate E was attending a Historically Black University in Washington, D.C., where he has joined a program whose mission is to uplift underrepresented Black children. Graduate F was attending a private university in Virginia, where he was studying engineering.

Data Analysis Techniques

I followed two of Yin's (2014) analysis strategies, analyzing data from the ground up and relying on theoretical propositions, to analyze the interview data and interpret meanings according to themes. The process included organizing the data, reading all data for overall

reflection, first coding inductively and then coding according to the tenets of Resilience Theory, analytic memoing, and finally building an explanation about the phenomenon in question (Yin, 2014).

I began the first cycle of coding by carefully reading the 14 interview transcripts and inductively coding and then categorizing the data based on words, phrases, and information provided by the high school graduates and school district personnel. In the second cycle of coding, I evaluated the data based on their connections to adversity, resilience process, and better- than-expected outcomes, as outlined in Resilience Theory (Masten, 2018; van Breda, 2018). Resilience researchers are able to communicate more nuanced results when they measure outcomes on continuous, rather than dichotomous scales, as well as in relation to specific variables (van Breda, 2018). To ensure the outcomes are relevant to the study at hand, in terms of the social context and developmental stage of the participants, some researchers have adopted the term "better-than-expected" outcomes, rather than "good" outcomes (van Breda, 2018, p. 6). Although the outcomes might not align with societal notions of "success," they are still "better-than-expected" in the face of adversity. For this study, the better-than-expected outcomes refer to high school graduation and any associated benefits the youth incurred, considering they were in one of the Virginia school districts whose 2022 graduation rate was 68% or greater (Table 1). As previously explained, this statistic not only represents the national graduation rate for students experiencing homelessness (Atwell, 2021; National Center for Homeless Education, 2022), but also served as the primary criterion for the single-site selection (Table 2).

The overall findings of the semi-structured interviews are identified below to answer the research questions and establish a cohesive understanding of the facilitating factors and barriers

that influenced the ability of Bethany City students experiencing homelessness to graduate from high school.

Findings

The semi-structured interview data captured the diverse experiences and perspectives related to the six Bethany City high school graduates earning their diplomas and the support they received from the eight school district personnel along their journeys. Three qualitative themes, based on 21 codes derived from the data (Table 8), provide answers to the "how" and "why" case-study questions about the pathways of students experiencing homelessness to high school graduation articulated in the research questions. Nine codes of academic support, basic needs and resources, educator-student relationships, community support, Clover High, the McKinney-Vento program, personal attributes, family and friends, and extra-curricular activities, which all occurred during the resilience process phase, supplied answers to Research Question 1 about facilitating factors critical to students experiencing homelessness earning a high school diploma. Answers to Research Question 2 about barriers to earning a high school diploma emerged from nine codes in the adversity phase: academic needs, planning for the future, transportation, school environment, student emotional and physical needs, family, generational cycles of instability, community concerns, and COVID-19. Finally, the participants' perspectives about the significance of a high school diploma, their recommendations around how school district personnel can support students experiencing homelessness, and their advice for current students experiencing homelessness fell into the better-than-expected-outcomes phase, providing answers to Research Questions 3 and 4. These last responses emerged from three final codes: diploma-related success, targeted interventions, and educator support and care.

Table 8

Themes and Codes of Qualitative Data

Adversity	Resilience Process	Better-than-Expected Outcomes
Transportation	Educator-Student Relationships	Diploma-related Success
Academic Needs	Unique Attributes of the Alternative School	Targeted Interventions
School Environment	McKinney-Vento Program	Educator Support and Care
Planning for the Future	Basic Needs and Resources	
Emotional and Physical Needs	Community Support	
Family	Academic Support	
Generational Cycles of Instability	Personal Attributes	
Community Concerns	Family and Friends	
COVID-19	Extra-curricular Activities	

Research Question 1

What facilitating factors do graduates who experienced homelessness in high school and school district personnel within a selected school district identify as critical to earning a high school diploma?

a. *School-based factors*

b. *Non-school-based factors*

According to Resilience Theory, in order to respond to disturbances that threaten well-being and development, resilience is a process, rather than a fixed attribute. Individuals call upon a combination of positive personality dispositions, a nurturant family milieu, and external societal support systems as a means of adapting to adversity (Garmezy, 1974). After discovering nine codes that emerged from subcodes and frequency counts (Table 9) in the high school graduate and school district personnel interview data, I determined the resilience process had occurred, comprising one of three qualitative themes. The codes were divided into school-based

factors, including academic support, basic needs and resources, educator-student relationships, community support, unique attributes of the alternative school, and the McKinney-Vento program, and non-school-based factors, such as personal attributes, family and friends, and extra-curricular activities. Both the resilience and adversity themes followed similar patterns, starting from within the individual and gradually expanding through rings of the ecosystem—family, school, and community.

Table 9

Resilience Process Codes, Subcodes, and Frequency Counts

Code	Subcodes	HSG f	SDP f	Total f
Relationships	Relationships	11	40	51
	Communication	19	28	47
	Celebrations	4	5	9
	Feelings of Support	48	69	117
	School Counselors	20	17	37
	Student Support Specialists	6	9	15
	Teachers	33	19	52
	Administrators	3	5	8
	Other School Staff	2	3	5
Unique Attributes of the Alternative School	School community/ support	106	56	162
	Academic support	22	16	38
McKinney-Vento Program	McKinney-Vento Program	15	29	44
Community Support	Connections to Resources and Programs	8	16	24
	Community Involvement	8	30	38
Academic Support	School support	27	27	54
	Technology	8	2	10
	Professional development	1	7	8
Personal Attributes	Motivation/ Determination	26	33	59
	Future Plans	17	25	42
Family and Friends	Family	23	15	37
	Friends/ Peers	16	3	19
Extra-curricular Activities	Extra-curricular Activities	25	5	30

Note. HSG = high school graduate; SDP = school district personnel

School-Based Factors

High school graduates and school district personnel identified a variety of school-based factors (Table 10) that supported the journeys of students experiencing homelessness to high

school graduation. According to all participants, educator-student relationships played a vital role in providing the students with the encouragement, support, and instruction they needed to make it to graduation. Additionally, all participants who had an affiliation with Clover High emphasized the unique community and learning environment that encouraged student success. The local McKinney-Vento program, which five of six graduates and six of eight personnel reported supporting student well-being and academic achievement, was the next highest contributor to graduation. Similarly, four of six graduates and seven of eight personnel emphasized meeting the basic needs of students in unstable living situations as an important factor in their ability to attend and participate in school. On another related note, four of six graduates and six of eight personnel mentioned community support, both internally among high schools and central office employees and externally through partnerships with local organizations, which contributed to the ability of educators to identify students in need and connect them with the appropriate resources and services. Academic support, particularly related to help from teachers and counselors, effective learning environments, and student mentality, was the least reported factor, by four of six graduates and five of eight personnel.

Table 10

School-Based Factors Identified by High School Graduates and School District Personnel

Factor	HSG	SDP
Educator–Student Relationships	6 of 6	8 of 8
	A, B, C, D, E, F	A, B, C, D, E, F, G, H
Clover High Attributes	3 of 3	4 of 4
	A, B, C	C, D, E, F
McKinney-Vento Program	5 of 6	6 of 8
	A, B, C, E, F	A, B, C, F, G, H
Basic Needs and Resources	4 of 6	7 of 8
	A, B, C, F	A, B, C, D, E, F, G
Community Support	4 of 6	6 of 8
	A, C, D, F	A, B, D, E, F, G
Academic Support	4 of 6	5 of 8
	A, B, C, D	A, B, C, D, H

Note. HSG = high school graduate; SDP = school district personnel

Educator-Student Relationships. Educator-student relationships was one of the two most salient codes that emerged from the qualitative interview data under the resilience theme. All the graduates named educators by category and/ or by name (Table 11), who positively impacted their journey to graduation. Five of six graduates named school counselors and teachers as the educators with the most meaningful contributions to their day-to-day lives as well as to their future preparations. Other influential educators included a coach, a principal, a secretary, and a student support specialist. Graduate E was grateful for the Mountain High secretary, recalling:

> So, I do believe that, like, the secretary at the school was kind of the person that helped me the most, engaging…the most or [encouraging the] possibility I could do so. And I just believed because it was, like, the people that were the same skin tone as me [who] helped me realize that I could be as such.

Additionally, four of six graduates described the safe and comforting refuge their teachers and counselors offered them, in terms of being able to do work or relax in their classrooms or offices. In addition to the graduate reflections, all the school district personnel described a variety of ways in which educators across the school district connected with students to contribute to their personal and academic growth.

Table 11

Influential School District Personnel Identified by High School Graduates

Graduate	Coach	Counselors	Teachers	Principal	Secretary	Student Support Specialist
A	X	X	X	X		
B			X			
C		X	X			X
D		X				
E		X	X		X	
F		X	X			

School Counselors. Five of six graduates described ways in which their school counselors supported them. Graduate D recognized that school counselors are there for the purpose of helping students, and his advice to future students included taking advantage of the people willing and able to assist. In particular, he developed a close connection with his own school counselor, referring to him more like a friend than an authoritative figure as they were fairly close in age. He attributed his school success and college acceptances to the help of his counselor. Graduate E agreed that school counselors help students stay on track academically. Graduate A remembered his counselor:

> [She] would take and pick me up from school, like, every day and take me home every day, like, when the bus wouldn't come because our school bus for our route would

> literally come an hour late every single day. So, she would take and come pick all them kids up and take us to school. Like, she really came in clutch.

Graduate C relied on her counselors, as well as the student support specialist, describing her as very sweet and attributing her as the reason she was connected to resources and programs for pregnant teens. She reminisced about Clover High in general:

> They have great counselors and stuff, like, that, like, people to mentor you. If you don't understand, like, they are a very trustworthy school. Like, they'll help you with anything. Like, if you don't have clothing or whatever food, they'll help you.

Graduate F said his school counselor not only encouraged him to persevere toward the high school diploma, but also helped him apply for college scholarships. She offered a workshop on scholarships at Mountain High and made students aware of specific funding opportunities offered through Bethany City.

Teachers. Five of six graduates expressed gratitude for the relationships they developed with their teachers, in addition to the academic and personal support they received.
Graduate A said:

> The people who really took a real big part in it was mainly the teachers. Like, at Clover High is some of the best teachers I've ever seen, like, seriously. Like, it's not that they don't feel like teachers to you, like, they feel, like, like people you've been knowing for years. And you could talk with them about anything. And it's, everything's gonna be cool.

Graduate B appreciated the leniency and understanding her teachers showed her. She described them as nice and motivating and remembered how they would support her, even throughout her school absences. She said:

> If I would miss, like, a week of school, they would contact me every day. And they would be like, girl, you need to make it in here. You need to come get this work. You need to do something. And then, [one teacher], he would even offer to pick me up.

Graduate C echoed that sentiment about the Clover High teachers, mentioning, "Their support system is very great, like the teachers take you as, like, their family. So, it's like they really want you to be better and succeed." At Mountain High, Graduate E had similar encounters with his teachers. He emphasized the importance of communicating with teachers and knowing they are trustworthy. He felt comfortable sharing personal information with them in hopes of receiving their support. When asked about how the teachers helped him to feel comfortable, he said:

> Just them trying to be adaptable and trying to understand. So, it's not about being understandable and just trying to say, yeah, I understand you. But it's genuinely trying to know how I felt, genuinely wanting to know because of course, like, you have these teachers that know students. They'll be sensitive. Of course, they just listen, but they can't do much.

Graduate F mentioned his teachers and counselors at Mountain High encouraged him to persevere and provided emotional support and comfort as needed. In particular, he was grateful that one teacher handmade a corsage for his prom date to wear to the dance. He remembered:

> One of my teachers, she pushed her way into, specifically helping me with the things that I was struggling with. And what I mean by that is, I remember, I told her a lot of things because you just end up doing that. Well, [when] you're going [through a tough time] or at least me as a person, I end up telling people a lot. But yeah, going through stuff to try and digest it.

Graduate D was the only individual who did not find support in his teachers. He recalled, "I didn't really know my teachers. I just attended class. I was—I never talked to them or tried to develop a relationship with them."

Safe Place. In particular, four of six graduates described ways in which their teachers, counselors, and student support specialists acted as safe, comforting individuals for them. Each of them also described how the educators' classrooms or offices served as a place of refuge for them. Their descriptions are listed below:

- She is an amazing teacher. And all around just like if you're having a bad day, you can go to her. She'll tell you, like, you can sit in my classroom until you're ready to, like, keep going and then just go ahead and do you work. Or you can do her work in her classroom, and she'll help you with anything. She was just all around, like, one of the best teachers at Mountain High. (Graduate A)
- I really just spoke with Employee F all the time. So, I really didn't have, like, nobody to talk to there but Employee F—so, like, every day she [was there]…(Graduate C)
- He [my school counselor] helped me with school itself. I was, I never was able to pay attention really well in class. Like, whenever I felt like I just wasn't in it, I would go to his—I would get my work, go to his, his office, and he would sit and help me with the work. And I get it done, go back to class. (Graduate D)
- Like, I remember, I'd walk into [my school counselor's] office, and I would just walk in randomly…she would just let you chill there. And she, [wouldn't] like, bug you or tell you to go back to class or whatever… For me, it was really nice because I could just walk in there and relax and have space, just you know, not to be busy and all that type of stuff. (Graduate F)

Relationships According to School District Personnel. All school district personnel described a variety of factors and approaches that contributed to their ability to effectively build relationships with their students (Table 12). Employee A, McKinney-Vento liaison, stated, "Well, I think, first and foremost is just being able for them to know there is someone else or other people that are here to help you and support you through this journey." Despite working in central office rather than the actual high schools, she and Employee B, McKinney-Vento program outreach specialist, reflected on their ability to support the emotional and physical needs of students experiencing homelessness. She said:

> We'll just check and say—hey just thinking about you, are you doing okay? And it means a lot to them to know—hey, somebody's thinking about me. So, I feel like that there's you know, there's a good balance of trying to be very thoughtful and not be, you know—you don't want to interrogate them. But just to kind of remind them that we are here, if you need to talk or need connections to other services.

Employee B observed:

> I think just having somebody, like, since I've started doing this recently and actually gone to the high schools and met the kids face to face, I think it's just having somebody you can put a face with. And like, I'm not a teacher, you know. I'm not a counselor or anything like that. I'm just somebody that's, you know, there to help them just, you know, and kind of relatable.

Employee G, school counselor at Mountain High, described relationships with adults and peers in the building as one of the biggest factors that influences whether students want to come to school. She described her role as:

> Telling [the students], hey, if your teachers know a little bit about what's going on outside of school, we can help you more inside of school because they're going to be more understanding of what, what, why maybe you're not here all the time or why you haven't turned in their work for them because something's going on. But that really depends on whether the student wants to do that.

She also shared her advice for building relationships:

> I think the teachers who are able to maintain some sense of warmth with students, it really impacts things…When we have people who are committed to just being able to let down a little bit and be, again, like friendly and warm to them, it makes a world of difference. It doesn't even require significant conversations. It's like greeting them, saying hi to them, remembering their name, asking them how they're doing. It's really like basic human things that just don't happen in the school all the time.

Employee H, technical education center instructor at Mountain High, did not name and describe relationships as directly as his colleagues. However, the interactions, advice, and support he provides his students did reflect the care and support he shows them. Given the unique setting of Clover High, the reflections of Employees C-E who work there, are captured in Table 12 and described in more detail later in this section.

Table 12

Relationship Factors Identified by School District Personnel

Employee	Relationship Factors
A	Know someone is supporting you; reminders that we are here for you; connections to services; people care; partnerships
B	Face with a name; do not take relationships for granted after Covid
C	Trust; takes all of us; work hard to build and sustain relationships; student needs are more important than titles; how would you want your kid to be treated?; empathy; trauma-related responses
D	Ongoing conversations with students; be real; talk to the students; prioritize well-being over academics; accountability; know the teachers care; not just another kid at school
E	Be open; non-judgmental; transparent; comforting; intuitive; listen to students
F	Be a champion, cheerleader; teachers stay on the kids; students feel connected when they feel like their teachers like them
G	Educators have different ways of building relationships; relationships are the reason students want to come to school; help the students feel comfortable talking; have conversations; be upfront; professional development on how to interact with teens is needed
H	Give the students a reason to come to school; help students reflect on their personal situations; encourage students to work hard; give students personal examples

Unique Attributes of the Alternative School. As mentioned, Clover High is Bethany City's alternative high school for students who wish to graduate on time with their cohort, after having fallen behind academically. The three graduates, A, B, and C, and the four school district personnel, C, D, E, and F, with experience there, all attributed student success there to the shared commitment to high school graduation, the strong sense of community, and the productive learning environment. Clover High is unique in that students must receive a referral to the school, apply and interview, and then commit to prioritizing their education. Employee C, Clover High principal, noted that the school does observe parent buy-in, at least during the application process as they attend the interview with their students. Each year, the school hosts 100-150 students, mainly upper classmen but a growing number of freshmen and sophomores in recent

years. In the interviews for this study, the graduates and school district personnel appreciated the small size of the school, which enabled teachers and students to know one another well and form strong relationships. The three graduates described a variety of Clover High aspects for which they were thankful. Graduate A said Clover High was the only reason he made up all his academic credits. Graduate B said:

> I just knew that at that school it’s smaller. So, that means you will get, like, more hands on learning, rather than being in a big classroom with everybody. And then my anxiety is really bad. So, it’s better to be in, like, small groups, rather than the big classrooms that you have at Mountain High.

Graduate C commented:

> They have great counselors and stuff like that, like, people to mentor you if you don’t understand. Like, they’re a very trustworthy school. Like, they’ll help you with anything. Like, if you don’t have clothing or whatever food, they’ll help you.

In addition to meeting basic needs and providing academic support, all the school district personnel at Clover High described the importance of relationship-building there. Employee C said:

> We just, we work really, really hard at relationships, and building those relationships, and sustaining those relationships—and trying to not only build relationships, but also teach appropriate boundaries. Because sometimes, that’s where our kids have not had experience. And so, trying to get them the whole picture of things.

Employee D, teacher, described the importance of having conversations with the students, which he did both in class and during his planning periods. Even though he only taught 40 of the 100

students, he had learned a considerable amount about students outside of his rosters. He commented:

> It's a cool place. Because we're so small, we can have that relationship. We know everybody. The kids whine about it because, you know, we know everything, but it is what it is. But it helps them know we care more. And… actually, they're not just another kid…

He emphasized the importance of helping them know he cares about their successes and offering emotional support over his geometry lesson plans as needed. In his final interview comment, Employee D summarized, "The biggest thing with these kids is relationships, and that's what I always say."

Employee E, another teacher, described her efforts to being open, non-judgmental, and caring, so that her students would feel comfortable coming to her. She said:

> I try to be in tune because they don't want to share what's going on, especially if they don't understand something. You know, they have a sense of shame. They don't want anyone to know that they don't know. So, a lot of times, I just try to recognize what a struggle could be and try to and try to tap into that. Just be intuitive. I try to be intuitive.

Employee F, Clover High student support specialist, shared similar tactics for building relationships with students and expressed her view that school employees are champions and cheerleaders for the students. She emphasized the importance of creating a shared understanding of what the students care about, future goals they might have, and how the educators can help them. She shared her philosophy on how educators can connect with students:

> I think kids, especially teenagers, all they want is for you to be authentic, authentically yourself. Don't do anything that's not you. And you don't have to be cool. You just have

> to care. And, you know, you don't have to change boundaries for them talking a different way to do a different thing –just care about them. That, I think at the end of the day, they will respect you for that.

Employee D expressed his opinion that every district needs a school like this one, where there can be a focus not only on homelessness but other student needs. Rather than thinking of the district "throwing away" kids at Clover High, he viewed it as a second chance. He said, "It gives them another opportunity to not only succeed [in] education, academically, but it [also] gives them a community that they don't seem to have at bigger schools."

Graduate A recounted a poignant comparison of his previous school and Clover High:

> And Mountain High, like, the teachers was there, like, they have, like, I say, like 30-40 kids in one classroom, and they can help you. But it's just, like, not all the help you need, like, at that moment. And then when I went to the other school, Clover High, like, it had teachers that was there, that was on it, like, anything you need right then and there they was gonna help you. You need this done; they was gonna help you learn this. You need to learn that; they're gonna help you learn this. Like, it was always about getting the students graduated. And my other school, it wasn't about getting graduated. It's about getting you through the day.

McKinney-Vento Program. Most graduates and school district personnel were aware of the McKinney-Vento program and described beneficial interactions, centering around basic needs, financial support, and personalized encouragement. Of the six graduates, five were familiar with the program—four by the name itself and one by Employee A's name. Employees A and B work in central office, as they are the McKinney-Vento liaison and the program

outreach specialist respectively. Of the other six school district personnel, four were familiar with the program and described their partnerships.

Employee A, liaison, described a variety of efforts mandated by the *McKinney-Vento Act* (2015) that contribute to the success of high school students experiencing homelessness related to eligibility, school of origin, transportation, referrals to school and community services, and providing basic needs, including food, clothing, cell phones, and bus passes. Similarly, Employee B, program outreach specialist, named SNAP benefits, blankets, store and gas cards, hygiene products, and transportation options like Lyft and Ever Driven as items she has been able to provide to students. Outside of McKinney-Vento funds, Bethany City has unrestricted funding from community donations that allows Employee A to offer creative solutions to the predicaments in which students experiencing homelessness can find themselves. For example, she has used the money to cover an electric or gas bill or covered partial rent payments in order to keep families from losing their housing.

Employee B spends most of her time helping seniors, in particular, conducting academic career plan meetings with them, coordinating the waiving of their senior dues and the provision of their caps and gowns, and in general helping them prepare for the transition from the public school system to their next step, whether it be attending college or joining the workforce. Together, Employees A and B have partnered with a local organization to host a special graduation celebration for McKinney-Vento students the past 2 years. The event includes a catered dinner, an iPad for each senior (purchased with American Rescue Plan–Homeless Children and Youth funds), and a guest speaker who has experienced homelessness. Employee A noted that it is an opportunity to help the students feel extra special while families and the school community members recognize and commend their accomplishments.

In summary, Employee A acknowledged the effectiveness of McKinney-Vento implementation, saying:

> I think that being able to offer all these additional things, really kind of keep those barriers limited, but not to say they're not out there—I just feel that, you know, we are aware of those, and they don't have as many barriers as they would have many years ago—even like for the local school division, or also just prior to McKinney-Vento being available as a federal law.

Graduate Experience. The graduates' involvement with the McKinney-Vento program, communication with Employees A and B, and services received are displayed in Table 13. Graduate F and Graduate B's mother were in touch with Employee A, and Graduates A, C, and E were in communication with Employee B to receive services. The five graduates did report receiving basic needs, including hygiene supplies, clothing, food, and store cards. Additionally, their senior fees were waived by the schools, and McKinney-Vento funds were used to supply caps and gowns for graduation. At the McKinney-Vento graduation celebration, each graduate received an iPad, purchased with American Rescue Plan Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief–Homeless Children and Youth funds. Graduate A was grateful to receive hygiene packets and other personal items, emphasizing Employee B would always make sure he had what he needed. When asked about any services or resources that helped him make it to graduation, he responded, "It was the, I say for real, for real, the main thing that really helped me was the McKinney-Vento program."

In addition to the resources received, the graduates emphasized the meaningful interactions they had with Employees A and B. Graduate C was offered resources, including

food and clothing, as well as connections to programs for pregnant teens. She described the influential relationship she had with Employee B. She said:

> [Employee B] was like a mother figure. Anytime I called her when I needed something, she was there… Like if it was something particularly with schoolwork or something, she'll get in contact with [Employee F] and see what we can do about it. Like clothes, panties, bras, food—all of that, she helped with that.

After his house burned down and his grandparents passed away, Graduate F appreciated the ability to communicate directly with Employee A for assistance. He described the experience:

> It was cool because she reached out to me through email. And that was—that wasn't something that normally happened. Normally, they reached out to my counselor first. So, that was cool because it was, like, directly to me, and I could kind of handle it myself.

These narratives represent the effectiveness of the partnerships among Employees A and B and educators in the high schools to implement McKinney-Vento mandates and serve students experiencing homelessness. However, Graduate D was familiar with neither the program, nor Employees A and B. Graduate E observed the need for increased awareness efforts around McKinney-Vento offerings. Although he was grateful to learn from Employee B that his graduation cap and gown would be given to him at no cost, he noted, "We didn't know the access of what was really there. And I feel like that's something [Bethany City] could actually work on, like, actually making the accessibility and, like, whatever that entails, like, available."

Table 13

High School Graduate Involvement With McKinney-Vento Program

Graduate	Familiarity with Program	Communication	Services Received
A	Yes	Employee B	Hygiene packets; iPad
B	Yes	Mother with Employee A	Paid senior fees
C	Yes	Employee B	Clothes, panties, pads, bras, food; house visit; connection to pregnant teen program
D	No	None	None reported
E	Yes	Employee B	Paid for cap and gown; iPad
F	Recognized Employee A's name	Employee A	Basic needs; store cards; iPad

School District Personnel Experience. The connections among school district employees and the McKinney-Vento program are displayed in Table 14. Employees C, F, and G reported the most interaction with the McKinney-Vento program, as their occupations are Clover High principal, student support specialist, and Mountain High school counselor respectively. Employee C noted how Employee A facilitates information and services, once a student is identified as experiencing homelessness. In particular, she mentioned students at her school have received basic needs and money for Ubers or more general transportation assistance through the McKinney-Vento program. Employees A and F worked closely together to identify students and provide services at Clover High. Employee G expressed gratitude for the help Employee A and her office provide, specifically providing resources, such as phones, bus passes, and basics, and offering special support to unaccompanied homeless youth. Employee H described a unique partnership he had created with Employee A. She had called Employee H and asked whether his automotive students at the Technical Education Center be able to repair cars for individuals experiencing homelessness, if she paid for the parts. He replied that he and his students would be

more than happy to do the work and had completed four or five vehicles at the time of the interview.

In addition to describing her collaboration with Employee A to identify students and provide services, Employee C recommended teaching educators about the legal ramifications surrounding McKinney-Vento and HIPAA (Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act), as well as other laws that protect privacy. She also shared her personal philosophy about the importance of prioritizing student needs over labels:

> We know we have kids who are McKinney-Vento, and I don't know that I always make that—this is who this is. I kind of treat it in my mind the same way I would treat a student with an IEP…let's see where the needs are, regardless of what the titles are and how they work and help whomever wherever.

Employees D and E, who are both teachers at Clover High, were not familiar with the McKinney-Vento program.

Table 14

School District Personnel Involvement With McKinney-Vento Program

Employee	Familiarity with Program	Connections to Program
C	Yes	Employee A facilitates identification and coordination; cap and gown
D	No	N/A
E	No	N/A
F	Yes	Collaborate with Employee A on identification
G	Yes	McKinney-Vento office helps a ton; help with seniors; cell phones, bus passes, basic needs to students
H	Yes	Collaboration on car repairs for individuals experiencing homelessness

Basic Needs and Resources. In addition to Graduates A, B, C, and F, all school district personnel except Employee H described a variety of ways in which Bethany City high schools and central office were able to provide basic needs and resources for students experiencing homelessness that their families, or they as unaccompanied homeless youth, were unable to meet themselves. Graduate A was grateful not only for the support from Employee C, Clover High principal, but also for the timeliness of her actions. He said:

> Yeah, like, she would take… like, anything I needed. Like, I was out of school, she would make sure I had it, like the next day at school – like anything I needed, period. Like, she made sure I had it.

He also described Employee B, McKinney-Vento program outreach specialist, as a reliable provider, as he was able to count on her for certain personal items he needed, like hygiene packets. Graduate C received items including clothes, panties, pads, bras, and food, which was helpful for her throughout pregnancy and early motherhood. Graduate F was grateful to obtain clothes, food, and store cards after losing everything in a house fire; the McKinney-Vento team, teachers and counselors, and community organizations all shared the responsibility of connecting him with basic needs.

The school district personnel were not only aware but also attentive to students' basic needs and communicated their understanding of how that affected the students' ability to attend and participate in school. Employee C, principal, eloquently summarized this shared effort at Clover Hill in particular:

> It's just, it's very much an atmosphere of, we recognize that a lot of the kids here, for whatever reason, don't have the support they need or need something more than what

they’re getting. And so, we try to fill in those gaps in any way we can. And it takes all of us.

Employee D, teacher, made a similar comment, “If somebody needs something immediate, like, then for the most part, the teachers pitch in. We don’t have a ton of money school-wise to get stuff.”

Employees C, D, E, and F, who all work at Clover High, described providing resources, including a school pantry and clothing closet, as well as diapers and other items for teen parents. There is a running list of needs that teachers help fulfill, sometimes going to Walmart to purchase items with their own money. There are also school-wide and teacher-initiated events for giving, including a Thanksgiving food drive, Christmas Angel Tree drive. Additionally, breakfast and lunch is free for all students at Clover High. Employee E, teacher, said:

> Of course we have, you know, lunch here and that’s free. Lunch and breakfast is provided. I mean, sometimes if my student might get here second or third period, I will send them to the cafeteria. I don’t make them wait until lunchtime.

McKinney-Vento services have already been discussed in this section, but Employees A and B, liaison and program outreach specialist, are able to supply basic needs to students, such as cellphones for educational and safety purposes, clothing, food and store cards, personal hygiene items, blankets, bus passes and transportation funds, and wrap around services. Employee A noted an extra unrestricted, community-raised fund that enables her to develop creative solutions to student challenges, including paying a utility bill or part of a month’s rent. In addition to naming specific items, Employee B described her ability to meet students in the schools and connect them with donations or resources they need. Employee G, school counselor, partners with an outreach committee through the Parent Teacher Association at Mountain High to provide

clothing and food to students in need. There is a referral form, on which educators can make exact requests on students' behalf. For example, the committee was able to provide a student who was starting a welding job after graduation the basic jeans and boots he needed but could not afford himself. Employee G also mentioned her efforts to refer and connect students to resources. Although she is able help them research, she does not have the time to guide each of them through the process of actually obtaining those items.

Mental Health Services. Two graduates and four school district personnel specifically mentioned mental health services as a beneficial support for students experiencing homelessness. More specifically, four of the six referred to the Valley Therapy Office (pseudonym), a local mental health facility that both welcomes walk-in appointments for mental health crises and partners with the local high schools to serve students on-site. Graduate B took advantage of Valley Therapy's services; she noted that transportation could be a barrier, but some of the therapists she saw were able to move her appointments to telehealth. Graduate E attended an afterschool program, which included family services for students. He chose to seek counselor support there, rather than at school.

When describing facilitating factors that help students experiencing homelessness graduate high school, Employees A, B, C, and F included mental health services. Employee A, liaison, commented that mental health clinicians and therapists based in schools provide extra outlets for student support. Employee B, program outreach specialist, echoed that idea and specifically named Valley Therapy Office as an accessible resource, as clinicians there accept walk-in appointments and Medicaid. Employees C, principal, and F, student support specialist, were also familiar with Valley Therapy, but they were able to arrange for therapists from that office to come to Clover High once a week. Employee C noted that this setup enabled students to

receive services more quickly, as they did not have to wait in lines and could expedite paperwork. Employee F was also grateful that Clover High was able to support two school counselors on site, who helped meet student emotional and physical needs. She said:

> We would always try to be case managers in the building, to where if we knew of any kind of resources whether it be mental health, community health, all that—we would try to connect [the students] to all kinds of, you know, outside resources.

Community Support. Four of six graduates and six of eight school district personnel described a variety of ways in which district employees collaborate with one another, as well as with organizations in the greater community, to best meet student emotional and physical needs and encourage academic progress. Graduate A reflected that a "big, big team" helped him make it to graduation. Specifically, he mentioned his school counselor at Mountain High connecting him with Employee B to receive McKinney-Vento services and offering him a referral for Clover High. Graduate B called her school trustworthy, and Graduates C and D both felt like they were a part of a community at their respective schools. Graduate C named teachers, counselors, and mentors as a collective group who supported her progress. Graduate E said his school was encouraging as a whole. When asked about his school community, Graduate F reflected:

> I never really had any school pride throughout my years in high school. And it was really just towards the end, when I actually started to realize, like, how much school can impact you and do for you. It's not just there to get you a piece of paper. It's there to encourage you, to push you along, to give you more opportunities, and to show you what's possible.

Internal Efforts of School District Personnel. Employees A, B, F, and G all referenced partnerships among the high schools and central office, facilitated by administrators, teachers, school counselors, student support specialists, and central office employees, for the purpose of

most effectively serving students in need. Employees A and B noted that school counselors play an especially important role in connecting various other individuals. Employee B also mentioned the relationship she has developed with the secretary at Clover High, as she is the first person the students see when they arrive at school and is able to support her efforts to identify students for the McKinney-Vento program and connect them to services and resources. Employees D and E, both teachers at Clover High, reflected on the school culture, which revolves around teachers pitching in to provide basic needs and academic support to students. Employee C, Clover High principal, noted that it takes all of her staff to fill the gaps students might have.

Employee A also emphasized a "team approach" as an important way to refer older youth to the McKinney-Vento program, track attendance, and coordinate wraparound services. As she described this group effort, she said:

> I think that there's not any teacher or any school counselor, even if it's not in our school division, if they're—if they're doing their job the way it's intended, they're going to reach out and someone's going to know [about a student in need].

In the McKinney-Vento office, Employee B reviews eligibility data, looking for students in overlapping reporting categories such as learning English or receiving special education services to make sure all support offerings are being coordinated. She is also on a committee in the school system that monitors a "By Name List," which tracks all youth up to the age of 26 who are experiencing chronic homelessness. Employee F, student support specialist, described her partnership with Employee A and the McKinney-Vento staff to identify students and connect them to services and resources, and Employee G, school counselor, highlighted the Parent Teacher Association Outreach Committee, which is able to connect students with donations and items of which they are in need.

External Community Partnerships. Employee A, liaison, expressed her impression that people in the Bethany City community are familiar with McKinney-Vento and maintain relationships or partnerships with the office. For example, she developed a partnership with a local bar association to sponsor the graduation celebration event, and there is a well-established, substantial community fundraising effort whose proceeds go to students in unstable living situations. Conversely, Employee B, program outreach specialist, shared her opinion that the community is unaware of the extent of homelessness and wishes the school system could create more partnerships that would benefit students and offer them resources.

In terms of school and community organization collaboration, Employees B, C, and F mentioned the importance of making mental health referrals for students and their partnership with Valley Therapy Office in particular. Employees B, G, and H mentioned the services the local community college can offer students, which ranges from short term class options and workforce training programs to assistance with college applications. Employees C and D were grateful for Clover High's partnership with a local agency, a faith-based organization, that provides resources and food generously and efficiently for their students and families. Their school also partners with the Sherriff's office to host a reset program, which partners students with mentors. Employee H has established a relationship with an auto parts store that provides him with materials for his students to use as they are repairing cars for individuals experiencing homelessness.

Academic Support. In terms of academic support, four out of six graduates, and five out of eight school district personnel mentioned factors ranging from teacher support and accruing academic credits to learning environment and student mentality. In general, employees A, B, and C all described academic planning meetings as ways for school district personnel to support

students' coursework and transitions from high school to college or the workforce. Employee H, an automotive instructor at the Technical Education Center, referred to himself as a talent scout and encouraged the students to put in the time and effort necessary to prove themselves. In addition to teaching the skills needed to repair cars, he connected with Employee A to repair cars for individuals experiencing homelessness. Graduate B was appreciative of teachers communicating with her about missed work when she was unable to attend school. Teachers would call her and either offer her the work online or help her once she returned. Graduate D said his school counselor helped him with his work.

More specifically, several interview responses focused on Clover High, which was designed for the purpose of providing academic support to students who had fallen behind academically but wanted to graduate on time. Employee C emphasized how students must apply and interview, make a choice to put education first, and accept the rules. Then, they receive the support of the Clover Hill staff, who are all committed to seeing them reach graduation. Graduate C affirmed that making up credits was her reason for transferring there. Employee D described Clover High as a place for students to receive a second chance to not only succeed academically but also to be part of a community. He also noted the positive impact of the school day structure on students, with seven period schedule and shorter classes, which he believed helped the students keep their minds and bodies active. When Graduate A moved to Clover High the second semester of his senior year, he only had eight out of 22 credits he needed to graduate. He was able to accrue the remaining 14 credits and attributed his success to the teachers' help and to the school itself. He also elaborated on the shift in his commitment to completing his work once he transferred to Clover High, remembering:

> When you get to Clover High, it's like they already know—like you used to be the kid that don't want to do the work in school and stuff like that. So, when you get there, it's like you have to do the work. Like if you don't do the work, there's no other option of this or that, that you can go to for you to get graduated. So, that's like your last resort. So, when kids get there, it's like the playing stops, all the messing around, all that stops.

Non-School-Based Factors

Although there were fewer non-school-based factors that contributed to the personal and academic progress of students experiencing homelessness, there were several common codes that graduates and school district personnel identified (Table 15). Five of six graduates and six of eight school district personnel did credit personal attributes, including self-esteem, individual strength, and hope for the future, as important qualities that enabled the students to reach graduation. The graduates emphasized individuals in their families who influenced their progress, while school district personnel made more general comments about family support. Extra-curricular activities, such as church and after school programs, were another important source of consistency and support for the students.

Table 15

Non-School-Based Factors Identified by High School Graduates and School District Personnel

Factor	HSG	SDP
Personal attributes	5 of 6 A, C, D, E, F	6 of 8 A, B, C, D, F, H
Family and friends	5 of 6 A, B, D, E, F	4 of 8 A, B, C, F
Extra-curricular activities	3 of 6 D, E, F	2 of 8 A, D

Note. HSG = high school graduate; SDP = school district personnel

Personal Attributes. Five of six graduates and six of eight school district personnel described a variety of personal attributes, related to self-esteem and individual strengths, coping strategies, and hope for the future, that enabled the graduates to follow through on earning their diplomas.

Self-Esteem. The graduates communicated their values and perceptions of themselves, using words and phrases including:

- I'm not the type to get a GED. (Graduate A)
- All you have to do is try…it's not always like a failure when you don't succeed, but you always have to get up and try again. (Graduate C)
- I feel like when I graduate college, I'll not only have that diploma, but I'll have another diploma, which just certifies me even more to get a job. (Graduate D)
- I wanted to be the outlier statistics of the family. (Graduate E)

The school district personnel used similar language to convey the effects of the graduates' progress and achievements on their-self-esteem. Employee F, student support specialist, actually mentioned that her work as a school counselor centers around resilience and

helping the students feel motivated and valuable. She encourages them to expect better and set new standards for themselves, while also acknowledging challenges related to the developing cognitive function of teenagers. Employee G, school counselor, empathized with student frustrations centered on having little control over their lives. However, as a student support specialist, her goal is to create power and options for them on the other side of high school. Employee A, liaison, articulated the ways in which the McKinney-Vento team shares pride with the students throughout their journeys and takes extra care to make them feel special at graduation, offering a catered dinner with a guest speaker and gifts. Employee B, program outreach specialist, reminisced about the McKinney-Vento graduation celebration:

> It really showed that—how proud that they were of their accomplishments, and you know, a lot of them that were going on to colleges, and even the ones that weren't, they've still seemed, you know, to take it very seriously.

Individual Strengths. The graduates reflected on the individual strength needed by students experiencing homelessness to reach graduation. Graduate A told himself he had to finish—he committed himself to the diploma and did not want to be like his parents who had earned their GEDs. Once he transferred to Clover High, he recognized he had one semester to take his work seriously and see things through. Graduate B knew she had to keep going; she prioritized finding a way to school or at least completing her assignments. It was important for her to be a role model for her nieces and nephew. Throughout high school, Graduate D reminded himself it was better to finish than to drop out. In his interview, he expressed gratitude for earning his diploma and enrolling in college. Although Graduate E was the only Black student in his classes, he relied on his resilience and persistence. He described himself as repetitive—he prioritized relationships with his teachers and would make sure to converse with them after class

or attend office hours. Graduate F said he found his strength through quiet time, which was the only constant in his life after his house burned and his grandparents passed, as well as through prayer and the peace that came from his Christian faith.

The school district personnel shared similar views about the graduates' personal commitment to overcoming challenges. Employee B, program outreach specialist, described the graduates as resilient, put together, prepared, and amazing. Employee C, principal, encouraged the students to work with the teachers and staff, assuring them the team would get the students across the finish line. Employee D, teacher, described the diploma as an indication for graduates that they had accomplished something, which would give them confidence to know they can pursue and achieve other endeavors in the future. Employee H, instructor at the Technical Education Center, gave his students reminders about how anyone can work their way out of hard situations and how ultimately, they are the ones that can change their own lives. He shared a personal turning point in his own life, when his uncle told him that nobody on the planet owed him anything and that he would have to work to make whatever he wanted out of life happen for himself. More generally, he used his own experiences with poverty and homelessness to encourage students to reflect on their lives, question their parents' situations, and work hard to better themselves.

Hope for the Future. All six graduates expressed various hopes they had for the future, capturing their ability to see past their current circumstances. Graduate A remembered his situation being hard but acknowledged it was temporary. He focused on providing for his younger brother. Similarly, Graduate B pictured herself as a role model for her younger relatives, using her accomplishments to motivate them in the future. Graduates C, D, and E associated the diploma with jobs and careers in which they could earn money, with Graduate D specifying

following his interests and Graduate E interested in becoming an outlier statistic in his family. Graduate F expressed his desire to go to college and buy himself more time and opportunities, as he figured out a desirable career path for himself.

The school district personnel observed that it could be challenging for students to look toward the future and described the variety of ways in which they encouraged that attribute. Employees D and F mentioned the students' focus on the present, as they often struggled to meet their basic needs and were unable to see forward. Employees A, B, and C used language including goals, interests and calling, and options as they discussed the future with students. Similarly, Employee F asked the students where they might see themselves in 5-10 years. Employee G emphasized empowering students to have more control over their lives after high school and to create lives they want.

Family and Friends. In addition to identifying individuals who helped the graduates on their paths to earning their diplomas (Table 16), the graduates described what helpful relationships looked like, according to specific actions and interactions. Five of the six graduates named individual family members and friends who supported their journey to graduation, and four of the six graduates mentioned specific friends who uplifted them either personally or academically. The school district personnel made fewer and more general comments about family and friend support, with only four of the eight acknowledging family and only two of eight recognizing friends.

Table 16

Family Member and Friend Support for High School Graduates

Graduate	Family	Friends
A	Mother	One friend
B	Sister; brother	Best friend
C	n/a	n/a
D	Parents; grandmother	One friend
E	Grandfather	n/a
F	Brother	One good friend

Family. In terms of family support, four of the five graduates who mentioned family described encouragement, and one mentioned financial contributions. Graduate A portrayed his mom as "in his ear about getting his diploma." Graduate B remembered her sister and brother telling her to keep going and standing behind her throughout high school. Graduate D recalled how his mother and grandmother were "diehard fans" for him to graduate, and how his parents would emphasize the consequences of not graduating. Graduate E mentioned his grandfather paid for him to go to an afterschool program, which helped him with homework and with developing his independence and work ethic. Graduate F mentioned his brother was going through the same situation as him. Graduate C did not name any family members. Graduate B summarized, "It's like having your family behind you. Sometimes, that's, that's all you need."

Although half the school district personnel did acknowledge the positive impact of family relationships, their comments were much less specific than the graduates' comments. Employees A and B referenced the support and pride of parents and caregivers toward their children at graduation. Employees C and F mentioned how family support and buy-in can be beneficial to students. Employee D's reflection varied from the others' reflections, mentioning limited interactions with parents, and noting most of his students would tell him their parents did not

care about them. Employees E, G, and H did not mention any supportive family members in particular.

Friends. In terms of friendships, four of six graduates named individuals whom they considered supportive peers. Graduate A mentioned a small group of friends who shared the same goal of graduating and described how they were able to push one another forward. More specifically, he named one friend with whom he is still in touch and another friend whose father murdered him right before graduation. Before the friend's death, Graduate A considered him to be one of the strongest people he knew and reminisced on how funny and uplifting he was. Graduate B identified a best friend who supported her mental health and academics. Graduate D mentioned a school friend whom he regarded as smart accountability partner, and Graduate F described a school friend as someone he shared classes with and talked with about day-to-day things. Graduates C and E did not name any friends.

Only two school district personnel mentioned the role of friendships. Employee A talked about the importance of peer support, especially when students were in unstable housing situations and might be couch surfing. Employee B described friendships in the context of events and programs hosted by the McKinney-Vento office. She believed it was helpful for the students to see peers in similar situations as themselves.

Extra-Curricular Activities. Three of six graduates (D, E, and F) mentioned the importance of extra-curricular activities on their paths to graduation, and only two of eight school district personnel commented on it. Graduates D and F attended church on Sundays and youth group activities on Wednesdays. Graduate D reflected on the good relationship with his pastor, who helped him with his homework during youth group and whom he had known since elementary school. Graduate F was very involved in his church community as a way to connect

with others and develop his spirituality, and also to earn service hours for honors programs and scholarships. Graduates D and E attended after-school programs, which not only offered them consistency during the week, but also provided them transportation and homework support. Graduate D said the youth center he attended was a place to get a snack, do homework, and hang out with other teens until it was time to go home. He participated in a second program that offered local trips on the weekend to places like a horse farm, skating, and the movies and an out-of-state trip to Tennessee. Graduate E attended a different program, where he was able to complete his homework, which helped him become more independent and develop a strong work ethic.

The school district personnel also described the benefits of extra-curricular activities for students experiencing homelessness. Employee A, liaison, mentioned that several students in the McKinney-Vento program work part time and that others are involved in recreational sports, like football, basketball, or track. She believes those programs can help break down barriers that exist for students who do not have those extra connections or outlets. Employee D, teacher, was aware that several of his students attend afterschool programs that they can walk to from school. He wishes there were more offerings for teens either at Clover High or in general because he finds several students end up smoking or drinking once they leave school. He attributes those choices to the local culture as well as to the parents supplying their children with the substances.

Research Question 2

What barriers to earning a high school diploma do graduates who experienced homelessness in high school and school district personnel within a selected school district identify?

a. *School-based barriers*

b. *Non-school-based barriers*

Masten (2018) characterizes resilience as a response and adjustment to situations that threaten individuals' well-being and development. In the case of students experiencing homelessness, there are a variety of factors that contribute to adverse circumstances that affect them both at school and at home. In terms of school-based barriers, participants described situations and experiences that comprised four school-based barriers: transportation, academic support, school environment, and planning for the future. Based on interview data, I categorized non-school-based barriers into five additional codes: emotional and physical needs, family factors, generational cycles of instability, community concerns, and COVID-19. When reflecting on his personal situation, Graduate A said:

> I was trying to think of a word, but there's really nothing else you could put right there to describe that other than basically like, hell while you're going through it—especially if you don't have anybody to, like, coach you through it and tell you it's some light at the end of the tunnel…like it's gonna get hard. I mean—real, real hard.

Similarly, Employee H acknowledged challenges he and his own parents had faced throughout their own generational cycles of poverty and homelessness. However, when asked about barriers for current students, his answer focused on how the students could respond and overcome, instead of identifying some of the difficulties with which he had had firsthand experience. He shared his belief that:

> In Bethany City, everybody has the same opportunity, you know. And the bottom line is, and I tell my kids all the time…what we do in this class is 100% up to you. And as far as the way I see it is, that is their education in general; you're going to get out of it exactly what you put in.

Nevertheless, the interview data organized and shared below in Table 17 present a convincing case that students in Bethany City do in fact face significant hardships related to their personal and academic progress and well-being.

Table 17

Adversity Codes, Subcodes, and Frequency Counts

Code	Subcodes	HSG f	SDP f	Total f
Transportation	Transportation	6	11	17
Academic Needs	Attendance	3	12	15
	Academic Performance	0	8	8
	Lack of Teacher Support	7	0	7
School Environment	School Protocol	20	42	62
	General Lack of Support	10	1	11
	Communication	0	5	5
Planning for the Future	No Vision	4	26	30
	Plans for after Graduation	3	15	18
Emotional Needs	Internal Emotional Struggles	0	39	39
	Mental Health	5	14	19
	Competing Priorities	1	6	7
Physical Needs	Basic Needs	3	51	54
	Living Accommodations	11	21	32
	Mobility	11	5	16
	Finances	6	0	6
	Substance Abuse	0	3	3
Family	Family Relationships	16	53	69
	Unaccompanied Youth	0	9	9
	Domestic Violence	0	6	6
Generational Cycles of Instability	General challenges	15	16	31
	Generational Cycles	3	25	28
	Trauma	4	12	16
	Poverty	1	7	8
	Chronic issues	0	3	3
Community Concerns	Culture	1	20	21
	Violence	0	7	7
COVID-19	COVID-19	3	5	8

Note. HSG = high school graduate; SDP = school district personnel

School-Based Barriers

The participants described a variety of school-based barriers that affect students' ability to not only attend school and learn, but also plan and prepare for the future (Table 18). If students are unable to get to school because of transportation issues, the school district personnel are unable to teach and assist them. Students experiencing homelessness face a variety of academic challenges that require extra support and attention from teachers and educators. The school learning environment, which includes classroom rules and procedures, schoolwide traditions, and internal district policies, can create additional barriers for students. In terms of the future, students need help creating goals and visions for themselves, as a way of giving meaning to their efforts in school.

Table 18

School-Based Barriers Identified by High School Graduates and School District Personnel

School-based Barrier	HSG	SDP
Transportation	4 of 6	3 of 8
	A, B, C, D	A, B, E
Academic Needs	3 of 6	3 of 8
	A, B, C	D, E, G
School Environment	6 of 6	4 of 8
	A, B, C, D, E, F	A, B, C, F
Planning for the Future	3 of 6	4 of 8
	A, D, F	C, D, E, F

Note. HSG = high school graduate; SDP = school district personnel

Transportation. Four of six graduates described issues with transportation that prevented them from getting to school some days. Graduate A commented that the bus for his route would come late every day and was grateful that his school counselor at Mountain High

would come to pick him and other students up. He described her as “really clutch” (Graduate A, personal communication, October 27, 2023). Graduate B faced challenges when her mother said she would drive her to school but then did not. She was also responsible for getting her nieces to school, and one Uber could cost up to $50. Graduate C mentioned missing the bus some days, and Graduate D said his bus stopped running for a while during Covid.

Three of eight school district personnel elaborated on the cycle of transportation, instruction and learning, and attendance policies. Employee B, program outreach specialist, underlined the importance of reliable transportation, stating, “Transportation is huge. You know, lack of transportation, whether it be their own transportation, their families’, or our school division, I would say that’s, that’s probably the biggest [barrier].”

Employee E, teacher, said:

> We need them here. You know, we can’t feed you, we can’t help you if you’re not here. But again, it’s a slippery slope. Because if I don’t have transportation, I can’t get to school. Then how do I get to school, but then you want to slap truancy on my back?

Academic Needs. Three of six graduates and three of eight school district personnel cited academic needs, or lack of academic support, as one of the barriers to high school graduation. Graduates A, B, and C were all behind on their academic credits and in danger of not graduating before they transferred to Clover High. For example, Graduate A had only earned eight out of the 22 credits he needed before his spring senior semester; he was able to complete the requirements at Clover High. He also mentioned that he struggled learning how to use technology and did not receive the guidance he needed from his teachers.

Employees D and E, both teachers, echoed the struggles students face when they get behind on their academic credits. Specifically, Employee D mentioned he wished Clover High

could offer a larger variety of classes and career and technical education opportunities, but students there have to focus on fulfilling graduation requirements. Employee G, school counselor, described the negative impact of standardized testing, high teacher turnover rates, strict discipline policies, and technology protocols on students experiencing homelessness. When so many assignments require technology, it can be hard for students without the skills or resources to participate. She described challenges related to students losing laptops or hotspots distributed by the school; students can incur high fees to reimburse the district and become unlikely to receive replacement items.

School Environment. All six graduates and four of eight school district personnel described a variety of challenges related to the school environment. First, classroom barriers can make it difficult for students to focus and learn. Next, school rituals can create financial obstacles that can cause stress or a decreased sense of belonging for students who do not have the financial means to participate. Finally, internal school barriers related to the limitations of federal legislation, district procedures, and college applications can discourage students.

Classroom Barriers. Graduates A and B noted how large classes sizes at their high schools before Clover High negatively affected their ability to learn. Graduate B struggled with anxiety and preferred working in small groups. When asked about barriers in school, Graduate C compared her experiences at the three different high schools, replying:

> Like, the kids, I can’t focus. I really couldn’t, like, be around kids. Basically, like that was really it. I was around people I knew. It was basically being, like, class clown. Like, Clover High is not really like that. It’s just interacting with you to get yourself at a better level or whatever the case may be. Hill High, it’s just fights and all that and Mountain

High—fights. And it was just so much going from school to school to school and then finally getting a good school to go to.

Graduate D also said he had a hard time paying attention in class. Graduates C, D, and E did not always feel like they received the help they needed from their teachers at Hill High and Mountain High. Employee E, teacher, acknowledged how classroom rules, such as no eating or drinking in class, can deter student learning if they are unable to concentrate or leave the room to eat a snack.

School Ritual Barriers. Schoolwide traditions, such as prom and the graduation ceremony itself, and school rules like paying senior dues created other barriers for the students. Employees A and B can cover some of the costs associated with these rituals through the use of McKinney-Vento funds and community donations. Employee A, liaison, said:

> Having information up front about the cap and gown is huge for them because they stress about that from the beginning of the school year. So, knowing upfront that we're going to help with senior dues and we're going to pay for your cap and gown takes a relief off them.

Employee B, outreach program specialist, echoed:

> I had a, actually it was Graduate C last year. She was just, I guess jumping through the hoops to get those senior fees waived, almost pushed her over the edge to where she was like, I don't even care, like I just don't even want it…I saw firsthand how much it stressed the student out thinking that she wasn't going to be able to graduate because of that $200 fee or whatever.

Internal School District Barriers. The school district personnel described challenges they encounter when trying to support students experiencing homelessness. Employee A, liaison,

described internal barriers based on protocol that when a student updates an address or comes to enroll and they don't have a lease or mortgage, school district personnel do ask them to be referred to the McKinney-Vento office. She also reflected on the limits of the *McKinney-Vento Act*, in that the legislation protects K-12 students. She and Employee B, outreach program specialist, try to help seniors with developing post-secondary options, connecting them to work workforce development programs, helping with housing –because they cannot continue to do that once they students leave. Employees C, Clover High principal, and F, student support specialist, mentioned the importance of appropriate staffing to ensure reasonable student-teacher or student-counselor ratios. In terms of college applications, Graduates D and F described needing help with the general process, as well as the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) and scholarship pieces. Both young men said they did not know how and were grateful to receive help from their respective school counselors. Employees A and C also acknowledged the importance of offering students help with FAFSA applications, as it can sometimes feel like a foreign language to students.

Planning for the Future. Three of six graduates and four of eight school district personnel acknowledged the limited ability of students experiencing homelessness to picture a future or envision how the high school diploma would serve them. Employee D, teacher, observed that many of his students were unable to see a future for themselves, largely because of their own family circumstances. Employee E, teacher, agreed that many students are not motivated and do not have the capacity to look to the future. Employee F, student support specialist, felt her students did not possess a mentality of change and tried to help them identify what they felt was holding them back. However, four graduates did mention their efforts and the associated challenges with preparing for life after high school. Graduate A described his

frustration at being ineligible to apply to a local community college access program that provides two years of financial assistance to colleges in Virginia. Because Graduate A attended school in Bethany City in Grades 9 and 12 and spent his 10th- and 11th-grade years in a different school district, he was unable to take advantage of the program. Graduates D and F struggled filling out college applications and FAFSA forms. Employee C, principal, also acknowledged the challenge of interpreting the language on FAFSA forms and more generally navigating the college application process. Graduate E expressed his disappointment around the limited local and regional opportunities. He felt that Bethany City did not have the professional training and opportunities he was looking for.

Non-School-Based Barriers

Given the challenges associated not only with poverty but also with homelessness, there are a variety of non-school-based barriers (Table 19) that affect students' ability to attend and participate in school. Most graduates and all the school district personnel addressed the emotional and physical needs of students experiencing homelessness in their interviews, which range from anxiety and depression to food and shelter. Although some participants, especially the graduates, recalled family member encouragement, most of the participants also described obstacles and difficulties associated with family relationships and requests. Although the graduates did not mention generational cycles of instability or community concerns, most school district personnel recognized the negative impact these factors had on the students. Finally, the COVID-19 pandemic did disrupt school routines, educator-student relationships, and transportation.

Table 19

Non-School-Based Barriers Identified by High School Graduates and School District Personnel

Barrier	HSG	SDP
Emotional and Physical Needs	6 of 6 A, B, C, D, E, F	8 of 8 A, B, C, D, E, F, G, H
Family	5 of 6 A, B, C, E, F	6 of 8 A, B, D, E, F, G
Generational Cycles of Instability	1 of 6 E	7 of 8 A, B, C, D, E, F, H
Community Concerns	1 of 6 E	5 of 8 B, C, E, F, G
COVID-19	2 of 8 A, F	5 of 8 B, C, F, G, H

Note. HSG = high school graduate; SDP = school district personnel

Emotional and Physical Needs. All graduates and school district personnel described the variety of challenges to the emotional well-being of students experiencing homelessness, summarized in Table 20. Emotional well-being, mindset, and outlook all affected the graduates' ability to academically progress toward graduation. The most frequent attribute, identified by two graduates and three employees, was lack of motivation or unwillingness to do schoolwork. Graduates A, B, and C described their personal situations as hard, which at times impacted their ability to function in the present and to look ahead to the future. Graduate B noted how some days she would be in a funk or feel depressed and not want to go to school or do her work. Employee D, teacher echoed this sentiment, calling the graduates a barrier to themselves when they did not do their work. Similarly, Graduate D mentioned instances where he wanted to give up and not apply to college, and Graduate C felt like she had no one to talk to after her grandmother passed. Employee E, teacher, observed students feeling shame about their situations and being resistant to disclosing personal information. Additionally, Graduate E and Employee E

both described how some students are taught not to share family updates with the school, for fear of children being separated from their parents or caregivers. Employee E said:

> I know a lot of my students don't want us to know what's going on because they're afraid that we are going to share information and get mom in trouble or, you know, grandma, grandpa, whoever, whomever that guardian in trouble. So, they don't want you to know, and you can't help them.

Employee A, liaison noted the same challenge of students needing to communicate with their teachers or counselors in order for school district personnel to be able to offer support.

Table 20

Frequency Counts of Emotional Needs of Students Experiencing Homelessness Identified by High School Graduates and School District Personnel

Challenge	HSG f	SDP f
Anxiety	1	0
Cannot see the future	0	18
Concern; worry	7	12
Depression/ funk	3	0
Discouragement; want to give up	8	0
Internalize issues; do not want others to know	0	10
Lack of awareness about resources and how to access them	1	10
Lack of motivation/ unwillingness	5	12
Lacking basic skills (family should have taught)	1	0
Limited racial representation	4	0
Mental health	3	8
No mentality of change	0	9
No one to talk to; hard without a coach	4	0
Past trauma	0	1
Shame; worthlessness	0	2
Substance abuse	0	5
Taught to not share family information with educators	1	2
Teen brains are not fully formed	0	1
What do students feel is holding them back?	0	1

Note. HSG = high school graduate; SDP = school district personnel

Most participants also described graduates' prioritization of meeting their basic needs before they could attend and fully participate in school. Graduate A was responsible for his younger brother and noted that even though his goal was to graduate high school, his main priority was to provide shelter for his brother each night and in the future. At one point, Graduate B was unable to pay her rent, after moving from hotel to hotel and responding to her mother's requests for money. Graduate F lost his house and his grandparents who were his caretakers in a fire. As he was trying to gather food and clothing, he reflected:

> I think the biggest barrier at the time was finances and worrying about how I'm going to live and survive and figuring out all that. I was really concerned at the time about can I go to college? Yeah, I had no money.

Employee F cited homelessness and poverty in general as the cause of personal barriers, saying:

> Lack of access to basic needs, or like, you know, sometimes, it's really hard. And I get it like, if you're having a crisis in your life, right—you don't have those, you know, the Maslow's hierarchy of needs. If you don't have those basic needs met, it is hard to come to school. And sometimes, you know, we would have to deal with those other crises before we could even expect them to come to school.

Family. The graduates and school district personnel described a variety of family-related difficulties, including relationships, responsibilities, living accommodations, financial stability, and educational attainment. Graduate A's mother sent him and his brother to live with family in Bethany City, who did not actually allow them stay. Graduate B's mother evicted her but also asked her for money. She was also responsible for babysitting her nieces and nephew, which prevented her from attending school some days. Graduate C's mother also evicted her, once she became pregnant; she had to navigate that experience and then care for her newborn, while navigating an unhealthy relationship with the baby's father. Graduate C also mentioned her grandmother had passed away, which left her feeling alone and without anyone to whom she could talk. Although Graduate E was not forthcoming about the specifics related to his eligibility to participate in the McKinney-Vento program and this study, he shared that he did not consider himself homeless because he always had a roof over his head. It is possible that he was doubling up or staying with friends or family members. He commented that he recognized that something

was wrong in his household. Graduate F was concerned about having money to live and attend college after his house burned down and his grandparents died.

All school district personnel except for Employee H mentioned or described family relationships and circumstances that created challenges for the students. In particular, Employees A, B, D, E, and F had observed various family members' lack of support for their children and even feelings of animosity about their children surpassing them educationally. Employees A, E, and G generally mentioned family issues or conflict, while Employee A specified parents evicting their children, parents fighting, domestic violence, and teen parenting as more particular challenges that could layer on top of housing instability. Employee D, teacher, was aware of parents supplying their children with substances after school, which affected their ability to learn in school the next day. Employee E, teacher, encountered students who were required to babysit younger family members and were therefore unable to attend school.

Generational Cycles of Instability. All employees except for G connected generational cycles of poverty, homelessness, and general difficulties to the situations in which the graduates found themselves. In contrast, only one of the graduates acknowledged these circumstances. Graduate E described how he hoped to be an outlier in his family, as he graduated in only 3 years, when the rest of his family had dropped out of high school. Employee A, liaison, mentioned:

> They are… moving quite frequently… facing challenges… dealing with other family issues. Their parent might have experienced homelessness as a child as well. I have worked with some of our parents now, I worked with them when they were younger. So, you can actually see that cycle of homelessness.

Employee B, program outreach specialist, said:

> Most of our kids are really trying to break away from things that their families have experienced or are experiencing or maybe past traumas, things like that. They are really trying to break free of it.

In terms of school participation and success, district personnel mentioned some families' lack of support for the graduates due to past family culture or norms. Employee A said:

> Their guardians really were not supportive in the sense that they kind of looked at them as, I think maybe a threat. I don't know how to say that. But basically, saying to them, you think you're better than us because now you're going to college…maybe some animosity or jealous or whatever you want to call it when they're not supported.

Employee B made a similar comment about one graduate's family who claimed the graduate thought he was better than everyone else now.

In addition to focusing on day-to-day needs and finding themselves in survival mode, the families of the graduates had limited educational attainment, displayed in Table 21. Employees E, G, and H noted that parents with less education were not only unable to provide financially for their families, but they also did not value the high school diploma or encourage their children in the same ways parents with more education did. Employee H, technical education center instructor, recounted from personal experience that because his own parents did not have high school diplomas, they were unable to model certain skills for him, like managing money, because they were playing bill roulette, or in other words trying to decide which bill they absolutely had to pay before the service would be suspended.

Table 21

High School Graduates' Family Educational Histories

Graduate	Family Education
A	Mom and dad General Education Development certification
B	Brother and sister high school graduates
C	Did not mention
D	Mom and dad high school graduates; mom and uncle college graduates
E	No high school or college graduates
F	No high school or college graduates

Community Concerns. The general location and culture of Bethany City presented issues that one of six graduates and five of eight school district personnel acknowledged. Graduate E felt Bethany City was "kid-ish" and did not have the ability to teach him the professionalism skills he would need for the future. He shared his observation that many students do not check their email and are unaware of opportunities available to them. Employees B and E specifically mentioned problematic environments, and Employees C, F, and G cited gang-related violence as one particular concern. Employee G, school counselor, also noted that Bethany City does not have a youth homeless shelter and that the adult shelter is not safe for adolescents. In terms of community familiarity about homelessness, Employee B said:

> I think that people are just—have no idea. I mean every time that we talk to anybody, and we throw a number out, it's like they're baffled by it. I mean, so, I think it's totally just an unknown issue in our community. And it's, it's sad because it's, it's widespread.

She continued to describe:

> There's a lack of resources in the community. I mean as far as you know, these kids that are on their own, I think, just more community resources to kind of help them better

> prepare for the future about living on their own, you know, if they were—different places that could partner…kind of get them better prepared.

COVID-19. Two of six graduates and five of eight employees noted the negative impacts of COVID-19 on life at home and at school. Graduate A attributed his homeless experience to the pandemic, as his mother was unable to pay a $4,000 light bill once the moratorium was lifted. She sent him and his brother from another city in Virginia to Bethany City to stay with relatives who told them "no" once they arrived. Graduate F acknowledged how Covid helped him realize who his friends were, as many of them had stopped communicating with him, which led him to believe they had only been there just to be there and hang out. He said his friends list slimmed down to a small amount, and his main friends did not even go to the same school as him.

Most of the school district personnel made similar observations. Employee B, program outreach specialist, reflected that during Covid, people were not face-to-face and were not seeing each other as much. When she did return, a student whom she had never met before ran up to her and gave her a big hug; he said I missed you so much. She thought he just knew she was from the school and that the interaction represented the importance of in person contact. Employee C, principal, had been able to hire two social workers with Covid funding, but now she was back down to one. Employee F, student support specialist, said:

> Covid—it definitely messed things up. It's changed it with mental health, with attendance, with grades, you know—made students kind of miss a lot of instruction time. And so, I felt like, the students we've worked with academically, we're several years behind. Emotionally, we're several years behind—all kind of things.

Employee G, school counselor, observed that coming out of Covid has been hard for all students, housed and unhoused. Employee H, technical education center instructor, described his

impression that students were being pushed through and able to get passing grades without doing much of anything and expressed his hope that the last of the Covid group was coming through the high school that year.

Research Question 3

What is the perceived impact of earning a high school diploma on the lives of students who have experienced homelessness, according to graduates who experienced homelessness in high school and school district personnel within a selected school district?

In the final phase of Resilience Theory, individuals affected by adversity reach better-than-expected outcomes (van Breda, 2018). In addition to reflecting on the various pathways to high school graduation for students experiencing homelessness, all participants communicated the positive consequences of the diploma, displayed in Table 22. In terms of diploma-related success, participants noted the accomplishment in terms of crossing the finish line as well as more general success. They also connected the diploma to the possibility of future opportunities, ranging from college and work experiences to options and stability. Five of eight school district personnel, in contrast with one high school graduate, commented on the power of the diploma to break generational cycles of instability. Although other graduates did not use that exact term, they did recognize diploma-related outcomes, including financial and housing security, as well as an ability to support their families. Overall, the resounding shared belief among graduates and school district personnel was that—in the words of Employee B, "The tassel is worth the hassle."

Table 22

Better-Than-Expected Outcomes Codes, Subcodes, and Frequency Counts

Codes	Subcodes	HSG f	SDP f	Total f
Diploma-related success	General success	24	19	43
	Cross the finish line	18	10	28
Future opportunities	College	6	8	14
	Job/ career/ income	18	15	32
	Options for the future	9	13	22
	Opportunities in the future	14	14	28
	Want better for themselves	3	4	7
Break generational cycles	Generational cycles	1	12	13
	Housing stability	2	2	4
	Financial security	3	5	8
	Support family	12	0	12

Note. HSG = high school graduate; SDP = school district personnel

Diploma-Related Success and Future Opportunities

All six graduates described the perceived value of a high school diploma and its connections to the future, and five of six mentioned their personal commitment to reaching that milestone. Graduate A called the impact of a diploma huge, as it is necessary for any job or career. He recognized that he would not have been able to get his current job without that credential. Graduate B described the diploma as something everyone needs, even though it is harder for some people than others to earn it. Graduate C associated the diploma with great jobs, not going through as much as you would if you did not have it, and a way to get in a good, stable place. Graduate D felt most jobs want some type of a diploma as proof of education. He earned an advanced diploma, which he believed would get him a better chance. He said:

> I feel like when I graduate college, I'll not only have that diploma, but I'll have another diploma, which just certifies me even more to get a job—a well-paying job that I would

like to have that aligns with what I would like to do. So, I can get paid for doing things that I like.

Graduate E connected the diploma to the job and career pathway and making money. He described the importance of having a credential to back up personal skills and qualifications when applying for jobs and being chosen as the best candidate. Graduate F viewed the diploma as a pathway to more opportunities and the first line to get across—as a prerequisite to college and having options for his future.

Graduates E and F said they had always wanted their diploma. Graduate E described his intentions to be an outlier, his desire to be different from others in his family or in Bethany City, and his ability to persevere. Graduate C said that she really wanted her diploma. Even though a lot of people did not believe in her, she said she knew she was going to graduate. So, that is what she did. Graduate A said he could not be the type to have a GED. Even though he had gotten behind on his credits, he knew locking in and worrying about the books would be worth it eventually to have his diploma.

All the school district personnel communicated their beliefs in the power of the high school diploma to act as a measure of success, improve future opportunities, and even break generational cycles of poverty and homelessness, summarized in Table 23. Employee A, liaison, summarized the impact of the diploma:

> Well, first and foremost is their opportunity to break the cycle of homelessness, to be able to best prepare them for, I guess, a better opportunity for obviously jobs and just secure and employment, and then also just to be able to help them be successful after high school.

Employees A, B, and E noted the significance that some graduates are the first in their families to earn high school diplomas. In more general terms, Employee B, program outreach specialist attributed the diploma to a marker of success, showing how far the students have come. Employee D, teacher, expanded on that sentiment, remarking:

> [The diploma is] something they can hold on to. And even if they don’t use it for jobs, or whatever, it shows that they have accomplished something, which they don’t, you know—especially being homeless, they’re not told that or have that a lot. And so, even if they don’t use it, you know, for a job, at least they’ve shown themselves—they’ve given themselves some confidence they can accomplish something in their lives.

Table 23

Summary of Positive Outcomes Related to High School Diploma Identified by School District Personnel

Employee	Diploma-related Success	Future Opportunities	Break Generational Cycles
A	Success	Secure employment	Better opportunity; break cycle of homelessness
B	Measure of success; overcome obstacles; show how far they have come		Break family cycles of generational poverty
C		Options; place to find future; opportunities for careers rather than jobs	Pathway to security, rather than food and housing cycles of insecurity
D	Personal accomplishment; increase confidence	Open some doors; hold on to diploma for the future	
E		Open doors for opportunities	Without diploma, become stagnant; can fall back into what they are used to; might be only person in family with a diploma
F	Biggest game changer	Baseline stepping stone to enter into society	Want to do better; create new standard for themselves; supporting themselves and future families – cyclical/ generational
G	Huge, huge deal	More control over what life looks like on other side of high school; opens opportunities that would not have been possible; more income	Able to support a life where they are not unhoused
H	Finish what you start; worth time and energy	Goal is to bridge the gap	

Breaking Generational Cycles

Five of eight school district personnel observed the power of the high school diploma to break generational cycles of homelessness, poverty, and food and housing insecurity. Employee E expressed her concern that without a diploma, students can become stagnant or sink down into the environments to which they are accustomed. On the other hand, the diploma offers access and opportunities, especially for students who are the first in their families to reach that milestone. Employees A and B, liaison and program outreach specialist, also commented on breaking cycles of homelessness and generational poverty. Given their close contact with students and their families, they observed some instances of supportive parents and family members who celebrated their graduates' success and fewer instances of guardians feeling threatened or displaying animosity or jealousy in response to their children's accomplishments. Employee F, student support specialist, also noted the influence family members can have on their students, in terms of their beliefs around dropping out of high school or earning a GED in place of a diploma. She shared:

> [The diploma] is one of the biggest game changers of their life because it just sets that baseline for supporting themselves or their future families. And as we know, it can also be cyclical and generational. And so, we tell them, life, you want to do better. You want to make this new standard for yourself and for, you know, anyone else who comes behind you.

Employee C, principal, noted the importance of educating Clover High students on the difference between a job and a career and the role of the diploma in breaking away from the paycheck-to-paycheck lifestyle. She commented:

> If you're experiencing homelessness, that just kind of feeds that cycle of insecurity—food insecurity, housing insecurity, all of those things. So, knowing that we can help a kid start down a path to some sort of security is huge.

Employee F echoed this sentiment, saying, "Whether or not they just stay in a job field or whether or not they pursue further education or training, [the diploma is] just kind of the baseline of what they need to enter into society."

Employee G, school counselor, also noted how the diploma not only gives students more control over what their life looks like after high school, different from what they have been accustomed to with their parents or guardians, but also opens new opportunities. In terms of financial stability, she said, "The reality of what a high school diploma does is, it allows for more income down the road so that they can potentially support a life where they're not unhoused anymore."

Research Question 4

What recommendations do graduates who experienced homelessness in high school and school district personnel within a selected school district have for teachers, administrators, and other school personnel regarding helping students experiencing homelessness with high school access and success?

The participants offered a variety of recommendations for school district personnel, which can be summarized into offering targeted intervention strategies and fostering educator—student relationships. Additionally, they shared advice for future students who might find themselves in unstable living situations. The graduates emphasized developing personal attributes to carry them through difficult situations and calling upon educator support. The school district personnel commented on the importance of communicating the value of the high school

diploma to students, and like the graduates, they described the importance of providing support and care to students.

Participant Recommendations for School District Personnel

Various participant recommendations on how school district personnel can support students experiencing homelessness centered around communication and relationship-building, as well as prompt support for students in precarious circumstances. Additionally, suggestions for school-based action steps, such as low educator-student ratios, team approaches, and therapeutic staff training, were mentioned. Frequency counts of specific suggestions from the graduates and school district personnel are summarized in Table 24.

Table 24

Frequency Counts of High School Graduate and School District Personnel Recommendations

Intervention	HSG f	SDP f	Total f
Communication	7	11	18
Relationships	9	8	17
Prompt Action	6	4	10
Low Educator to Student Ratios	2	7	9
Academic Support	6	2	8
Team Support Approach	3	5	8
Therapeutic Staff Training	0	3	3
Basic Needs	1	2	2
College Preparation	1	0	1
Family Support	0	1	1
Improved Gun Policies	0	1	1
Local Youth Shelter	0	1	1

Note. HSG = high school graduate; SDP = school district personnel

Specific action items are listed below.

Targeted Interventions:

- Meet basic and transportation needs of students
- Create family partnerships and shared understanding
- Use a team approach at school, prioritizing small educator to student ratios
- Maintain consistent and meaningful communication with students
- Offer academic accommodations; emphasize graduation and future options
- Provide staff professional development on therapeutic, trauma-informed approaches

Educator Facilitation of Educator-Student Relationships :

- Be open and transparent, empathetic and caring, and flexible
- Be aware of potential signs and be prepared to act swiftly
- Prioritize student comfort and well-being using therapeutic approaches
- Create connections to provide students with personal and academic support

Advice for Students Experiencing Homelessness

In addition to recommendations for school personnel, I asked four out of six graduates to share advice about graduation that they would offer directly to students experiencing homelessness. Their responses, which centered around personal attributes and educator support, are summarized in Table 25. Three of four graduates acknowledged the challenges associated with homelessness, and all four graduates gave suggestions related to strengthening their personal mentality and persevering. Two graduates also commented on the importance of educator support.

Table 25

Summary of High School Graduate Advice for Students Experiencing Homelessness

Graduate	Challenge	Personal Mentality and Resilience	Educator Support
A	It's real hard	Don't give up; keep your head in the books	
B	No matter how hard it is…	Keep going; don't get discouraged because of your home situation; find a way to get to school and do you work	
C	It feels hard	All you have to do is try; it's not a failure when you don't succeed; you always have to get up and try again	They will see you trying
D		Use educators to help you get what you want	Use the people at school whose job is to help you; don't neglect that source of help; use as many of them as possible

I asked six out of eight school district personnel to share advice about graduation that they would offer directly to students experiencing homelessness. Their responses, which centered around the benefits of the diploma and educator support and care, are summarized in Table 26. Five out of six employees commented on the importance of making it across the finish line and the future opportunities the diploma offers students. Four employees underlined the amount of support and the sincere commitment they offer to students.

Table 26

Summary of School District Personnel Advice for Students Experiencing Homelessness

Employee	Benefits of Diploma	Educator Support and Care
A	So important to cross the finish line	People care; we are in this with you
B	Do not give up; keep going; see it through; it is worth it in the end; the tassel is worth the hassle	
C		Work with us; we'll get you there; we want you to succeed; anything we can do to help you, we will
D	Diploma is important; it will open doors for you; whether you value it or not, it will help you	
F	Where do you see yourself in 5-10 years? What are your goals and values?	We want to help you identify what is holding you back
G	The diploma will help you control what your life looks like on the other side	If you feel helpless, this is the one area we can help create power for you; we can create options for you

CHAPTER 5

RECOMMENDATIONS

Given the significance of the diploma in predicting future success, graduating high school is a momentous milestone for all students, but especially for those who have experienced homelessness. The purpose of this study was to better understand the variety of factors that ultimately enabled students who had experienced homelessness in Bethany City to graduate high school, according to their own insights as well as to those of local school district personnel. This study not only explored the facilitating factors and barriers related to the student pathways through high school, but also included advice for students in similar circumstances and recommendations for other school district personnel to support them. The results have the potential to not only help scholars and practitioners develop a better understanding of these unique pathways to graduation, but also to provide state and local stakeholders with recommendations on how to better support these students and close related academic achievement gaps. In this chapter, a summary of the findings of the study organized by research questions is provided. Then a discussion of the findings under the lens of Resilience Theory, recommendations for policy and practice, and recommendations for future research are offered.

Summary of Major Findings

In this study, three major themes emerged from qualitative data obtained from interviews with Bethany City high school graduates and school district personnel. The themes include adversity, resilience process, and better-than-expected outcomes, which align with the tenets of Resilience Theory.

Research Question 1

What facilitating factors do graduates who experienced homelessness in high school and school district personnel within a selected school district identify as critical to earning a high school diploma?

a. *School-based factors*

b. *Non-school-based factors*

One major theme, resilience process, emerged from nine codes of school-based and non-school-based factors that high school graduates and school district personnel identified as critical for students experiencing homelessness to earn high school diplomas. In Resilience Theory, the resilience process refers to the second phase involving the mediating factors that work together to overcome adverse circumstances from the first phase and produce better-than-expected outcomes in the third phase (van Breda, 2018). In order of importance, school-based factors included educator-student relationships, unique attributes of the alternative school, McKinney-Vento program, basic needs and resources, community support, and academic support. Non-school-based factors included personal attributes, family and friends, and extra-curricular activities.

Educator-Student Relationships. All 14 participants identified educator-student relationships as a critical factor to students experiencing homelessness reaching high school graduation. The graduates identified teachers and school counselors as the educators with the greatest impact on both their day-to-day lives and their preparation for the future. Additionally, they described the ability of educators to create safe places for them to rest and regroup. Interview data from school district personnel centered around various approaches for effectively building relationships with students. All participants acknowledged the importance of

relationships, which included creating a sense of support, communicating openly, and celebrating success.

Unique Attributes of the Alternative School. All three graduates and four school district personnel associated with Clover High attributed successful high school graduation to the sense of community and the productive learning environment fostered at this alternative school. In comparison with the other two high schools, Clover High's small size enabled educators to build relationships with students and for students to receive the academic support and basic resources they need. School employees and community partners ensured the students were connected to the materials and services essential to cross the finish line.

McKinney-Vento Program. Five of six graduates and six of eight school district personnel discussed involvement with the McKinney-Vento program, which helped facilitate personal and academic success for students experiencing homelessness. Employees A and B, McKinney-Vento liaison and outreach program specialist, played an important role in not only identifying students in vulnerable situations and removing barriers, but also providing an additional layer of support and care for these youth. Basic needs, financial support, senior experiences, and personalized encouragement comprised the major foci of interview data related to the McKinney-Vento program.

Basic Needs and Resources. Four of six graduates and seven of eight school district personnel referenced a variety of basic needs, as well as creative approaches to providing them, as an essential aspect of the journey to high school graduation. In particular, six participants mentioned mental health services as important outlets of support for students in precarious situations. Participants communicated their beliefs that students experiencing homelessness felt comfortable asking and could depend on adults to deliver items in a dependable and timely

fashion. They also described a number of collection sources, including donations and funding through the McKinney-Vento program, the Parent Teacher Association at Mountain High, Clover High staff members, and a Bethany City community fund for the homeless.

Community Support. Four of six graduates and six of eight school district personnel described ways in which schools and local organizations partner together to meet the emotional and physical needs of students to encourage personal development and academic success. Half of the adult participants mentioned the team approach taken in Bethany City, in which employees around the district, from central office and throughout the schools, collaborated to support students. Additionally, community businesses and agencies were able to offer services to students, such as mental health care, workforce training and mentorship opportunities, and event sponsorships.

Academic Support. Four of six graduates and five of eight school district personnel acknowledged the academic support provided to students experiencing homelessness as an important means of advancing toward the high school diploma. Generally speaking, teacher encouragement, comfortable classroom environments, recuperating lost course credits, and shifting student mentality were all examples of helpful assistance students received. As previously mentioned, Clover High offered a unique environment that facilitated academic progress toward graduation.

Personal Attributes. Five of six graduates and six of eight school district personnel described a variety of personal attributes, which did comprise an important aspect of the resilience process that enabled students experiencing homelessness to earn their high school diplomas. The attributes generated from interview data included self-esteem and individual strengths, coping strategies, and hope for the future.

Family and Friends. Five of six graduates and four of eight school district personnel referenced support offered by family and friends throughout high school. The graduates identified specific family members and peers who encouraged them, as well as described helpful interactions and actions. Although the school district personnel did discuss these individuals, their comments were fewer in number and less specific.

Extra-Curricular Activities. Three of six graduates and two of eight school district personnel included extra-curricular activities as a contributing factor to high school graduation. The graduates described youth groups at church and after-school programs as opportunities for them to receive emotional and academic support, as well as weekly routines. The school district personnel observed the benefits of recreational outlets and community connections students receive through activities, such as sports, jobs, or local youth programs.

Research Question 2

What barriers to earning a high school diploma do graduates who experienced homelessness in high school and school district personnel within a selected school district identify?

a. *School-based barriers*
b. *Non-school-based barriers*

Another major theme, adversity, emerged from nine codes of school-based and non-school-based barriers that high school graduates and school district personnel identified as problems for students experiencing homelessness trying to earn high school diplomas. School-based barriers included academic needs, planning for the future, transportation and school environment. Non-school-based barriers included emotional and physical needs, family, generational cycles of instability, community concerns, and COVID-19.

Transportation. Four of six graduates and three of eight school district personnel cited unreliable transportation as a significant barrier, whether it was due to the students', families' or school district's inability to meet that need. Oftentimes, transportation was out of the graduates' control, as their parents might choose when to take them or ask them to babysit younger relatives. Other obstacles included inconsistent school buses and financial burdens, in addition to lack of motivation to attend school or related mental health challenges. In particular, Employee E underlined the hindrance of transportation on attendance because that is the most effective way for school district personnel to connect the students with the personal and academic supports they need to be successful.

Academic Needs. Three of six graduates and three of eight school district personnel referred to various academic needs as a barrier to high school graduation. The graduates mentioned how they had fallen behind in course requirements in their general public schools but focused their reports on how were able to recover those credits at Clover High. The school district personnel voiced concerns about students falling behind academically, struggling with technology, and facing challenges related to standardized testing and high teacher turnover rates.

School Environment. Six of six graduates and four of eight school district personnel noted that school environments can create barriers for students experiencing homelessness, in terms of classroom size and culture, school rituals, and school policies and procedures. The graduates noted that large classes at Hill High and Mountain High could make it difficult to concentrate and to connect with teachers. Additionally, the participants described how students' inability to pay for things like prom attire, a yearbook, or a cap and gown reduced their sense of belonging. Finally, they mentioned challenges related to student enrollment and post-secondary preparations.

Planning for the Future. Three of six graduates and four of eight school district personnel observed the negative impact of present circumstances interfering with students' ability to plan for the future. The challenges ranged from personal mentality and family needs to navigating college or job application processes.

Emotional and Physical Needs. All 14 participants described a variety of emotional and physical needs that impact students experiencing homelessness on their journeys to high school graduation. Emotional well-being, mindset, and outlook comprised the most significant barriers to academic progress. Reflections included personal struggles as well as unwillingness to share information with educators or ask for help. Additionally, when students' basic needs, ranging from proper hygiene and clothing to food and school supplies, are unmet, it is difficult for them to attend and fully participate in school.

Family. Five of five graduates and six of eight school district personnel reported how family circumstances and actions negatively affected students' attendance and academic progress, even in situations where students felt committed to school. In some cases, family members were unable to provide students with living accommodations and transportation, and in others they required students to help with family or financial responsibilities. Participants cited the impact of general conflict and turmoil on students' academics and well-being.

Generational Cycles of Instability. One graduate, in contrast with seven of eight school district personnel, shared observations related to the difficulties of generational instability. The school district personnel described challenges including poverty, limited education, homelessness, and food insecurity, which they hoped students could overcome with high school diplomas. In addition to being unable to offer students with certain skills or resources, some family members were not supportive of students seeking better for themselves.

Community Concerns. One graduate and five of eight school district personnel cited the location and culture of Bethany City as a barrier to high school graduation. Participants described problematic environments in which students could find themselves after school, as well as the absence of a youth shelter or safe place for students in unstable living situations. Gang- and gun-related violence, as well as easy access to drugs and alcohol, created challenges for students.

COVID-19. Two of six and five of eight school district personnel described the negative impact of COVID-19 on all school community members, but especially on students experiencing homelessness. For some parents, the pandemic created circumstances in which they were unable to pay bills or adequately provide for their children. It was also difficult for educators to provide the academic and emotional supports students were accustomed to receiving, resulting in a variety of barriers to students' well-being and progress.

Research Question 3

What is the perceived impact of earning a high school diploma on the lives of students who have experienced homelessness, according to graduates who experienced homelessness in high school and school district personnel within a selected school district?

The answers to research questions three and four produced the final theme, better-than-expected outcomes, which this study refers to as the high school diploma itself and associated benefits. A variety of subcodes, including crossing the finish line, wanting better, options, and security, in the interview data comprised the diploma-related success code.

Diploma-Related Success. All participants communicated their personal and collective beliefs related to the importance of the high school diploma, in terms of not only an academic milestone but also open doors and increased opportunities for the future. The graduates drew

connections between the diploma and personal success related to academic achievement, college, jobs and careers, and higher income. Similarly, the school district personnel viewed the diploma as a measure of success and a predictor or options for the future. However, they also described its power to break generational cycles of instabilities in ways that the graduates largely did not.

Research Question 4

What recommendations do graduates who experienced homelessness in high school and school district personnel within a selected school district have for teachers, administrators, and other school personnel regarding helping students experiencing homelessness with high school access and success?

Participant recommendations on ways for school district personnel to support students experiencing homelessness can be summarized under two final codes: targeted interventions and educator support and care.

Targeted Interventions. Given the importance of relationships among school district personnel and students experiencing homelessness, participants made several suggestions on ways to strengthen the interactions among school community members. Participants emphasized the importance of creating a shared understanding of the negative impacts of homelessness and effective approaches to mitigating those effects. Additionally, small educator to student ratios can help facilitate meaningful connections, focused on academic accommodations and future planning for students. Finally, trauma-informed staff training can improve educators' ability to effectively offer students holistic care.

Educator Support and Care. Throughout the interview process, participants shared their beliefs around the importance of relationships and communication among all school community members in order to provide students experiencing homelessness with the support

and care they need. School-based action steps included low educator-student ratios, team approaches, and therapeutic staff training. Additionally, it was critical for school district personnel to identify students experiencing homelessness and act quickly to provide resources, such as academic support, basic needs, and transportation.

Discussion of Findings

The results of this study communicate several important findings for educational stakeholders interested in increasing high school graduation rates of students experiencing homelessness to consider when implementing and revising current policies and practices. First, Resilience Theory proved to be an effective framework for analyzing the lived experiences of participants in relationship to high school graduation. Similarly, the beliefs of the participants in this study concerning positive outcomes associated with the high school diploma align with previous research findings and serve as a foundation for action steps to support students experiencing homelessness. Despite the better-than-expected outcomes participants in this study achieved, the graduates and school district personnel did identify school-based and non-school-based barriers that they encountered, which must be addressed to ensure success for future students experiencing homelessness. Next, in addition to the direct participant discussion around McKinney-Vento implementation, there are implications for leveraging both federal and local policies to minimize the effects of challenges associated with unstable housing for students. Finally, the salient nature of relationships throughout interview data suggest that establishing connections through communication and care for students is a critical aspect of providing the support and resources students need.

Utility of Resilience Theory

Resilience Theory served as an effective framework for understanding the lived experiences of high school graduates who had experienced homelessness and the school district personnel who supported them. Masten (2018) noted that:

> "The resilience of a child at a given point in time will depend on the resources and supports available to the child through many processes, both within the child and between the child and the many systems the child interacts with" (p. 16).

The answers to research question 1, which enumerate the school-based and non-school-based factors critical to students experiencing homelessness graduating high school, address this combination of personal attributes and community-based supports upon which the students called. Further, the selection of graduating high school as the resilient outcome proved to be "relevant to the study at hand and the social context and developmental stage of the participants" (van Breda, 2018, p. 6). It provided a specific and meaningful milestone to which the high school graduates and the school district personnel were able to speak thoughtfully and productively.

Based on their interviews with youth, families, and McKinney-Vento liaisons, Clemens et al. (2018) identified critical incidents, philosophy of services, community and school collaboration, and relationships with families, as four domains of collective beliefs on McKinney-Vento implementation. The similarities of results between this study and mine can be used to inform future research for the purpose of further honing understanding around protective factors for resilience and intervention efforts centered around these factors. In particular, it is significant that the most important facilitating factor identified by participants was relationships, as this finding aligns with previous research on the nature of resilience, claiming it involves dynamic interactions among systems including relationships, rather than a singular or stable trait

(Masten, 2015; Masten & Monn, 2015). The results of my study not only add a new set of youth voices to literature that counteracts stigmas around homelessness, but they also include school district personnel perspectives that can inform the improvement of response strategies (Mohan & Shields, 2014; Thompson et al., 2016; Toolis & Hammack, 2015; Zhang et al., 2020).

Shared Understanding of the High School Diploma's Value

An abundance of research communicates the power of the high school diploma to predict positive adult outcomes, including secondary education, more employment opportunities, higher income, and healthy lifestyles and living conditions (Hatch et al., 2022; Haycock, 2010; Lansford et al., 2016; Levin et al., 2007; Maynard et al., 2015; Ross & Wu, 1995; Zajacova, 2012). Interviews from this study demonstrate that the high school graduates and school district personnel from Bethany City understand the significance of the high school diploma, as not only a measure of success but also as a creator of future options. It is important for practitioners and scholars to further evaluate the effects of this shared understanding on the actions of the participants. Additionally, it is worth noting the positive impact the graduates placed on family support, in contrast with what some of the educators considered more of a barrier. School district personnel might need to consider parent or guardian buy-in on a case-by-case basis to determine the extent to which family support should be sought. Additionally, if other school districts do not have this foundational understanding, extra steps to educate community members on the importance of the diploma might need to be taken before trying to replicate those taken in Bethany City.

In addition to diploma related outcomes, researchers have identified protective factors to graduation, such as family and school circumstances and individual skills and strategies (Cambron et al., 2017; Haycock, 2010; Rosen et al., 2019). The results of this study fall into

those categories, which give practitioners reason to focus their efforts on these areas when supporting students experiencing homelessness on their journeys to graduation. Further, the overlap between protective factors and resilience process tenets emphasizes the effectiveness of Resilience Theory as a framework for scholars studying high school graduation. One research team found that students who had dropped out of high school reengaged when they had the skills to pass courses and confidence in their ability to complete school (Rosen et al., 2019). Participants in this study also highlighted the importance of understanding the diploma's significance as part of a vision for the future. This could be one protective factor worth exploring more, either in future research or in intervention implementation.

Continued Action Needed to Overcome Barriers to High School Graduation

Despite the good intentions of the *McKinney-Vento Act* (2015) and the noble efforts of individuals and groups to implement the associated mandates, participants in this study reported barriers to graduation that they had encountered first-hand, categorized by school-based barriers: transportation, academic support, school environment, and planning for the future and non-school-based barriers: emotional and physical needs, family, generational cycles of instability, community concerns, and COVID-19. To continue narrowing the achievement gap between stably and unstably housed students, it is important to understand the causes of these barriers and determine solutions for removing them. As the purpose of the EHCY program is to mitigate risk and promote success for students experiencing homelessness, more research, funding, and collaboration might be needed to fulfill implementation aspirations.

Transportation. Transportation was the highest school-based barrier noted by graduates and by school district personnel. A variety of factors including family mobility, school district protocol and staffing, available funding, and miscommunication among families and school

district personnel can hinder transportation efforts (Mizerek & Hinz, 2004). Although McKinney-Vento mandates specify that transportation should be provided to students experiencing homelessness, specific funding is not allocated, which accounts for one major barrier. Logistically speaking, family mobility creates complications, as it takes time to coordinate updated bus routes or notify district staff, drivers, and parents of changes. Location can affect availability of transportation options, as many rural areas have limited services and resources. When third party vendors are required or when students are traveling between districts from their temporary residencies to schools, it can become very expensive to fund rides. COVID-19 created another layer of challenge related to bus driver shortages. As of September 2023, the K-12 bus driver force is still down 15% compared to September 2019 (Hickey & Cooper, 2023).

Although the legislation about providing transportation is clear, the nuances related to implementation suggest that more coordination, in terms of staff capacity and funding alternatives, are needed to fully meet student needs. Quantitative research illustrating the relationships among transportation, attendance, academic achievement, and student well-being can serve as a helpful foundation to encourage school districts to allocate more personnel and additional funding to ensure students experiencing homelessness are able to attend school. Qualitative research highlighting the narratives of families and students, as well as those of teachers and other personnel, could also help administrators and other stakeholders advocate for and create better practices for increasing student attendance and connecting them to the services and resources they deserve.

Academic Support. It is important to note that academic support is another mandated provision in the EHCY program and is one of three codes that fell under both the adversity and resilience process themes. However, it is interesting that it did not receive as much attention as

other barriers from the participants. Related to transportation, attendance was the subcode under the academic support code with the highest frequency, which makes sense as students experiencing homeless are more likely to miss school than their domiciled peers (da Costa Nunez et al., 2012; National Center for Homeless Education, 2017b; Tobin & Murphy, 2013). As Employee E, teacher, noted, the students cannot receive help if they are not at school. It is curious that the academic performance subcode was only identified by school district personnel and the lack of teacher support subcode was only identified by the graduates. The educators at Clover High discussed academic performance in the context of students falling behind at in the general public schools, which aligns with previous research on challenges for students experiencing homelessness (Buckner, 2008; Miller, 2011). However, the focus of their comments was on the students' ability to recover credits and still graduate on time because they received basic needs and emotional support, which also matches results from earlier studies (Griffin et al., 2019; Kidger et al., 2012; Moore et al., 2018; Thapa et al., 2013; Wagaman et al., 2022). The Clover High graduates noted a lack of teacher support at their previous schools, in comparison with teacher support as a facilitating factor once they changed schools. Based on the facilitating factors, it appears that if students experiencing homelessness are able to attend school, have their basic needs met, and make the right connections to supportive adults, they can succeed academically.

School Environment. All six graduates concurred on ways in which the general public-school environments at Hill High and Mountain High impeded their academic progress. The large class sizes and high teacher to student ratios in the two public schools made it difficult for students to focus in class and to develop relationships with their teachers, while simultaneously enabling classmates to fool around. The graduates navigated this issue by connecting with their

counselors, seeking help from other adults in after school programs, or calling upon their own strengths to complete their work, which matches the findings on personal attributes and educator-student relationships during the resilience process. Additionally, they described financial barriers to participating in social or community events, which they were able to overcome through McKinney-Vento funding or the support of their teachers and other community organizations. This finding underlines the importance of identifying students experiencing homelessness, so that they can be connected to the appropriate resources and services (Cumming & Gloeckner, 2012; Havlik et al., 2020; National Center for Homeless Education, 2008).

The comments of school district personnel on negative impacts of the school environment were more related to internal school district barriers. Some of these, including identifying and enrolling students experiencing homelessness and providing them assistance with college and FAFSA applications, are accounted for under McKinney-Vento mandates. Similar to transportation and academic support, these are barriers for which policies are already in place, so practitioners need to evaluate and possibly revise implementation efforts. Both quantitative and qualitative data, like these interviews, can be provide a starting point for conversations to better understand the barriers and devise solutions, which might require additional funding and staffing.

Conversely, the three graduates who transferred to Clover High highlighted the unique, beneficial aspects of that environment. Their interviews convey their experiences with a sense of community, which is produced through four elements: membership (the feeling of belonging), influence (a sense of mattering), reinforcement (integration and fulfillment of needs), and shared emotional connection (the belief that group members have shared experiences; McMillan & Chavis, 2023). In terms of membership, the graduates described the positive impact of smaller class sizes. In particular, Graduate C mentioned fights or feeling like the class clown, and

Graduate A recalled feeling like the kid who did not want to work at the public schools. Through relationships with teachers, both these graduates felt cared for and received the academic and personal supports they needed to be successful at the alternative school. Because Clover High has an application process, which involves an interview with parents and a commitment to graduation, influence is established from students' entry to the school. Graduate A observed the difference in focus on making it through the day at the public school versus making it to graduation at the alternative school. Graduates A, B, and C described ways in which their basic needs were met at Clover High; the teachers and staff were not only dependable but also timely in the delivery of personal items, including clothing, hygiene products, and baby supplies. The staff created a culture of provision and found creative solutions to provide resources for the students. Finally, all the participants from Clover High emphasized the relationships and emotional connections among teachers and students. Their reflections centered around trust, communication, consistency, and care. Although the public schools might have limited ability to change structural aspects, such as class size or daily schedules, there are valuable lessons about building a sense of community that can be learned from the alternative school.

Planning for the Future. Graduates and school district personnel noted how it can be challenging for high school students, especially those experiencing homelessness or encountering chronic adversity, to envision their lives on the other side of school. When there are competing priorities, such as paying bills or caring for family members, young adults can feel pulled away from school to meet immediate needs rather than contribute to future success. The school district personnel described a variety of approaches they take to preparing students for the future, including guest or graduate speakers, job fairs, college application and FAFSA workshops, and community college partnerships. Additionally, they emphasized the importance

of conversations with students, whether those take place during academic planning meetings, in meetings with McKinney-Vento staff or school counselors, or in informal conversations with teachers.

Although it is important for students to prepare for post-secondary education or workforce experiences, educators are tasked with balancing goal setting with responsiveness to immediate needs that emerge on a daily or periodic basis. Because teachers and counselors have the most frequent contact with students, it is important for them to have the necessary skills to recognize warning signs of housing instability and to communicate with students in respectful and trustworthy manners. Additionally, they need to be aware of school and community resources and services to which they can point students. The school staff should have a system for shared communication that not only protects student privacy when necessary, but also includes the appropriate employees to maintain ongoing support. Clear school policies and effective staff training can help ensure effectiveness in attending to short- and long-term student needs.

Emotional and Physical Needs. Emotional and physical, or basic, needs is the second of three codes that participants associated with both adversity and resilience. This code was the most salient non-school-based barrier, as all participants described various struggles students experiencing homelessness faced. In contrast, I placed the facilitating factor subcodes under the school-based code because four of six graduates and seven of eight school district personnel described various ways in which the school communities, through partnerships with the McKinney-Vento program and other local organizations, were able to meet the basic needs of the students. The graduates described receiving a variety of items, such as clothing, food, hygiene products, technological devices, and financial support for senior activities. In addition to tangible

items supplied, relationships with educators that fostered a sense of support and security for the graduates. As the graduates described receiving items, they also highlighted the timeliness of the aid and the dependability of the school district personnel who were providing the items. Although the district personnel might not be able to remove all the non-school-based factors and barriers that cause students to find themselves in adverse circumstances, they can collaborate internally and with local organizations to meet the needs of students. These findings also connect with the importance of identifying students experiencing homelessness and raising community awareness about the issue, so that appropriate funding and resources can be allocated and provided to students.

Family. Family is the third of three codes that participants identified as both a barrier and facilitating factor to high school graduation. Five out of six graduates cited family as both a barrier and a facilitating factor, while six of eight school district personnel identified family as a barrier, and only three identified it as a facilitating factor. When describing family barriers, all participants noted the inability of parents or guardians to meet their children's basic needs, in terms of stable housing, transportation, and food and clothing, which aligns with both the structural causes and individual factors of homelessness discussed in Chapter 2. Unfortunately, these circumstances negatively affect students' physical and emotional well-being, as well as their attendance and participation in school. While school district personnel do not have the authority to change students' home lives, they can identify students according to McKinney-Vento mandates and connect them to appropriate services in order to mitigate some of the negative effects they are experiencing (Miller et al., 2015; Murphy & Tobin, 2011; Tobin & Murphy, 2013; Wynne et al., 2013). When graduates referred to family support as a facilitating factor to graduation, they described their relationships and the encouragement their parents or

other immediate family members offered them. This finding aligns with the educator-student relationship code, as it highlights the students' needs for emotional support and assurance.

Generational Cycles of Instability. Overall, the school district personnel's comments about generational cycles of instability were more related to the power of the diploma to change the trajectory of graduates' lives in general terms, rather than directly related to the individual graduates in this study. Because the graduates did not acknowledge this topic themselves and the school district personnel expressed their own perceptions related to the high school diploma, it appears that more information is needed to assess the accuracy of the personnel's claims. One graduate in contrast with seven of eight school district personnel noted the impact of generational cycles of instability on students' ability to graduate high school. Although Graduate E did not use that exact term, he described his desire to be the outlier statistic of his family, as no one had completed ninth grade. He articulated the impact of a diploma in terms of personal qualifications that can lead to job opportunities and increased income in a way that would distinguish himself from his family, which was different from the other graduates who mentioned those benefits in more general terms. His reference to generational instability was more in terms of future goals, rather than causes of his current circumstances. Although he mentioned family issues, he did not consider himself homeless, as he did have a roof over his head.

Because family and living situations were not the main focus of the interview questions, the other graduates referred to their housing situations in varying degrees. Graduate A attributed COVID-19 and his mother's inability to pay an electric bill as the reason he and his brother were sent to Bethany City from another city in Virginia. Graduate B was a teen-mom, which caused tension in her family and in turn affected her living situation. Graduate C noted that transportation and mental health issues were the major barriers to her attending school. Graduate

D did not discuss his circumstances, and Graduate F lost housing very suddenly when his grandparents' home burned down in the middle of the night. A common view of homelessness does entail "an extreme form of poverty influenced by accumulated lifetime exposure to environmental risks" (David et al., 2012, p. 1). It would be helpful to know more about the graduates in this study to better understand the extent to which they were at risk for homelessness and if there were generational factors involved before certain events occurred that affected their housing.

The school district personnel discussed the impact of generational instability in very direct, but general terms. Their comments were about the student population in Bethany City, rather than the individual graduates in this study. This difference in participant data could be based on lived experiences as adolescents vs. adults or the personnel's familiarity with local and national news and research. For example, Employee A, McKinney-Vento liaison, mentioned she has been in her position long enough to see multiple generations of families come through the McKinney-Vento program. This observation aligns with some research that emphasizes the importance of a two-generation approach to interrupt generational homelessness in young families (SchoolHouse Connection, 2019). Many youths who experience homelessness find themselves in unsafe family contexts and face parental rejection or flee conflict (Samuels et al., 2019). These teens are disproportionately at risk to become parents themselves, which then increases their chances of experiencing homelessness compared to their peers without children (Morton et al., 2017). Therefore, intervention efforts that include two-generation programming, for both parents and children, can be beneficial for young families (Kull, Dworsky, et al., 2019). Another research team proposed a three-generation approach, in which the health care system and social programs are called upon to optimize the ability of youth to transition from school to

the workforce, to participate in reproductive planning, and to develop parenting skills and capacities (Cheng et al., 2016).

Employees B and F spoke about generational or cyclical challenges in the context of the high school diploma and its ability to create a new baseline for students, upon which they can support themselves or create new living standards. Some research suggests that families with higher incomes, in addition to higher levels of education, are better equipped to raise healthy children who perform better academically than their classmates with parents in lower socioeconomic statuses (Ensminger & Slusarcick, 1992; Haycock, 2010; Newcomb et al., 2002). Given the influence of parent or guardian roles can have on student success, it could be worthwhile for educators to consider this two-generation programming approach. Although there is a high correlation between poor academic achievement and school dropout, other factors including student engagement in deviant behavior, bonds with antisocial peers, and family backgrounds in poverty can also affect dropout (Battin-Pearson et al., 2000). If parents cannot create stable environments for their children, including housing, basic needs, and transportation, it is difficult for students to attend and participate in school. Simultaneously, if they have limited abilities to help their children create goals and envision future options, it can negatively affect students' commitment to school.

Community Concerns. It is important for educational stakeholders to be aware of community concerns, so that they can try to mitigate the impacts they have on students. It is interesting that the school district personnel referenced these concerns in much greater detail than the one graduate who described the city's culture as "kid-ish" (Graduate E). He expressed his frustration related to limited local professional opportunities and to lack of awareness about opportunities and how to take advantage of them. Even if school districts are unable to offer

programming to prepare students for work and college experiences, they might be able to connect students to online offerings or coordinate with neighboring districts to provide workshops. His reflection underlines the importance of honoring youth voices and learning their unique and collective insights (Mohan & Shields, 2014; Thompson et al., 2016; Zhang et al., 2020).

Some school district personnel noted the difficulty students experiencing homeless had in envisioning futures for themselves, which supports Graduate E's observation that opportunities to develop soft skills and prepare for the future are needed in Bethany City. In terms of the school district personnel comments about community concerns, they shared the negative effects of violence and other gang-related activities and after school activities involving drugs and alcohol on school attendance and performance. This finding can be paired with the facilitating factor of extra-curricular activities, such as youth groups at local centers and churches, to encourage local stakeholders to further investigate ways to ensure afterschool activities for students experiencing homelessness. Previous research communicates positive outcomes, including increased sense of engagement and attachment, better school attendance, lower levels of behavioral issue, higher grades and assessment test scores, and greater development of life skills and values not typically taught in classroom environment, for students experiencing homelessness who participate in extra-curricular activities (National Center for Homeless Education, 2017c).

COVID-19. Graduates and school district personnel observed negative impacts of COVID-19 on various aspects of school, such as transportation and face-to-face interactions. Additionally, it is important for educators to be aware of the disruptions the pandemic caused for families, in terms of inability to pay bills and in turn loss of housing. Family circumstances can

change in an instant, which prompts the need for educational and community-based supports. Although no one can predict natural disasters or pandemics like COVID-19, educational stakeholders can reflect and improve upon approaches taken to both prepare and respond to these types of crises. For example, Anthony (2021) investigated how the roles of McKinney-Vento liaisons changed during COVID-19 and made recommendations for practitioners to increase identification efforts, allocate additional staff to support McKinney-Vento efforts, and explore virtual options to accommodate school of origin when possible. Her results were based on survey and interview data from Virginia McKinney-Vento liaisons. It would be beneficial to collect more information from others, such as students, parents, and teachers, to better understand the impacts of Covid on student well-being and achievement and to determine ways to compensate for deficiencies created during the pandemic.

McKinney-Vento Implementation

Although the purpose of this study was to develop a comprehensive picture of the factors that enable students experiencing homelessness to graduate high school, it is important to evaluate the effects of McKinney-Vento implementation on their success. It is interesting that five of six graduates were familiar either with the program or with Employee A or B, McKinney-Vento liaison and program outreach specialist, as that was one of the criteria for participation in the study. I did not discover why Graduate D was unfamiliar with the program, but it is possible that he received services without understanding the program name or that his parents communicated with the liaison. Even though it is more important for students to receive services than to recognize the program name, awareness is still critical to identifying more students who could qualify and to removing stigmas around homelessness. Graduate F was grateful for the ability to directly contact Employee A, rather than going through his school counselor. School

district personnel need to make sure all community members, especially students themselves, understand their educational rights and the assistance that is available to them. Training videos and programming, posters and brochures, social media, and bumper stickers are all examples of ways to increase awareness around the community (National Center for Homeless Education, 2021b).

I made the intentional choice, according to Resilience Theory, to include school district personnel in the study as a means of better understanding the extent to which McKinney-Vento implementation supports student success. Of the six employees who the graduates identified as supporting their ability to graduate (C–H), two (D and E) were unfamiliar with McKinney-Vento. This is concerning because teachers and school counselors were identified as the individuals with the closest proximity and greatest ability to support students' daily needs. However, both teachers worked at Clover High, where Employee C, principal, described the collective staff effort to meet student needs, rather than focus on labels. The teachers themselves described a variety of ways in which they meet students' emotional and basic needs, which aligns with research saying students need someone at the school-level whom they trust (Cumming & Gloeckner, 2012). It would be beneficial to collect more information about teachers' awareness of the McKinney-Vento program at Clover High and the other public schools in Bethany City. Even though educators are largely able to support students at Clover High, there are funds and resources guaranteed to students through McKinney-Vento mandates, which could provide additional assistance. It is important for all school staff to have appropriate training so that they can identify students experiencing homelessness and help connect them to needed support (National Center for Homeless Education, 2021b).

Educator-Student Relationships

Educator-student relationships was one of two unanimous facilitating factors to graduation; the other was the unique attributes of Clover High, which also fostered strong relationships among educators and students. The graduates reflected on the school-level staff who were able to encourage them, connect them with resources, and even treat them like family. It is interesting that racial demographics did not appear to influence these relationships, because most of the graduates are Black, and the majority of the school district personnel are White (Tables 6 and 7). Rather, support for the well-being and success of the students superseded other factors. Given the researched negative consequences of homelessness and other related issues, such as poverty, mental health, or family turmoil (Adams et al., 2018; Coates & McKenzie-Mohr, 2010; Colburn & Aldern, 2022; Wynne et al., 2013; Zhao, 2023), it makes sense that the students would seek comfort and security from individuals in the school community. Additionally, when the graduates described receiving resources from the school district personnel, they noted the importance of timeliness and dependability. Local service providers should consider ways to make communication with students easy and efficient, as well as ways to have items immediately or quickly accessible. Perhaps a team of volunteers could be "on call" to respond to student needs as they are submitted.

The reflections of school district personnel centered around the strategies they take to build relationships with students (Landsman, 2006). First, they noted the importance of the students knowing that someone cares about them and is checking in on them. The two McKinney-Vento staff members felt students enjoyed connecting with them, as a community member with a different role from teachers or other school staff. Employee G, school counselor, described the importance of friendliness and warmth when communicating with the students. It is

interesting to compare the quality of relationships among school staff and students at Clover High, in comparison with the two public high schools. It appears that the smaller class sizes positively affected teachers' ability to know and interact with the students. At Clover High, there were high levels of accountability, with teachers going to pick up students if they did not have transportation or calling them to check on them and send them missed classwork. Although relationships are not written into McKinney-Vento mandates, it is clear according to the interview data that they play a vital role in making students feel supported and connecting them to the tangible resources they need. In addition to more research to better understand this topic, scholars and practitioners should explore ways to articulate the importance of relationships to local personnel and provide staff professional development training.

Recommendations for Policy and Practice

Based on the findings of this study, several recommendations for policy and practice to increase graduation rates for students experiencing homelessness are included below. Table 27 includes the recommendations that stem from the findings, as well as their connections to existing literature.

Table 27

Recommendations for Policy and Practice

Findings	Related Recommendations	Supporting Literature
Students experiencing homelessness graduate with support and resources offered by school district personnel	Increase identification and awareness efforts to ensure students receive support.	Cassidy, 2015; Clemens et al., 2018; Cronley & Evans, 2017; A. J. Martin, 2013; Masten, 2018
Transportation is a barrier to school attendance and high school graduation	Increase coordination and funding for transporting students experiencing homelessness to school.	National Center for Homeless Education, 2017a; SchoolHouse Connection, 2022; Sparks, 2014; Wynne et al., 2013
Relationships and feelings of support are essential for helping students experiencing homelessness graduate high school	Create a McKinney-Vento "point of contact" at each school to partner with students/ families, educators, and the district liaison.	Cutuli & Hebers, 2014; Durlak et al., 2011; Havlik et al., 2014; Masten et al., 2015; Morgan, 2018; National Center for Homeless Education, 2018; Havlik et al., 2020; Wagaman et al., 2022
Teachers and school counselors have the most direct contact with students experiencing homelessness at school	Require mandatory trauma-informed professional development training for all teachers and school counselors.	Cutuli & Hebers, 2014; Durlak et al., 2011; Griffin et al., 2019; Havlik et al., 2014; Kidger et al., 2012; Landsman, 2006; Masten et al., 2015

Recommendation 1

The high school graduates in this study achieved better-than-expected outcomes by earning their diplomas through a combination of their own personal attributes and support from school district personnel, family and friends, and other community members. These results align with previous research communicating the importance of these dynamic interactions in enabling students experiencing homelessness to overcome adversity through resilience processes (Cassidy, 2015; Clemens et al., 2018; Cronley & Evans, 2017; A. J. Martin, 2013; Masten, 2018). Therefore, I recommend increasing identification and awareness efforts so that more

students can benefit from the provisions guaranteed by McKinney-Vento mandates and offered by school district personnel. Identification can be a challenge for a variety of reasons, including family mobility, shame and fear related to homelessness, or limited awareness of resources (Cumming & Gloeckner, 2012). Before creating new policies or revising current ones, states and school districts should ensure proper student identification, as it is mandated in the *McKinney-Vento Act* (2015) and is the first step in the process of helping students experiencing homelessness succeed in school (Cunningham et al., 2010; National Center for Homeless Education, 2008, 2021b).

Recommendation 2

Four of six high school graduates in this study reported that transportation was a barrier for them. Of the other two, one was able to walk to school, and the other had a car. While only three of eight school district personnel cited transportation as a barrier, Employees E, teacher, and F, student support specialist, made poignant comments about the importance of student attendance at school in order to receive support and resources. Building on my first recommendation of ensuring student identification, my second involves guaranteeing transportation, which is also a McKinney-Vento mandate. Although existing research does communicate both the benefits of and the barriers to transportation (National Center for Homeless Education, 2017a; SchoolHouse Connection, 2022; Sparks, 2014; Wynne et al., 2013), it is essential for involved stakeholders to continue researching and creating new solutions that enable students' attendance and participation in school. Because federal mandates at state and local levels are already in place, it would be beneficial to connect students to current offerings and then evaluate their effectiveness in relation to academic success and high school graduation, before exploring new approaches or strategies.

Recommendation 3

McKinney-Vento liaisons play a critical role in the implementation of federal mandates, as they serve as a connection among the state office, local district personnel, and families and students. However, they face a variety of challenges to identifying students and providing basic needs that can range from their own work capacity and district support to greater implications of poverty and systemic racism (Havlik et al., 2020; Milner 2013). Based on the results of this study and other research that emphasizes the importance of emotional support and personalized connections among educators and students experiencing homelessness (Cutuli & Hebers, 2014; Durlak et al., 2011; Havlik et al., 2014; Havlik et al., 2020; Masten et al., 2015; Morgan, 2018; National Center for Homeless Education, 2018; Wagaman et al., 2022), I support the practice of creating a McKinney-Vento "point of contact" at each school.

This individual would be able to coordinate with the school district liaison to ensure McKinney-Vento implementation and would be able to focus on the relationship-building aspect of supporting students experiencing homelessness. They could serve as a contact for students and families themselves or ensure that each student found an educator in the building in whom they felt comfortable confiding and seeking help. Adding an extra layer of McKinney-Vento assistance in schools could help increase communication and delivery of resources and could decrease stigma and other barriers. However, depending on the capacity of the school counselor or social worker, it would make sense for this individual to assume McKinney-Vento responsibilities. They are trained in serving students and often are already involved with supporting students in vulnerable situations.

Positive relationships can have a profound impact on student success. One systematic review revealed that positive longitudinal and cross-sectional associations existed between

student-teacher relationships and student engagement in school (Quin, 2016). The findings of this study align with that research. The graduates not only identified and described specific individuals who supported them, but also compared experiences in which they did and did not receive support. It is interesting that their commentary focused more on feeling encouraged and receiving resources than on academic support. Once they had the materials and a conducive learning environment, they were able to complete their schoolwork. Additionally, the liaison and program outreach specialist emphasized their unique roles as supportive adults without academic attachments; they conveyed their ability to connect with students in ways that differed from other educators.

Recommendation 4

According to interview data, creating relationships and offering support to students was one of the most salient facilitating factors to high school graduation. Therefore, I recommend specialized or tailored professional development training to school district personnel, so that they can not only identify students experiencing homelessness, but also help meet their academic, emotional, and basic needs. Training should be categorized for various staff positions, such as principals, secretaries, bus drivers, etc., as each set of community members play varying but important roles in recognizing and supporting students in need. Researchers have found that students experiencing homelessness perform better academically when they receive emotional support (Cutuli & Hebers, 2014; Durlak et al., 2011; Havlik et al., 2014; Masten et al., 2015; Moffitt et al., 2011). More specifically, other researchers have established connections among peer and teacher social support, school connectedness, and improved emotional health (Griffin et al., 2019; Kidger et al., 2012). Given their direct proximity to students, teachers and school counselors would benefit from trauma-informed or therapeutic training, so that they can

encourage student attributes that contribute to resilience. However, it is important to note the variety of tasks and training for which educators are already responsible. It would be beneficial to evaluate current requirements, search for possible areas of overlap, and explore various training formats that could take place over time or remotely.

Recommendations for Future Research

The high school diploma is a critical academic milestone for students experiencing homelessness, as it can provide opportunities related to higher education, career pathways, and stable living conditions. Because the pathways to graduation can vary greatly according to personal and local circumstances, there are many opportunities to further investigate and understand factors that effectively equip these youth to cross the high school finish line. Despite the plethora of research possibilities related to this topic, three salient suggestions for future studies are offered in response to the findings of this study: (a) a longitudinal and expansive study of high school graduates; (b) an investigation of alternative schools and programs; (c) a deeper dive into the roles of McKinney-Vento liaisons. Although this study centered around strengths-based approaches and the high school diploma, it would be beneficial to learn from students who earned the GED or dropped out of high school to better understand those options and pathways.

Longitudinal and Expansive Study of High School Graduates

The scope of this research was limited by the nature of single-site case study, in terms of selecting one school district and interviewing 14 participants. Although the results communicate meaningful findings related to the ability of students experiencing homelessness to graduate high school, they cannot be generalized to the entire population in Bethany City or to other school districts across the United States. Therefore, it would be beneficial to replicate the present study

both geographically, across any of the other 23 Virginia school districts with graduation rates of 68% or above, displayed in Table 2, and longitudinally in upcoming school years in Bethany City and in other school districts. Although there are not pre-COVID data available to use for comparison purposes, it would be interesting to investigate long-term impacts of the pandemic on students experiencing homelessness.

Interviewing high school graduates and school district personnel was an intentional decision for this study that aligned with Resilience Theory. Although personal attributes and strategies are important in overcoming adversity, success also relies on dynamic interactions among individuals and systems, providing a variety of supports and resources. Because school district personnel play crucial roles in implementing McKinney-Vento mandates at the local level, more research should be done to ensure equitable opportunities are being offered to students experiencing homelessness and appropriate training is provided to school staff. Simultaneously, there is great value in learning from individuals with lived expertise, which emphasizes the continued need to collect information and data from students and graduates themselves. After I had already completed the interviews for this study, I was introduced to Hope Theory, which entails goal-directed determination, successful agency, and pathways or planning to meet set goals (Snyder et al., 1991). I am eager to explore this framework as a means of understanding the mindsets, actions, and pathways of students experiencing homelessness in school and in relationship to high school graduation.

Investigation of Alternative Schools and Programs and Their Impact on Students Experiencing Homelessness

Although I only interviewed three Clover High graduates and four school district personnel, including the principal, two teachers, and a former student support specialist, it was

clear that the unique attributes of Clover High facilitated the ability of students experiencing homelessness to reach graduation. Given the overlap in participant narratives around the application process, the productive learning environment, and the provision of academic, emotional, and physical support offered to students, it would be worthwhile to conduct a deeper investigation of the ways in which educators at Clover High are able to remove barriers and ensure student success. In terms of a qualitative approach, it would be interesting to conduct a single-site case study at Clover High and collect interview data from other graduates, other educators and support staff, and current students and parents for the purpose of creating a more comprehensive illustration of the community culture and practices that uplift students. It could also be productive to execute a multi-site case study and explore other alternative school and program approaches, whether in Bethany City or around Virginia. Quantitatively speaking, a variety of comparisons related to student demographics, academic achievement, and school funding and resources could offer insight about the differences in student experiences at general public and alternative schools. Based on the graduates' positive reflections about after-school programs and extra-curricular activities, these could be a narrower point of interest for future researchers.

Deeper Dive Into the Roles of McKinney-Vento Liaisons

McKinney-Vento liaisons play a critical role in protecting the educational rights of students experiencing homelessness, as they are the local point of contact for students and families, as well as administrators and school district personnel. Additionally, their connection to the State Coordinator and homeless education office provides them essential information, training, and funding to effectively implement the federal mandates. There is a need for more empirical research on liaisons' awareness, roles, challenges, and training in serving children and

youth experiencing homelessness. In the fall of 2023, I invited McKinney-Vento liaisons in Virginia school districts with graduation rates of 68% or above to participate in semi-structured interviews with similar questions to this study about the facilitating factors and barriers to high school graduation for students in their localities. In broad terms, the results aligned to those in this study, as the liaisons communicated the importance of McKinney-Vento policies, teams of school personnel, relationships with students, and provision of basic needs and transportation to help students experiencing homelessness graduate.

In 2012, Canfield et al. developed the McKinney-Vento Act Implementation Scale as a means of evaluating liaison preparation, accessibility, and collaboration and then generating a global implementation score. I have begun a new research study in which I am distributing this survey, alongside surveys with questions about personal levels of joy and hope, to Virginia liaisons in order to better understand their perceptions of McKinney-Vento implementation around the state and identify ways to increase empirical data, improve student equity, and inform state-level supports. Additionally, I plan to launch another study this fall, distributing the same survey to liaisons in Virginia, Maryland, Washington, D.C., and West Virginia. The results will enable me to identify implementation strengths and weaknesses and in turn to collaborate with State Coordinators to influence policy change and enhance state and local efforts to protect students' educational rights.

Conclusion

This study highlighted the complex nature of homelessness, as it relates to school access and success for K-12 students. Although it focused primarily on the experiences of high school graduates during their senior year, reflections on family and school-related barriers and supports were woven throughout the interviews. Taken together, these unique stories underline the

important role of the *McKinney-Vento Act* (2015) and the educators who implement it in ensuring that students in unstable housing have equitable opportunities to participate and succeed in school. According to Bethany City's high school graduation rates and participant interview data, success is possible. The results of this study offer scholars and practitioners insights into Resilience Theory as it relates to students experiencing homelessness graduating high school and a foundation upon which future policies and practices to increase graduation rates can be built.

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APPENDIX A

High School Graduate Interview Invitation

Dear 2023 (or 2022) High School Graduate,

My name is Martha Crockett. I am a doctoral student at William and Mary's School of Education, and I am writing to ask for your help with my dissertation research study. The purpose of this study is to better understand the factors that help students who have experienced housing instability graduate high school. I understand that you have recently graduated high school – Congratulations! You have valuable insight about overcoming challenges, and I would be grateful to have the opportunity to learn more about your personal pathway through high school.

Thank you for your interest in participating in this study, which involves filling out a short demographic questionnaire (5-10 minutes) and engaging in a one-on-one interview (25-40 minutes) in order to share your experiences and observations related to navigating high school while encountering housing instability. Interviews will be conducted over Zoom video conferencing or by telephone. With your permission, the interview will be recorded, so that I can transcribe our conversation for analysis purposes. Your school district will not be identified, and personal identifying information will not be shared in the findings. You will be able to choose which questions you feel comfortable answering, and you will be able to stop the interview at any time. Compensation for participation will be $50.

Please visit my Calendly site to select a time for your interview. The demographic form and consent form are also attached to this email. Please fill those out and return those to me before our interview. If you have any questions about the study or the interview, need to find an alternate time, or need help with the forms, do not hesitate to email me at mlcroc@wm.edu.

Should you have any questions about this study, you may contact me at mlcroc@wm.edu or my dissertation chair, Dr. James Stronge at 757-221-2339 or jhstro@wm.edu. To report any dissatisfaction with the study, please contact the Chair of the Human Subjects Committee, Dr. Jennifer A. Stevens at 757-221-3862 or jastev@wm.edu.

Thank you in advance for your consideration,

Martha Crockett
William & Mary School of Education
mlcroc@wm.edu

APPENDIX B

High School Graduate Participant Consent Form

Principal Investigator: Dr. James Stronge
Co-Principal Investigator: Martha Crockett

This is to certify that I have been given the following information with respect to my participation in this study:

Purpose of the research: To explore the factors that promote and inhibit the ability of students experiencing homelessness in your school district to graduate high school

Procedure to be followed: As a participant in this study, Martha Crockett will be interviewing you regarding your experience related to the high school graduation of students experiencing homelessness. The interview will be conducted over Zoom video conferencing or by telephone and will be recorded with your permission.

Discomforts and risks: There are potential risks associated with this research, as participants will be asked to recall past instances of adversity and vulnerability related to experiences of homelessness.

Duration of participation: Participation in this study will take approximately 30-50 minutes: short demographic questionnaire (5-10 minutes) and one-on-one interview (25-40 minutes)

Statement of confidentiality: Your data will be private and will not be linked to your name or school district in any way. Recordings will be held be the researchers and not be disseminated.

Voluntary participation: Participation is voluntary. You are free to withdraw at any time without penalty. You may choose to skip any question or activity.

Incentive for participation: Participants will receive $50. We appreciate your contributions to this valuable research.

Potential benefits: The potential benefits will be a better understanding of the pathways of students experiencing homelessness to high school graduation, which may inform future improvements to the implementation of the McKinney-Vento Act (2015).

Termination of participation: Participants may terminate their involvement in the project at any time. Participation may be terminated by the researcher if it is deemed that the participant is unable to perform the tasks presented.

Questions or concerns regarding participation in this research should be directed to: Tom Ward, PhD., chair of the Education Internal Review Committee (EDIRC), at 757-221-2358 (EDIRC-L@wm.edu).

I am aware that I may report dissatisfaction with any aspect of this study to Jennifer A. Stevens, Ph.D., the Chair of the Protection of Human Subjects Committee by telephone (757-221-3862) or email (jastev@wm.edu).

I am aware that I must be at least 18 years of age to participate in this project.

I agree to participate in this study and have read all the information provided on this form. My signature below confirms that my participation in this project is voluntary, and that I have received a copy of this consent form.

Name:

Signature:

Date:

APPENDIX C

High School Graduate Participant Demographic Questionnaire

Name:

The following questions inquire about personal characteristics related to your demographics, high school experiences, and current situation.

Please consider completing this form by filling in the blanks.

1. Age:
2. Gender:
3. Race/ ethnicity:
4. Age when homelessness first occurred:
5. Length(s) of time experiencing homelessness:
6. Were you living with your family during episodes of homelessness, or were you on your own (unaccompanied)?
7. Did you have any dependents during episodes of homelessness or in high school?
8. Did you enter foster care (full or part time)?
9. Current living status:
10. Are you currently in college?
11. Are you currently employed? If yes, what is your status? (Full time/ 40 hours/ week; part time/ less than 40 hours/ week)
12. What is your preferred payment method for compensation of $50 for your participation in this study? (Venmo, PayPal, Cashapp, etc.)

APPENDIX D

School District Personnel Interview Invitation

Dear School District Employee,

My name is Martha Crockett, and I am a doctoral student at William and Mary's School of Education. I am currently working on my dissertation, whose purpose is to better understand the factors that help students experiencing homelessness graduate high school. I have designed a case study in which I will interview high school graduates who encountered housing instability and school personnel within a selected district in an attempt to form a comprehensive illustration of the factors that contributed to the success of this student population. The results of my study will be shared with educators, policy makers, and community members as a means of informing and improving efforts to serve students experiencing homelessness and of increasing high school graduation rates for this student population.

You are receiving this email because a recent graduate or another employee from your school district identified you as an individual who supports the education and graduation of students experiencing homelessness. I invite you to participate in my study, which involves filling out a short demographic questionnaire (10-15 minutes) and engaging in a one-on-one interview (45-60 minutes) in order to share your experiences and observations related to this topic. Interviews will be conducted over Zoom video conferencing or by telephone. With your permission, the interview will be recorded for transcription purposes. Your school district will not be identified, and personal identifying information will not be shared in the findings.

Please email me at mlcroc@wm.edu to express your interest in participating; I will send you more information about the study, a participant consent form, and a short demographic questionnaire. We will then be able to schedule a time for the interview.

Should you have any questions about this study, you may contact me at mlcroc@wm.edu or my dissertation chair, Dr. James Stronge at 757-221-2339 or jhstro@wm.edu. To report any dissatisfaction with the study, please contact the Chair of the Human Subjects Committee, Dr. Jennifer A. Stevens at 757-221-3862 or jastev@wm.edu.

Thank you in advance for your consideration,

Martha Crockett
William & Mary School of Education
mlcroc@wm.edu

APPENDIX E

School District Personnel Participant Consent Form

Principal Investigator: Dr. James Stronge
Co-Principal Investigator: Martha Crockett

This is to certify that I have been given the following information with respect to my participation in this study:

Purpose of the research: To explore the factors that promote and inhibit the ability of students experiencing homelessness in your school district to graduate high school

Procedure to be followed: As a participant in this study, Martha Crockett will be interviewing you regarding your role in supporting the high school graduation of students experiencing homelessness. The interview will be conducted over Zoom video conferencing or by telephone and will be recorded with your permission.

Discomforts and risks: There are limited potential risks associated with this research, as participants will be asked to recall past instances of helping students overcome adversity related to experiences of homelessness.

Duration of participation: Participation in this study will take approximately 45-75 minutes: short demographic questionnaire (10-15 minutes) and one-on-one interview (45-60 minutes).

Statement of confidentiality: Your data will be private and will not be linked to your name or school district in any way. Recordings will be held be the researchers and not be disseminated.

Voluntary participation: Participation is voluntary. You are free to withdraw at any time without penalty. You may choose to skip any question or activity.

Incentive for participation: Participants will not be compensated. We appreciate your contributions to this valuable research.

Potential benefits: The potential benefits will be a better understanding of the pathways of students experiencing homelessness to high school graduation, which may inform future improvements to the implementation of the *McKinney-Vento Act* (2015).

Termination of participation: Participants may terminate their involvement in the project at any time. Participation may be terminated by the researcher if it is deemed that the participant is unable to perform the tasks presented.

Questions or concerns regarding participation in this research should be directed to: Tom Ward, PhD., chair of the Education Internal Review Committee (EDIRC), at 757-221-2358 (EDIRC-L@wm.edu).

I am aware that I may report dissatisfaction with any aspect of this study to Jennifer A. Stevens, Ph.D., the Chair of the Protection of Human Subjects Committee by telephone (757-221-3862) or email (jastev@wm.edu).

I am aware that I must be at least 18 years of age to participate in this project.

I agree to participate in this study and have read all the information provided on this form. My signature below confirms that my participation in this project is voluntary, and that I have received a copy of this consent form.

Name:

Signature:

Date:

APPENDIX F

School District Personnel Demographic Questionnaire

Name:

The following questions inquire about personal characteristics related to your employment in the school district and impact supporting students experiencing homelessness.

Please consider completing this form by filling in the blanks.

1. Gender:
2. Race/ ethnicity:
3. Job title:
4. Length of time in current job/ school district:
5. Please briefly describe your role or connection in supporting students experiencing homelessness:
6. Have you ever personally experienced homelessness?
7. Is there anything else you would like the researcher to know about you, personally or professionally, that would help illustrate your role in helping students experiencing homelessness graduate high school?

APPENDIX G

High School Graduate Semi-Structured Interview Protocol

Name of Participant:

Date of Interview:

Informed Consent Signed:

Project Introduction Script:

Thank you so much for agreeing to participate in my dissertation study. I want to congratulate you on recently graduating from high school. That is a huge accomplishment and something to be proud of. I really appreciate you taking the time to meet with me, as you know something valuable about overcoming adversity. I'm grateful for your willingness to share your insights with me and, in turn, the audiences who can learn from the results of this study.
This interview should take approximately 25-40 minutes. I am going to ask you several questions to better understand your personal pathway to high school graduation. Please respond as honestly as possible. I would like to record your responses though audio and video (if conducted via Zoom). Do I have your permission to record?
As a reminder, the names of people and the school district will not be shared in the study. We may stop at any time if you feel uncomfortable with the interview, or we can skip any questions you do not want to answer. Do you have any questions before we begin?
I will start by asking you some questions about graduation and your diploma, and then we will move into some questions about your pathway through high school.

Interview Questions:

1. What do you think has been and will be the impact of earning a high school diploma on your life?
   Probe a: What was your main motivation for earning a diploma?
   Probe b: At any point, did you consider going for the GED or dropping out of school? How did you stay on the pathway to a diploma?
   Probe c: Which individuals, if any, encouraged you to earn a diploma? Did you encounter varying opinions on the value of a diploma (e.g., from teachers, family, or friends)?
   Probe d: What advice would you give to other students experiencing homelessness related to graduating from high school?

2. What factors inside school helped you achieve high school graduation?
   Probe a: Which individuals, if any, in school supported your education and graduation (e.g., teachers, counselors, coaches)?
   Probe b: What role did other students plan in supporting your education and graduation?

Probe c: Which members of the school community did you choose to share information about your living situation with? Did you feel comfortable sharing, or did you feel the need to hide information?
Probe d: What services and resources, if any, did the school district provide you? (e.g., credit recovery, partial credits, attendance incentives, shortened school schedule, daycare, transcript reviews)
Probe e: Are you familiar with the *McKinney-Vento Act*, and were you aware of services available to you at your school through this legislation? If so, what was the process to accessing those services, and how did they help you?

3. What factors outside school helped you achieve high school graduation?

   Probe a: Which individuals, if any, outside school supported your education and graduation? (e.g., family members, community leaders, church members, neighbors)
   Probe b: Did the school district refer you to other services in the community? If yes, for what services or resources did they refer you?
   Probe c: Were there any community-based services and resources that you used to support your education and graduation?
   Probe d: Did you have any experiences outside school (such as summer camp, work, or internships) that supported your education?

4. What barriers inside school made it harder to reach high school graduation?
   Probe a: Were there any school policies or rules that negatively impacted your ability to attend school and participate?
   Probe b: What was the role of technology in your education? Did it help or hinder your education?

5. What barriers outside school made it harder to reach high school graduation? (I want to remind you that you do not have to answer any question that you find too personal.)
   Probe a: How did your living situation impact your ability to meet your basic needs? How did that impact your education and graduation?
   Probe b: Did you have any family issues or work responsibilities that impacted your education and graduation? If yes, how did they impact your ability to graduate? situation?

6. Can you describe your experience with homelessness and how it impacted your education and graduation?
   Probe a: Can you provide any information about what led your family to lose housing and the timeline of those experiences?
   Probe b: When you experienced homelessness, what was your living situation?
   Probe c: How would you define homelessness? Is there another term or description you would use to describe your circumstances?
   Probe d: What do you wish would have been different about your time in high school when you were experiencing homelessness?

7. What recommendations do you have for school district personnel regarding helping students experiencing homelessness with their high school education and graduation?
   Probe a: Is there anything you wish that school district personnel had offered but did not?

   Probe b: If school district personnel had known about your situation, how do you feel this could have changed the support and resources you received?

Is there anything else that you would like to share about your school experiences and factors that led to your high school graduation?

Thank you very much for your valuable contribution to this research.

APPENDIX H

School District Personnel Semi-Structured Interview Protocol

Name of Participant:

Date of Interview:

Informed Consent Signed:

Project Introduction Script:

Thank you so much for agreeing to participate in my dissertation study whose purpose is to understand the factors that support students experiencing homelessness to graduate from high school in your school district.
This interview should take approximately 45-60 minutes. I will ask you several questions to better understand the ways in which you supported the pathways leading to high school graduation for students experiencing homelessness. Please respond as honestly as possible.
I would like to record responses though audio and video (if conducted via Zoom). Do I have your permission to record?
As a reminder, names of people and the school district will not be shared in the study. We can stop at any time if you feel uncomfortable with the interview, or we can skip any questions you do not want to answer. Do you have any questions before we begin?

Interview Questions:

1. What do you perceive as the impact of a high school diploma on the lives of students experiencing homelessness?
   Probe a: What student and family perceptions of the high school diploma have you observed?
   Probe b: If students are not motivated to earn a diploma, are there other goals they are working toward (such as CTE or other certifications)? What district or community resources are available to support those pathways?
   Probe c: How are students able to balance the challenge of meeting their day-to-day needs and planning for the future?

2. What factors inside school have you observed as helping students experiencing homelessness graduate high school?
   Probe a: What is the role of the *McKinney-Vento Act* in identifying, enrolling, and ensuring academic success of students experiencing homelessness in your school district?
   Probe b: What services and resources (related to McKinney-Vento and in addition to McKinney-Vento), if any, does the school district provide to students experiencing homelessness that contribute to school success? Who is involved in the delivery of those services and resources?
   Probe c: What overlap, if any, have you observed in identification and service offerings related to the *McKinney-Vento Act* and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act?

3. What factors outside school have you observed as helping students experiencing homelessness graduate high school?
   Probe a: Does the school district provide referrals for other services in the community that contribute to school success? If so, which are those that you recommend most frequently?
   Probe b: Are there any activities or work experiences outside of school that you have observed as beneficial to students?

4. What barriers inside school have you observed related to students experiencing homelessness graduating high school?
   Probe a: Are there any school policies or practices that create unintended barriers to student participation/success in school (e.g. attendance policies, accreditation requirements, rigid scheduling)?
   Probe b: Can you describe the impact of transportation on students' ability to participate in school and succeed academically?
   Probe c: Have you observed students experiencing homelessness trying to participate in school-sponsored extra-curricular activities? What barriers to participation have you observed?

5. What barriers outside school have you observed related to students experiencing homelessness graduating high school?
   Probe a: To what extent are you aware of students' non-school basic needs and student participation/success in school? If yes, what are they? In what ways is the school district able to address students' non-school needs?
   Probe b: To what extent do students' responsibilities in the family, such as working or watching siblings, impact their education?

6. What recommendations do you have for school district personnel to help students experiencing homelessness achieve high school access and success?
   Probe a: What advice do you give students experiencing homelessness related to high school graduation?
   Probe b: Is there anything you wish you could have done differently in the past to support students experiencing homelessness?
   Probe c: Have there been any positive or negative consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic on students experiencing homelessness that would influence future policy development and implementation?

Is there anything else that you would like to share about your experiences in working with students who experienced homelessness and were able to succeed with high school graduation?

Thank you very much for your valuable contribution to this research.

VITA

Martha Louisa Crockett

Education:	2020 – 2024	William and Mary Williamsburg, VA Doctor of Philosophy
	2013 – 2015	University of Virginia Charlottesville, VA Master of Education
	2007 – 2011	University of Richmond Richmond, VA Bachelor of Arts
Professional Experience:	2023 – present	Project HOPE-Virginia Williamsburg, VA Research and Community Development Specialist
	2020 – 2023	William & Mary Williamsburg, VA Graduate Assistant
	2016 – 2020	Miss Porter's School Farmington, CT French and Latin Teacher
	2011 – 2016	Westminster School Annandale, VA French Teacher