Students Experiencing Homelessness in Allegheny County

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As of the 2018-19 school year, public schools across the United States identified over 1.4 million students experiencing homelessness. The federal McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act mandates that schools identify students experiencing homelessness (SEH) and provide them with needed academic supports such as transportation to school, credit recovery and transfer assistance, and supplies necessary for an educational experience equal to that of their peers who live in stable housing. A first step to providing these critical supports is for schools to fulfill their legal obligation to accurately identify SEH.

Close to 3,000 students in Allegheny County public schools were identified as experiencing homelessness during the 2018-19 school year.[1] While this represents only 2.0% of the total student population, housing instability creates great obstacles for these children to attend and succeed in school. Meanwhile, homelessness rates have been growing in recent years and lost income due to COVID-19 is likely to bring even more students to the point of housing and educational instability. (See Call-Out Box on "Challenges of COVID"). These factors make accurate identification practices all the more important.

RFA's PACER series recently released a statewide report on Students Experiencing Homelessness in Pennsylvania: New Evidence of Under-Identification and Inequity. Using the same data, this ACER brief takes a closer look at trends in identification and enrollment of SEH in Allegheny County's public school districts and charter schools.

Challenges of COVID for Students Experiencing Homelessness (SEH)

The aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic is likely to bring even more families to the point of housing instability and homelessness, as wages are lost while medical and rent bills stack up. Meanwhile, SEH are particularly susceptible to additional challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic. A higher risk of asthma, overall poorer health, and inability to properly socially distance due to conditions in homeless shelters or overcrowded doubled-up settings make these students and their families particularly likely to be affected by COVID. Furthermore, SEH are more likely to lack a stable place to do schoolwork, a high-quality internet connection, and 1:1 devices that can connect to the internet. Even when students start the year with these resources, their mobility and housing challenges make it difficult to maintain a stable connection or working device for the full year. For these reasons, it is now even more crucial that students' homelessness status is identified and schools address these additional support needs. However, a recent study estimated that there was a 28% decrease nationwide in the number of SEH identified at the beginning of the 2020 school year compared to the prior year.

The **McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act** requires states and LEAs to identify SEH and provide supports for their enrollment and success in schools, including procedures to enable students to remain at their school of origin and, when transfer is necessary, to accrue credits for full or partial coursework completed at a prior school. Schools must also provide SEH with transportation and educational supports to reduce barriers to education caused by homelessness. All McKinney-Vento protections and requirements remain in effect during COVID shutdowns— including the mandate to identify students experiencing homelessness—even during school closures and remote instruction.

While the requirements under McKinney-Vento are largely unfunded, the most recent round of COVID relief funding under the American Rescue Plan Act includes an unprecedented $800 million in dedicated funding to be used for the identification and support of students experiencing homelessness. States and LEAs can also choose to use the additional COVID emergency funds to support the needs of students experiencing homelessness.

Experiences of homelessness go beyond a simple lack of housing; they are deeply rooted in historic inequities. Students who are Black, Latinx, American Indian and Alaska Native are more likely to experience homelessness, as well as students who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual or questioning, English language learners, and students who are refugees. However, intersectional data on identification and enrollment of students experiencing homelessness in these groups are not publicly available in most states, including Pennsylvania. Understanding how these groups are identified and served under McKinney-Vento would provide critical context into whether these federal protections are being equitably applied.

Student Homelessness Data Sources Used in This Report

This report relies on data from the U.S. Department of Education's [EdFacts Initiative](#), which provides the overall count of students experiencing homelessness as well as by housing status, special population, and local education agency (LEA) i.e., by school district or charter school. This dataset represents a yearlong count of students who were identified as homeless at any point during the year.

1. Identification of Students Experiencing Homelessness in Allegheny County

Because many families and youth experiencing homelessness remain hidden, there is no way of knowing the true number of students who are actually experiencing homelessness according to the federal McKinney-Vento Act definition. Multiple researchers have compared numbers of student homelessness to poverty rates as a way of estimating where under-identification of students experiencing homelessness may be occurring.[2] Here we follow this methodology by comparing rates of student homelessness as reported by Pennsylvania LEAs to rates of poverty for school-aged children according to the U.S. Census. This metric provides a rough estimate of how well school communities are complying with the mandate to identify students experiencing homelessness. In Figure 1 we compare Allegheny County to the state and national averages.

Identifying Students Experiencing Homelessness (SEH)

"Public schools [nationwide] are identifying only slightly more than half of high school students experiencing homelessness. As many as one million students experiencing homelessness are not receiving services they need, and to which they are entitled under the federal McKinney-Vento Act." -[Schoolhouse Connection](#)

Who Identifies SEH? Schools have a proactive legal duty to identify eligible students; the burden is not on families to self-identify. To support schools in meeting this duty, states are required to appoint a coordinator for homeless education to oversee identification of SEH and implementation of other McKinney-Vento mandates statewide. Additionally, every LEA must assign a Homeless Education Liaison to oversee implementation in local schools.

How are SEH identified? Many SEH in Allegheny County are identified through school staff recognizing a need for transportation to school*; however, many other strategies can and should be applied, particularly during times of remote instruction. Numerous best practices are employed by schools to [identify](#) SEH including housing questionnaires at the school, outreach to families, referrals from community agencies, and trained school staff who are able to recognize the signs of homelessness. Some districts also have data-sharing agreements with local shelter systems that allow them to match SEH real-time.

*According to multiple advocates and social services staff in Allegheny County.

Figure 1. Calculating the Rate of Identification of Students Experiencing Homelessness, 2018-19

	Students Experiencing Homelessness (SEH)	÷	School-Aged Children in Poverty	=	Rate of Identification of SEH
Allegheny County	2,938	÷	23,623	=	12.4%
	(2.0%)		(18.5%)		
PA	31,179	÷	308,245	=	10.1%
	(1.8%)		(20.8%)		
Nation	1,432,030	÷	9,120,981	=	15.7%
	(2.8%)		(22.9%)		

- PA overall identified fewer SEH per school-aged children in poverty than the nation overall (10.1% to 15.7%), indicating that the state may be failing to identify thousands of students experiencing homelessness.

- Allegheny County schools identified 12.4 SEH per 100 school-aged children in poverty. This rate of identification of SEH was higher than PA overall (10.1) but still lower than the national rate (15.7).

2. Patterns of Identification and Enrollment of Students Experiencing Homelessness in Allegheny County School Districts and Charter Schools

Figure 2. Allegheny County School District Identification Rates of Students Experiencing Homelessness, 2018-19

School District		Identification Rate: SEH per School-Aged Children in Poverty	Percent SEH	Percent School-Aged Children in Poverty
Highlands		22.3%	5.4%	28.2%
South Allegheny		22.2%	3.2%	24.3%
Moon Area		22.1%	0.8%	3.9%
Sto-Rox		17.0%	6.4%	32.9%
Clairton City		14.4%	6.3%	79.9%
Pittsburgh		13.6%	5.0%	41.5%
Keystone Oaks		12.2%	0.9%	13.9%
Woodland Hills		11.7%	5.6%	40.1%
East Allegheny		11.6%	3.3%	28.4%
Shaler Area		9.8%	1.1%	12.1%
Carlynton		9.3%	1.6%	19.2%
Gateway		8.8%	1.5%	18.1%
West Mifflin Area		8.6%	2.0%	31.2%
Penn Hills		8.0%	1.9%	18.7%
Quaker Valley		7.0%	0.7%	9.5%
Riverview		6.7%	1.2%	19.3%
Duquesne City		6.4%	8.6%	88.7%
Wilkinsburg Borough		6.2%	9.7%	87.2%
Allegheny Valley		6.1%	0.9%	20.3%
Cornell		6.0%	2.3%	31.5%
Baldwin-Whitehall		4.9%	1.0%	23.7%
North Allegheny		4.8%	0.2%	4.5%
Elizabeth Forward		4.6%	0.8%	19.0%
Chartiers Valley		4.6%	0.4%	8.1%
Mt Lebanon		2.7%	0.2%	6.2%
Fox Chapel Area		2.5%	0.1%	5.2%
McKeesport Area		2.4%	1.1%	65.0%
Steel Valley		2.2%	1.1%	44.6%
Bethel Park		1.8%	0.1%	7.1%
Northgate		*	3.3%	*
Plum Borough		*	1.1%	*
Montour		*	0.9%	*
Deer Lakes		*	0.8%	*
West Allegheny		*	0.7%	*
South Fayette Township		*	0.7%	*
North Hills		*	0.6%	*
South Park		*	0.6%	*
West Jefferson Hills		*	0.5%	*
Upper Saint Clair		*	0.4%	*
Avonworth		*	0.4%	*
Brentwood Borough		*	0.3%	*
Pine-Richland		*	0.3%	*
Hampton Township		*	0.3%	*

*Census estimate for number of school-aged children in poverty is not reliable (RSE<30)
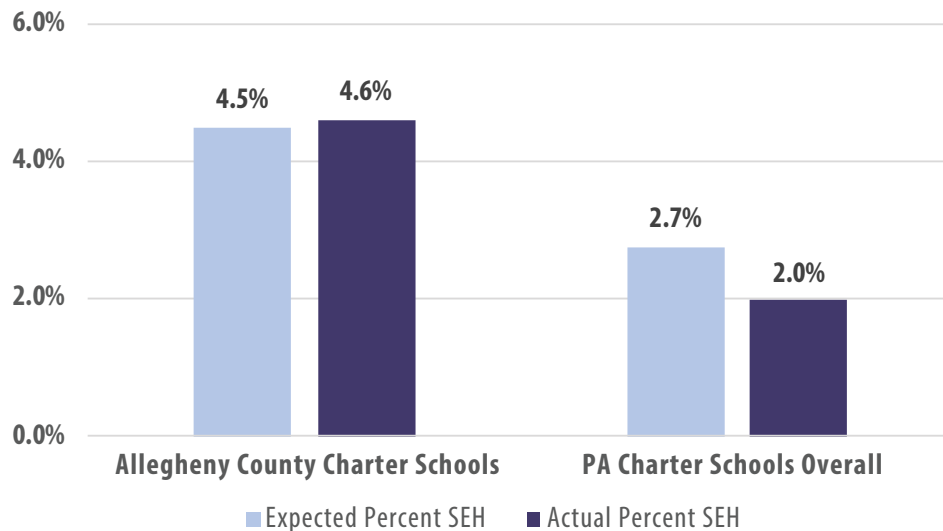
A more local analysis showed that rates of identification of students experiencing homelessness among Allegheny County school districts varied widely. In Figure 2 we provide rates of identification for each school district, as well as the percent homeless and percent of school-aged children living in poverty.

- Allegheny County school districts ranged widely in their identification rate of SEH from over 22% in Highlands, South Allegheny, and Moon Area to just roughly 2% in McKeesport Area, Steel Valley, and Bethel Park. This suggests that even within Allegheny County there are differences in implementation of identification best practices.

- Pittsburgh SD, which has long participated in data sharing agreements with the Allegheny County Department of Human Services, had a rate of identification of 13.6%. This was greater than the statewide average (10.1%) and over three times higher than in Philadelphia (4.4%). Still, Pittsburgh's rate is below the national average (15.7%) and other districts in the county, which could indicate that even more students are remaining unidentified as experiencing homelessness.

Below we examine patterns of identification and enrollment of students experiencing homelessness in Allegheny County's charter school sector. The following analysis compares student homelessness rates in charter schools to their "expected rates," which are calculated using a weighted average of the rates of students' school districts of residence. Statewide we found that charter schools underserved students experiencing homelessness, but that is not the case in Allegheny County, as shown below in Figure 3.
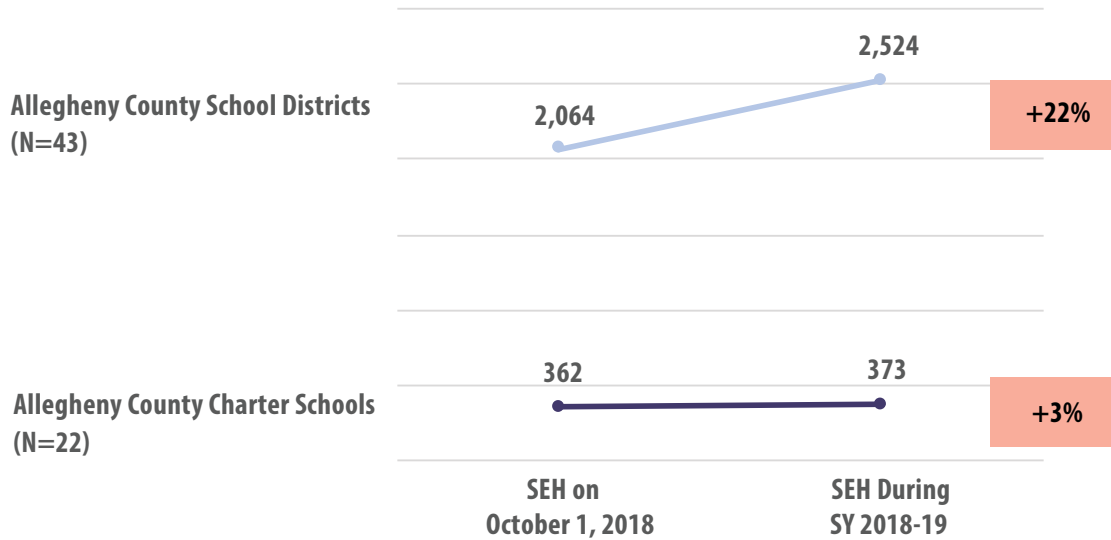
Figure 3: Actual vs. Expected Percentage of Students Experiencing Homeless in Brick & Mortar Charter Schools, 2018-19

- Allegheny County brick-and-mortar charter schools enrolled SEHs at roughly the same rate as the expected rate of SEH, based on the weighted average of their school districts of residence (4.5% expected to 4.6% actual).

- PA brick-and-mortar charter schools overall, under-enrolled SEH compared to their expected rate (2.7% expected to 2.0% actual).

- Propel charter schools is a network operating eight charter schools in the county and serving close to half of the county's charter school students. As a group, these schools enrolled SEH at a higher than expected rate (5.5% to 4.5%), while the other Allegheny County charters as a group under-enrolled SEH compared to the expected rate (3.7% to 4.4%).

Despite the federal protection mandating that schools support students experiencing homelessness to remain at their school of origin throughout a given school year, students experiencing homelessness often struggle with high mobility rates, a known barrier to educational achievement. Students lose an estimated four to six months of academic progress with each school transfer[3] and studies have found school mobility to be associated with lower school engagement, poorer grades, and a higher risk of dropping out of school.[4] School transfers also frequently coincide with long periods of absenteeism, and both of these factors disrupt the classroom as a whole.[5] However, in this section, we see that Allegheny County school districts are accepting a higher share of these mobile students experiencing homelessness mid-year, while county charter schools overall are not shouldering an equal share of the mid-year increase. Figure 4 shows mid-year mobility by comparing an October snapshot count of homelessness rates in district and charter schools to a yearlong count in the same year.

Figure 4. Mid-Year Change in Students Experiencing Homelessness in Allegheny County Schools: October 2018 Snapshot vs. Yearlong Count, 2018-19 (with Percent Increase)
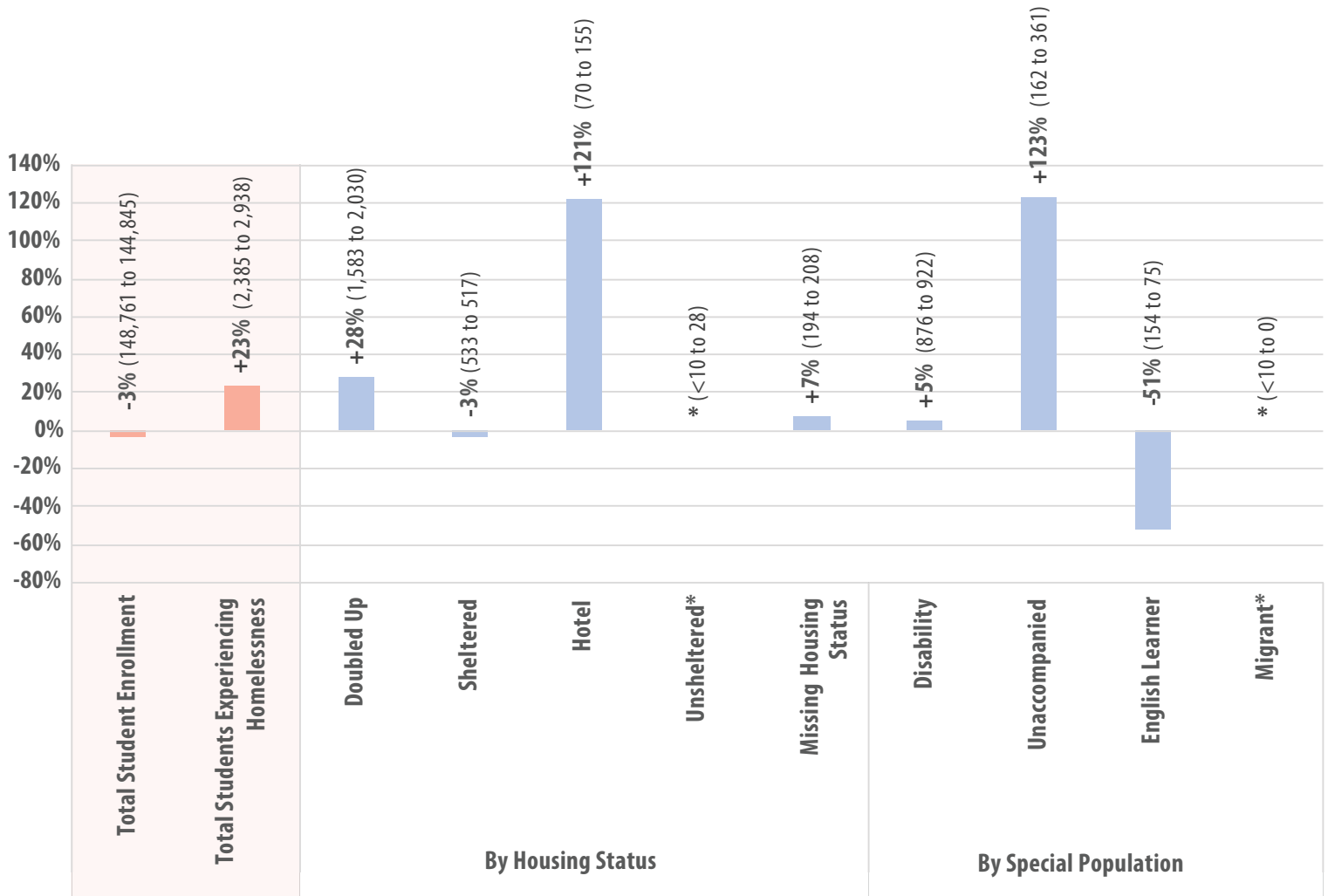

Allegheny County School Districts (N=43)

2,524

2,064

+22%

Allegheny County Charter Schools (N=22)

362

373

+3%

SEH on October 1, 2018

SEH During SY 2018-19

Note: Yearlong count of SEH during SY 2018-19 is from the U.S. Department of Education's EdFacts Initiative. Snapshot of SEH on October 1st, 2018 is from a Pennsylvania Department of Education statewide dataset.

- The percentage of SEH increased mid-year in Allegheny County school districts (+22%).

- Meanwhile, there was only a slight increase in SEH enrolled in brick-and-mortar charter schools in Allegheny County (+3%).

- The disparity in enrollment of SEH between district schools and brick-and-mortar charter schools, which mirrors our state-level findings, may indicate that students experiencing homelessness are denied equitable access to enrollment in charter schools at a particularly vulnerable time, when experiencing mid-year mobility.

3. Change in Students Experiencing Homelessness in Allegheny County

From 2013-14 to 2018-19, the reported number of SEH increased by 23% in Allegheny County, even while total student enrollment decreased by 3%. This increase may be due to increased homelessness and/or to improved identification practices by schools. Below in Figure 5, we provide the overall percent and total change in the county. Those changes are also broken down by type of housing status and by student special populations available in the federal dataset.

Figure 5. Percent (and Number) Change in Students Experiencing Homelessness and Total Enrollment in Allegheny County, by Housing Status and Special Populations, 2013-14 to 2018-19

* Percent change not shown due to small numbers of SEH.

- Among the different housing statuses, students living in doubled-up settings are the most common in Allegheny County (2,030 out of 2,938 SEH in 2018-19); however, students living in hotels/motels (+121%) saw the greatest percent increase during the time period.

- Among special population categories, students unaccompanied by a parent/guardian increased dramatically (+123%), while the number of English Learner students experiencing homelessness declined by 51%.

4. Next Steps in Supporting Students Experiencing Homelessness in Allegheny County

Under-identification of students experiencing homelessness is a well-known problem across the country preventing unknown numbers of students from accessing the educational supports to which they are entitled. We found that, on average, Allegheny County schools identify students experiencing homelessness relative to student poverty at higher rates than other Pennsylvania school systems. But county rates are still below national averages. Meanwhile, rates of identification vary widely across Allegheny County school districts, with many identifying at less than half the national rate. School districts with lower rates of identification should examine their policies and turn to their higher-identifying neighbors to understand best practices in identification of SEH. Local policymakers and school leaders should also examine policy and practice to remove barriers to ensure that students experiencing homelessness due to mid-year mobility have equal access to enrollment in county charter schools.

About ACER and RFA

The Allegheny County Education Research Project (ACER) is a project of Research for Action (RFA), a Pennsylvania-based nonprofit education research organization that seeks to use research as the basis for the improvement of educational opportunities and outcomes for traditionally underserved children and students. RFA's work is designed to strengthen early education, public schools and postsecondary institutions; provide research-based recommendations to policymakers, practitioners, and the public; and enrich civic and community dialogue. Learn more about ACER and RFA at https://www.researchforaction.org/acer.

Endpoints

1 As reported to the U.S. Department of Education's EdFacts Initiative

2 This method for measuring homeless student identification has been used by the New York Technical Education Assistance Center for Homeless Students, which publishes this measure online as a resource for LEAs, advising that "poverty data can be a useful tool for districts in estimating the approximate number of students who may experience homelessness [and] to determine whether your school district may be under-identifying students experiencing homelessness." In a past state ranking by the Institute for Children, Poverty, and Homelessness, a similar calculation comparing the number of students identified as homeless to school-aged children in extreme poverty found that Pennsylvania ranked 46th out of 50 states in identification of students experiencing homelessness in 2014-15. Urban Institute, "What Will it Take to End Homelessness?", 2001, https://www.urban.org/research/publication/what-will-it-take-endhomelessness/view/full_report; Institute for Children, Poverty and Homelessness, "Out of the Shadows: A State-by-State Ranking of Accountability for Homeless Students," 2017, https://www.icphusa.org/reports/shadows-state-state-ranking-accountability-homeless-students/; New York Technical Education Assistance Center for Homeless Students, "Local Poverty Rates & Student Homelessness," January 2018, https://nysteachs.org/resources/local-poverty-rates-student-homelessness.

3 Legal Center for Foster Care & Education, "Questions and Answers: Credit Transfer and School Completion", https://web.archive.org/web/20170827082931/https://www.americanbar.org/content/dam/aba/migrated/child/education/QA_2_Credits_FINAL.authcheckdam.pdf

4 EdWeek, "Student Mobility: How It Affects Learning." https://www.edweek.org/leadership/student-mobility-how-it-affects-learning/2016/08

5 The 74, "Research Shows Changing Schools Can Make or Break a Student, But the Wave of Post-COVID Mobility May Challenge the Systems in Ways We've Never Seen" https://www.the74million.org/changing-schools-can-make-or-break-a-student-but-the-wave-of-post-covid-mobility-may-challenge-the-systems-in-ways-weve-never-seen/