



ON THE SCENE



The LiveWire panel, from left: Jonathan Houston from Equal Opportunity Schools and, previously, the Tukwila School District; Katy Miller from the US Interagency Council on Homelessness; Katara Jordan from Building Changes and Schoolhouse Washington, and Jonathan Martin, from The Seattle Times' Project Homeless.

LiveWire: Searching for solutions to student homelessness

The Seattle Times LiveWire presented “Homework without a home: Helping homeless students in Seattle” at Seattle Central Library on Dec. 6, with The Seattle Times’ Project Homeless, a new public service journalism initiative that examines our region’s homeless crisis. The free public event took a hard look at what is – and isn’t – being done to help homeless kids in our city stay in school, find permanent housing and learn to thrive.

The LiveWire series, presented by series sponsor Microsoft, addresses vital issues impacting our region and its people. Principal sponsor University of Washington provided additional support.

The event panel was comprised of local experts: Jonathan Houston, partnership director at the nonprofit Equal Opportunity Schools and former McKinney-Vento liaison for the Tukwila School District, where he coordinated services for homeless students; Katara Jordan, a senior manager at Building Changes, who leads policy and advocacy efforts for youth and family homelessness in Washington state and partners with organizations like Schoolhouse Washington; and

Katy Miller, regional coordinator for the US Interagency Council on Homelessness, who acts as a bridge between the work in DC and locally in 13 U.S. states, including Washington. Jonathan Martin, Project Homeless editor at The Seattle Times, moderated the panel discussion. Thaisa Way, executive director of Urban@UW and professor of landscape architecture at the College of Built Environments at the University of Washington, introduced the program.

One in every 16 students in Seattle is homeless – as is one in every 27 students in Washington state. About half are in 5th grade or younger. And 87 percent of homeless kids in Seattle Public Schools are students of color, widening the achievement gap between black and white students.

The McKinney-Vento Act, which provides federal funding to states for district programs that serve homeless students, defines homeless children as “individuals who lack a fixed, regular and adequate nighttime residence.” Nearly 40,000 students in Washington state were homeless last year. 3,612 homeless students attend Seattle Public Schools, a number that has more than doubled in the last five years. Think homelessness doesn’t affect your school or your district? 97 percent of Seattle Public Schools had homeless students last year.

The numbers are important. As panelist Jonathan Houston said during the event, right now “Identification happens when there’s



Audience members asked panelists questions via Twitter and Facebook.

a need, but if we can be more proactive, we can be more vigilant in our support of students.” To help them, we first must know where and who they are. Washington ranks 7th nationally in identifying homeless students.

McKinney-Vento requires every school district to have a homeless liaison to identify and enroll homeless students and connect them to services – “It’s the law,” emphasized panelist Katy Miller. “Homelessness decreases your likelihood of graduating from high school by 87 percent,” said panelist Katara Jordan. Only 53 percent of homeless high school seniors in Washington graduated last year. Studies show that homeless students lose four to six months of learning each time they move schools. Free transportation is provided to help homeless students stay in their same school. The McKinney-Vento liaison also connects students to district services such as early childhood education, special education, and free and reduced lunch.

Jordan noted that Washington is one of the only states to provide supplemental funding for schools

to support homeless students – especially important because support for homeless students is not part of the basic education covered by McCleary. Miller noted, however, “It’s the job of local and state government, not schools, to coordinate with families to support homeless students’ success.” Schools can be an excellent entry point to support services for students and families, but they can’t solve it alone.

The panel noted that Seattle has a large number of excellent nonprofit and social service organizations offering homeless services. Washington is also experimenting with innovative solutions, including partnerships between school districts and local housing authorities, that could be replicated on a national scale.

Jordan reminded the audience, “When we are talking about student homelessness, we are talking about family homelessness. There are some promising solutions, but we still have a lot of work to do.” If you want to help homeless students, she says your first call should be to your district’s McKinney-Vento homeless liaison, listed at k12.wa.us/HomelessEd/ContactList.aspx

Watch a video of the complete event and read related coverage at seattletimes.com/livewire.

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Panelists onstage at the Central Library (from left, Katara Jordan, Jonathan Houston, Katy Miller and Jonathan Martin).



Mary Gresch, UW chief marketing & communications officer and Connie Kravas, UW VP of advancement.



Panelist Katara Jordan urged the audience to support the Homeless Student Stability Act and Washington Youth & Families Fund.



Frank A. Blethen, Seattle Times publisher, welcomed guests at a pre-event reception.



Panelist Jonathan Houston (left, with panelist Katy Miller) has served as a liaison for homeless students, and experienced homelessness firsthand.



Kelly Ngo, communications officer at the Raikes Foundation, which is a community funder of Project Homeless.



Thaisa Way, Urban@UW executive director and UW College of Built Environments professor, introduced the program.



Crystal C. Hall, associate professor at UW's Evans School, and Erik Houser from Campion Advocacy Fund.



Jonathan Martin, editor of The Seattle Times' Project Homeless, moderated the panel discussion.



Kollin Min, senior program officer at the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, which supports Project Homeless.



Mary Grace Roske, Seattle Foundation marketing & communications VP, and Sharon Chan, a Seattle Times VP.



Lisa Kelly, from UW School of Law's Children and Youth Advocacy Clinic, and Casey Trupin, from Raikes Foundation's youth homelessness program.



Tyra Williams, McKinney-Vento liaison/program manager for Seattle Public Schools, greets Nichelle Page, from Tukwila's Equity and Social Justice Commission.