

Necessary, But Not Sufficient: The McKinney-Vento Act and Academic Achievement in North
Carolina

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Abstract

Congressional concern about homeless students resulted in the McKinney-Vento Act (MCKV) of 2001, which provides funds to local educational agencies (LEAs). The MCKV is almost a decade old, yet no evaluations of its academic effectiveness have been reported. Using a systems theory framework, this study sought to determine whether homeless students in Grade 6 from MCKV-funded LEAs scored better in reading comprehension and mathematics on end-of-grade (EOG) test scores than students from LEAs that did not receive MCKV funding. Data from 2006 and 2007 were provided by the North Carolina (NC) Department of Public Instruction. About 20% of the state's LEAs received MCKV grants. Using untreated control group designs with matched pretests (Grade 5 EOG test scores) and posttests (Grade 6 EOG test scores), 2 x 2 ANOVAs with repeated measures failed to support the hypothesis that MCKV grants improved the academic achievement of homeless students. There was no significant difference in the funded and nonfunded EOG test scores. School social workers need to be vigilant at providing intervention programs that are designed to supplement the services of the MCKV. Educators must use the results to lobby legislators to fund training to improve the academic performance of homeless students.

Key Words: McKinney-Vento Act, homelessness, homeless education, academic achievement, end-of-grade test scores

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Introduction

Since 1987, the U.S. Congress has been funding programs to improve the education of homeless students. Congress has paid even more attention to this issue since passing the McKinney-Vento (MCKV) Act of 2001. These efforts, however, have never been the subject of statewide empirical evaluations. This study provides what is arguably the first empirical evaluation of the MCKV. The findings showed that the MCKV has not significantly improved the academic performance of homeless students in North Carolina, a state that provides very limited support for this population of students. Rather than criticize the intent of the MCKV, the researchers conjectured that if the MCKV program were studied in an environment that provides more efficacious homeless services, the educational and other outcomes for homeless students might be better. The researchers offer methodologies for school social workers that could enhance the effectiveness of the MCKV.

The negative impact of homelessness on many facets of the lives of children has been well documented. Compared to normally housed children, homeless children have poor health outcomes and limited preventive health care support. Hopper (2003) and Wong, Salomon, Thistle-Elliott, Tallarita, and Reed (2004) reported that homeless children suffer from more types of illness for longer periods of time with more harmful consequences than normally housed students. Similarly, the negative impact of homelessness on psychological and mental health issues has been reported by Swick (2006) as well as Taylor, Stuttaford, Broad, Vostanis (2006). Jackson (2007) noted that about 34% of homeless persons are in families with children and 84% of the adults in homeless families are women.

School social workers are particularly interested in the negative impact of homelessness on academic achievement. Israel, Urberb, and Toro (2001) and Jozefowicz-Simbeni (2003) reported that homelessness among students results in lower achievement test scores, poorer grades, more grade retentions, and a higher incidence of school dropouts than among normally housed children. Rafferty (1998) reported that children who are homeless have lower standardized test and achievement test scores and are more likely than normally housed students to be retained in the same grade level. Hendricks and Barkley (in press) compared the end-of-grade (EOG) tests of homeless versus normally housed Grade 6 students in North Carolina. Their examination of four EOG tests (reading comprehension in 2006 and 2007 and mathematics in 2006 and 2007) supported the finding that normally housed Grade 6 North Carolina students scored significantly better than homeless Grade 6 students, however, the effect size (d) of the differences between the two groups was small, ranging from $d = .25$ for mathematics in 2006 to $d = .29$ for reading comprehension in 2007. These effect sizes were only slightly larger than Cohen's (1969) convention for small effect ($d = .20$).

The McKinney-Vento Program

Before 1987, federal efforts regarding homelessness focused primarily on the issue of basic housing and economic issues. A major step regarding the education of homeless children was taken in 1987 with passage of the Stewart B. McKinney Act. By enacting this legislation, the federal government recognized that it had a responsibility to assist in improving the educational experience of homeless children. Duffield (2001) noted that this act established programs for homeless children, including emergency food and housing as well as emergency mental health care. The services provided by the act were expanded through amendments in 1988, 1990, 1992, and 1994 (Project Hope, 2008). A major revision occurred in 2001 when the

act was renamed the MCKV. The MCKV of 2001 also mandated the designation of a state coordinator to promote educational access for homeless students; made it easier for homeless students to register in a new school; and provided counseling, free lunches, free clothing, and free school supplies.

Lack of Evaluation of the MCKV

The MCKV was the federal government's most significant step to support the education of homeless children. In the researchers' opinion, the MCKV has provided many helpful, *necessary* services, but there have been no tests demonstrating that the MCKV is *sufficient* in achieving its goal of improving the educational experience of homeless students. Clearly, the MCKV has been the impetus for some positive change. For example, there is broad consensus that the MCKV has increased awareness at the local, state and national levels of the special needs of homeless students. It also has ensured the provision of some federal money to support homeless education.

The fundamental problem, however, is that no one knows whether the MCKV is achieving its academic improvement goals. Beginning in 2002-2003, the federal government required states to provide academic achievement data for homeless students. These data from the National Center for Homeless Education (2008) have suggested that reading comprehension and mathematics scores for homeless children across the nation have improved. These data, however, have not made it possible to determine the role of the MCKV in this improvement.

As part of the literature review, the researchers of this study sought the advice of persons who were especially knowledgeable about homeless education in general and the MCKV program in particular. First, Hendricks (2010) spoke with the individual who supervised the MCKV program for the U.S. Department of Education (USDoe). In particular, the researcher

asked about peer- reviewed evaluations of the educational effectiveness of the MCKV. The supervisor replied, “If you find anything, let me know” (personal communication, May 25, 2007).

The researcher then spoke with the person who for 5 years had the primary responsibility in the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI) for implementing the MCKV. She was arguably the most informed individual regarding the effectiveness of the MCKV, especially its implementation in North Carolina. When asked where the researchers of this study might obtain scholarly, peer-reviewed assessments of the MCKV funding program, she, similar to the USDoE official, stated that she was not aware of any peer-reviewed studies on the educational effectiveness of the MCKV (personal communication, October 28, 2007). These conversations confirmed the conclusion that although much had been written about homelessness in general and the impact of homelessness on education, the researchers’ initial conclusion was correct: There has been and there remains an absence of peer-reviewed literature evaluating the academic impact of the MCKV.

Data Collection and Analysis Procedures

This lack of assessment in the literature prompted the researchers to investigate the effectiveness of the MCKV on the academic achievement of homeless Grade 6 students in North Carolina. As implemented in North Carolina in 2006 and 2007, only about 20% of local educational authorities (LEAs) received MCKV funding. The other 80% did not. This difference created the possibility of a funded experimental group receiving MCKV support and an unfunded control group that did not receive MCKV funding. The NCDPI provided all Grade 6 EOG test scores for mathematics and reading comprehension for the test given in the springs of 2005, 2006 and a2007. The data indicated LEA (in North Carolina usually the county), housing

status, date of test, and mathematics and reading comprehension scores. The data were analyzed using SPSS ANOVA capability. The Grade 5 scores for all four tests were used as baseline data.

This study was guided by one overarching research question: Do homeless students from LEAs that receive program funding achieve higher EOG reading comprehension and mathematics scores than students from LEAs that are not funded? The researchers compared the change from the pretest (Grade 5) to the posttest (Grade 6) scores of homeless students in the 21 LEAs that received funding to the EOG scores of homeless students in the 90 LEAs that were not funded. Four separate calculations were conducted for reading comprehension and mathematics for 2006 and 2007.

The study was limited to students who had both a Grade 5 pretest score and a Grade 6 posttest score. One independent variable was the test year with two values (i.e., Grade 5, Grade 6) and another was funding category, with two values (i.e., funded or nonfunded). The dependent variables were ratio level EOG scores for reading comprehension and mathematics. A 2 x 2 repeated-measures ANOVA was used to determine whether there was a significant difference between the EOG scores for the two funding states, that is, funded or nonfunded.

The EOG is given in North Carolina once a year in the spring near the end of the school year. The researchers decided to use the students' Grade 5 test scores as the baseline data. However, even though establishing a baseline was desirable, using Grade 5 data created two issues. The first issue was whether the Grade 5 EOG test was appropriate as a pretest for the EOG Grade 6 test. A study of the literature and test descriptions from the NCDPI (2002; Bazemore, Van Dyk, Kramer, Brown, & Yelton, 2006) convinced the researchers that the Grade 5 test was useful as a baseline. Subsequently, the issue also was discussed with one of the psychometricians at the NCDPI. She acknowledged that although the Grade 5 and Grade 6

standard curricula and course of study for the 2 years were different, the tests for Grade 5 and Grade 6 were aligned to measure growth from one year to the next. Thus, using the Grade 5 tests as a baseline for comparison with Grade 6 was reasonable.

The other issue was that requiring both a pretest Grade 5 and a posttest Grade 6 EOG score reduced the number of students' scores that were available because the unmatched cases were omitted. The absence of a pretest score was more common than the absence of a posttest score, but both instances occurred. Approximately 26% of the 2006 data and 23% of the 2007 data were unmatched and were subsequently not used in the study.

Results

Table 1 displays descriptive statistics for reading comprehension EOG scores comparing the same students from Grade 5 in 2005 and Grade 6 in 2006. A 2 x 2 repeated-measures ANOVA found no significant ($p \leq .05$) interaction between grade and funding, $F(1,337) = .026$, $p = .872$); therefore, the researchers tested the main effects of grade and of funding. The difference between the total pretest (Grade 5) and total posttest (Grade 6) reading scores combined across funding states (i.e., the main effect of grade) was not significant, $F(1,337) = 1.14$, $p = .286$. In addition, the difference in reading comprehension scores between students from funded and nonfunded LEAs combined across pretests and posttests (i.e., the main effect of funding) was not significant, $F(1,337) = 2.81$, $p = .094$.

Table 1

Reading Comprehension: 2006 Posttest Versus 2005 Pretest

Funding status	Pretest (Grade 5 2005)	Posttest (Grade 6 2006)	Total
Funded	$M = 252.55$ $SD = 10.33$ $N = 250$	$M = 253.44$ $SD = 2.85$ $N = 250$	$M = 252.99$ $SD = 9.09$ $N = 500$
Nonfunded	$M = 254.37$ $SD = 11.89$ $N = 89$	$M = 255.02$ $SD = 12.63$ $N = 89$	$M = 254.69$ $SD = 12.26$ $N = 178$
Total	$M = 253.46$ $SD = 11.11$ $N = 339$	$M = 254.23$ $SD = 10.24$ $N = 339$	$M = 253.84$ $SD = 10.67$ $N = 678$

Table 2 displays the descriptive statistics for reading comprehension EOG scores comparing the same students from Grade 5 in 2006 and Grade 6 in 2007. A 2 x 2 repeated-measures ANOVA found no significant ($p \leq .05$) interaction between grade and funding, $F(1,333) = .031, p = .860$; therefore, the researchers tested the main effects of grade and the main effects of funding. The difference between the total pretest (Grade 5) and total posttest (Grade 6) reading scores combined across funding states (i.e., the main effect of grade) was significant, $F(1,333) = 4.94, p = .027$, but the size of the difference was small (difference between M s divided by pooled SD s = .20). The difference between reading comprehension scores of students from funded and nonfunded LEAs combined across pretests and posttests (i.e., the main effect of funding) was not significant, $F(1,333) = .020, p = .888$.

Table 2

Reading Comprehension: 2007 Posttest Versus 2006 Pretest

Funding status	Pretest (Grade 5 2006)	Posttest (Grade 6 2007)	Total
Funded	$M = 345.13$ $SD = 19.89$ $N = 249$	$M = 348.42$ $SD = 8.19$ $N = 249$	$M = 346.87$ $SD = 14.04$ $N = 498$
Nonfunded	$M = 345.56$ $SD = 19.50$ $N = 86$	$M = 348.36$ $SD = 7.98$ $N = 86$	$M = 346.49$ $SD = 13.74$ $N = 172$
Total	$M = 345.34$ $SD = 19.69$ $N = 335$	$M = 348.39$ $SD = 8.08$ $N = 335$	$M = 346.86$ $SD = 13.89$ $N = 670$

Table 3 displays descriptive statistics for mathematics EOG scores comparing the same students from Grade 5 in 2005 and Grade 6 in 2006. A 2 x 2 repeated-measures ANOVA found no significant ($p \leq .05$) interaction between grade and funding, $F(1,187) = .273, p = .602$; therefore, the researchers tested the main effects of grade and the main effects of funding. The difference between the total pretest (Grade 5) and total posttest (Grade 6) mathematics scores combined across funding states (i.e., the main effect of grade) was significant, $F(1,333) = 12.43, p = .001$, but the size of the difference was small (.23 pooled *SDs*). The difference in mathematics scores between students from funded and nonfunded LEAs combined across pretests and posttests (i.e., the main effect of funding) was not significant, $F(1,187) = .008, p = .930$.

Table 3

Mathematics: 2006 Posttest Versus 2005 Pretest

Funding status	Pretest (Grade 5 2005)	Posttest (Grade 6 2006)	Total
Funded	$M = 252.69$ $SD = 6.91$ $N = 154$	$M = 254.24$ $SD = 7.14$ $N = 154$	$M = 253.46$ $SD = 7.02$ $N = 308$
Nonfunded	$M = 252.31$ $SD = 8.70$ $N = 35$	$M = 254.40$ $SD = 7.82$ $N = 35$	$M = 253.35$ $SD = 8.26$ $N = 70$
Total	$M = 252.62$ $SD = 7.25$ $N = 189$	$M = 254.27$ $SD = 7.25$ $N = 189$	$M = 253.41$ $SD = 7.64$ $N = 378$

Table 4 displays descriptive statistics for mathematics EOG scores comparing the same students from Grade 5 in 2006 and Grade 6 in 2007. A 2 x 2 repeated-measures ANOVA found no significant ($p \leq .05$) interaction between grade and funding, $F(1,335) = .150, p = .618$; therefore, the researchers tested the main effects of grade and the main effects of funding. The difference between the total pretest (Grade 5) and total posttest (Grade 6) mathematics scores combined across funding states (i.e., the main effect of grade) was significant, $F(1,335) = 8.25,$

$p = .004$, but the size of the difference was small (.23 pooled *SDs*). The difference in mathematics scores between students from funded and nonfunded LEAs combined across pretests and posttests (i.e., the main effect of funding) was not significant, $F(1,335) = .113$, $p = .737$.

Table 4

Mathematics: 2007 Posttest Versus 2006 Pretest

Funding status	Pretest (Grade 5 2006)	Posttest (Grade 6 2007)	Total
Funded	$M = 345.18$ $SD = 19.79$ $N = 252$	$M = 348.15$ $SD = 9.70$ $N = 252$	$M = 346.66$ $SD = 14.75$ $N = 504$
Nonfunded	$M = 345.22$ $SD = 14.56$ $N = 85$	$M = 349.13$ $SD = 7.66$ $N = 85$	$M = 347.18$ $SD = 13.61$ $N = 170$
Total	$M = 345.20$ $SD = 19.68$ $N = 337$	$M = 348.64$ $SD = 8.68$ $N = 337$	$M = 346.92$ $SD = 14.18$ $N = 674$

Homeless students from the LEAs that received MCKV funding did not demonstrate significantly different achievement in reading comprehension or in mathematics than the homeless students from LEAs that did not receive MCKV funding. Homeless students did demonstrate small gains over time in three out four tests, but those gains were for all homeless students combined across those who were in funded and nonfunded LEAs.

Conclusion

Effect of MCKV Funding on Academic Performance

The most important issue of this study was to determine whether MCKV funding improved academic performance. The data did not support this conclusion: There was no significant difference in the EOG test scores of homeless students in funded and nonfunded LEAs. Each LEA in North Carolina determines how the subgrant funds are to be used. As a result, many approaches have been made to meeting the academic needs of homeless students.

Some of them have probably been more effective than others. It is difficult to identify which approaches have been more important in improving academic achievement.

There is no easy answer to explain why the MCKV has not had a greater impact on the educational experience of Grade 6 homeless students. The 18 activities for which the MCKV can legally provide support are inherently valuable to the education of homeless students. It is difficult to find fault wanting children to be present in school, providing transportation, facilitating registration, providing school supplies, and so on. All of these educational services are of great value to homeless students. However, even though all of these services are valuable, most of them focus on the *at-school* experience, whereas the major impediments to educational success for homeless students very likely lie outside of the classroom.

Historically, North Carolina has done very little in comparison to some states (e.g., Texas, Minnesota, and Virginia) to improve the education of homeless students. Even though this study did not conclude that MCKV funding significantly improved the EOG scores of homeless Grade 6 students in North Carolina, the MCKV, even in its moderately funded state, has achieved such important goals as increasing the school attendance of homeless student (Jeynes, 2002; Kerbow, Azcoitia, & Buell, 2003).

This empirical study needs to be replicated in states that provide stronger support for homeless education than is the case in North Carolina. The researchers suspect that in environments that have programs supporting homeless families, the MCKV may provide the additional impetus needed for significant academic improvement. That the MCKV did not achieve its academic goal in North Carolina, a state where little more is done to help homeless students, should not lead the reader to conclude that the MCKV is not effective and should be discontinued. That is certainly not the conclusion of these researchers. This study only

empirically validated that the MCKV has not been effective in a state that has few other educational services for homeless students. An empirical study similar to the analysis conducted in this study made in a more supportive environment may provide clearer evidence of the usefulness of MCKV.

Homeless children of all ages are under tremendous strain from a variety of sources. All of the MCKV-funded treatments, important and valuable as they are, cannot alone overcome the massive negative consequences of homelessness. For example, most homeless children lack a good place to study. In addition, they often are uncertain about their next meal, and they are concerned about where they will sleep. These basic issues of survival can and often do dominate the lives of homeless children. Another fact is that even good parents in the midst of the homeless experience can be distracted by financial and personal crises. In such an environment, parental involvement in encouraging and assisting their children with homework is a low priority. Homeless parents often do not engage in educational support at all. Beyond the parental issues, the normal social relationships that are so important to adolescents are disrupted, and the general lack of stability created by the homeless experience presents a devastating challenge for homeless students. In short, although the MCKV was well intentioned and resulted in inherently valuable legislation, it has not been sufficient in remediating the disruptions in homeless students' lives that could lead to academic improvement for these students.

More resources for the MCKV would certainly help to meet these challenges, although more resources are not necessarily the panacea needed to address this complex problem. The researchers agree with advocates for the homeless population (e.g., National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth, 2008; Wong et al., 2004) that the funds currently allocated to support homeless students are insufficient. Advocates for the homeless population

have made a strong case for increased funding. The researchers believe that their efforts are worthy of attention and support. This empirical study strengthens the advocates' case that more needs to be done. In short, the underfunded MCKV is important but inadequate. The recommendations that follow, which the researchers are confident would make the MCKV more effective, cannot be achieved without expanded funding.

Recommendations

Even before the passage of the MCKV in 2001, school social workers had begun to address the problem of homeless students. The HERO program, described by Davey, Penuel, Allison-Tant, and Rosner (2000), is one example. The program focused on activities and services designed to enhance the social environment and the self-image of homeless students. Self-image, confidence, and motivation are fundamental to educational success. These characteristics are especially challenging for homeless students. These important concepts are not specifically addressed in any of the 18 MCKV-funded services.

A second program (Knowlton, 2006) was designed to improve the classroom teachers' knowledge of and ability to respond to homeless students. Typical classroom teachers lack adequate training and knowledge regarding the special needs of homeless students. This lack of preparation exists, even though classroom teachers usually spend more time with homeless students than do school psychologists, social workers, administrators, or counselors combined. In the researchers' opinion, a "homeless friendly" classroom may be the single most important at-school factor in the academic and social success of homeless students. As currently structured, the MCKV does very little to create more effective classroom experiences for homeless children.

A third intervention modality stresses the importance of the role of counselors and social workers in dealing with homeless situations (Baggerly & Borkowski, 2004). Although the social

worker is almost always the person in the school setting charged with responding to the problems and special needs of homeless students, the literature has been generally silent on the importance of the social worker in interactions with homeless students. Furthermore, the social worker's interaction with the homeless family needs to be expanded. Social workers and counselors need to be trained more effectively to address the special issues relevant to homelessness.

Given the early period of these three interventions, it might be conjectured that homeless intervention programs were started before the MCKV was enacted. After its adoption, these interventions were allowed to lapse, perhaps because it was expected, or at least hoped, that the MCKV would satisfy the need in this area. In the review of the literature, the researchers found no recently initiated programs to train counselors, social workers, and especially classroom teachers in dealing with homeless students. Hendricks's (2010) 12 years of experience as a school social worker, and Hendricks and Barkley's (in press) analysis of the literature led the researchers to conclude that the MCKV is a necessary but inadequate program. School social workers could learn from the intervention efforts of the pre-MCKV period.

Possible modifications to the MCKV show merit in contributing to the academic achievement of homeless students. Just as the MCKV calls for the appointment of state coordinators to oversee the services provided to homeless students, the researchers believe that the MCKV should mandate that teachers, counselors, and social workers be trained to better serve the needs of homeless students. Extensive training programs (e.g., knowledge of MCKV, educational techniques for working specifically with homeless children, interventions outside of the school building) for teachers, counselors, and social workers should be a requirement for any LEA that applies for a subgrant under the MCKV (Markward & Biros, 2001). This training will increase the probability that the MCKV can make an educational difference in the lives of

homeless students. Although the researchers concluded that skeletal funding of the MCKV has not achieved the desired academic goals, they are confident that the MCKV, in conjunction with other programs, is promising.

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