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First, thank you to the House Children & Youth and Education Committees for hosting this much needed session and thank you to all of the other advocates who took the time to come out to show support for our Commonwealth's most vulnerable kids and youth. We're building a strong statewide coalition, and it's always wonderful to see everyone come together in person after months of zoom meetings.

I work for a small, Pittsburgh-based nonprofit called Homeless Children's Education Fund (HCEF) that works to advance the education of children and youth experiencing homelessness, as defined by the McKinney Vento Act, throughout Allegheny County. We serve around 1,000 students per year with critical education support ranging from afterschool programming at shelters to paid workforce development opportunities for high school students to scholarship funding and much more.

Every day, we see that when you connect young people experiencing homelessness with e.g. tutoring, regular transportation to school, systems navigation, all of the things that our school homeless liaisons and ECYEH staff statewide are constantly stretching their capacity to provide, they can accomplish great things - whether it's a 2nd grader going from not knowing the alphabet to reading his first Pete the Cat book by himself, or a 12th grader deciding to pursue college after getting some help with the FAFSA.

Unfortunately, though, many students across the state don't have access to this type of individualized support, and this lack is borne out in the current **aggregate outcomes** for these students:

58% of unstably housed students in PA were **chronically absent** from school, meaning they missed at least 10% of classroom instruction time over the year, as compared to only 20.3% of the total student population.

The **4-year graduation rate** in PA is 87% for all students; only 68.8% of unstably housed students graduate on time, meaning they're 2.4 times more likely than the general student population to drop out or delay graduation. This traces a direct line to future homelessness, as research indicates that young adults without a high school diploma are over 4 times more likely to face homelessness and displacement.

Nationally, high school students experiencing homelessness are **over four times more likely to attempt suicide** and **over 2.5 times more likely to be bullied on school property**.

It's a platitude at this point, but one worth repeating, that every system is perfectly designed to get the results it gets. These are the results our system was designed to produce, but the good news is, we've already laid the foundation to build a better one. Over the past two years, regional ECYEH offices and school districts across the state have been able to provide unprecedented new services and wraparound supports for students experiencing homelessness thanks to a dedicated federal investment through American Rescue Plan Homeless Children and Youth funding.

ARP funds allowed schools to provide more flexible school transportation options to families, decreasing the amount of school students miss due to displacement; they provided districts the opportunity to hire outreach workers dedicated specifically to working with unstably housed students and families individually to meet their unique educational needs; they expanded preventative services like emergency hotel stays. They offered a path forward for students across the Commonwealth, and we have a golden opportunity now to keep moving along this path.

When these federal investments expire in January 2025, the legislature and Shapiro administration will face a choice: you can let these new programs die, consigning students to long periods of absenteeism while they wait for transportation or wraparound supports that districts can't afford to provide, or you can replace these investments with state funds, setting a national precedent for how states should be addressing the growing youth homelessness crisis and ensuring that our most vulnerable students have access to all the opportunities that they deserve.

The transportation, enrollment, and wraparound assistance provided by the McKinney Vento Act, our regional ECYEH offices, and our local school-based homeless liaisons are our strongest means to ensure that students experiencing homelessness across PA have the chance to thrive in school and in life. But they need our help. They need dedicated, sustainable funding to function appropriately, and I implore you to prioritize this in the coming year.