



Increasing Access to Higher Education for Students Experiencing Homelessness: Utilizing Transition Plans to Empower Students

This brief is designed for educators who want to support the educational aspirations of students experiencing homelessness. Over the past few decades, many PK-12 educators and community partners have focused time and resources on improving high school graduation rates for these students to create an educational foundation as they transition to adulthood. While continued work is needed to support access to and success in the PK-12 system, progress has been made over the past decade.

Most of these young people will also benefit from a postsecondary degree, credential or certificate to achieve future financial and residential stability. Although students experiencing homelessness consistently report wanting to earn a college degree, credential or certificate (Hallett, 2010; Hallett et al., 2019; Tierney et al., 2008), they attend and graduate from college at significantly lower rates than their peers (Skobba et al., 2018). Only 15% of individuals 18-25 who experienced homelessness attend a postsecondary institution as compared to 52% of their peers (Kull et al., 2019). They may have attended multiple schools between 9th and 12th grades, which reduces the likelihood of developing trusting relationships with educators and peers who could support their college aspirations. Many high school students experiencing housing insecurity will be the first in their families to pursue college. These students benefit from proactive and holistic guidance from trusted educators who consider their current experiences and future goals.

High school teachers, counselors, administrators and community partners can utilize a college transition planning process to support the aspirations of students experiencing homelessness. While educational

transition plans have previously been utilized to support students with special needs and those exiting foster care, this tool has rarely been leveraged to address the unique needs of students experiencing homelessness and housing insecurity. A transition plan enables educators to guide students in articulating goals, identifying potential challenges, accessing resources, and taking consistent steps toward turning their goals into reality. Transition plans allow for the development of tailored strategies that recognize each student's individual strengths and challenges. This collaborative and holistic transition process enables educators the ability to co-create personalized plans with students. The process empowers students to pursue postsecondary opportunities confidently. By centering the student's voice in the planning process, this tool supports meaningful and actionable transition planning that aligns with the students' goals and aspirations.

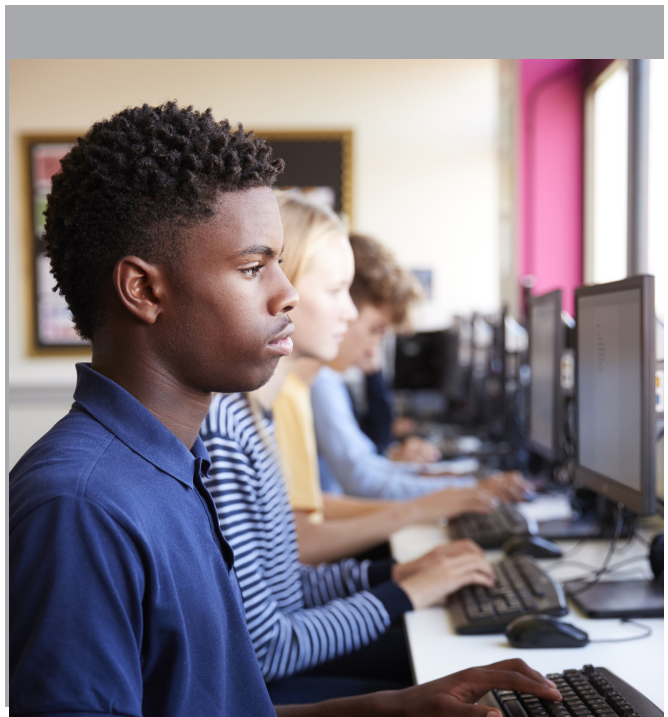
What Is a Transition Plan?

A transition plan is a structured process of collaborating with students (and potentially their family members) to discuss future aspirations and gathering the information needed to successfully achieve those goals. Transition planning is a proactive approach to prepare students for life beyond high school that focuses on their educational, vocational, and personal goals. The process involves identifying resources, setting achievable milestones, and ensuring ongoing support as students transition out of high school. Transition plans offer a sense of direction and security by addressing both immediate and long-term needs. Students have a sense of agency in the process and take an active role in shaping their futures. The transition planning tool is designed to be flexible, adaptable to each student's unique circumstances, and focused on sustainable outcomes.



Who Could Support Students in Developing Transition Plans?

- ⇒ High school guidance counselors could incorporate transition plans within their college support programming. Students would fill out a draft of the transition plan prior to meeting with the counselor.
- ⇒ College preparation teachers could integrate the transition plans into their classes or programming.
- ⇒ A school or district may decide to adopt college transition plans as an overarching strategy to support the academic success of students experiencing homelessness. The homeless liaison or another district representative could serve as an additional resource for the student.
- ⇒ Community partners (e.g., afterschool programs, religious organizations or college preparation groups) who support students and families experiencing homelessness could integrate transition plans into their work.
- ⇒ Agencies that specifically support students experiencing homelessness (e.g., drop-in centers, homeless shelters or youth shelters) could integrate the transition plans into their overall support programming for youth and/or their family.
- ⇒ Family members, guardians or other important individuals within a student's network could also be involved in the process. Some students may have close relationships with their parents or guardians and want those individuals be part of their planning process. Other students may not have consistent contact with family members.
- ⇒ We recommend making sure that both the student and the educator providing support have a copy of the transition plan. Students experiencing homelessness frequently move — sometimes within little notice. They may lose contact with the educator and would benefit from having a structured outline of how to keep moving forward as they begin at another school. And, educators should keep a copy because students may misplace the document.



How Can Transition Plans Be Used in Practice?

It is essential to create a supportive environment where students feel heard and valued. Encourage open communication, and ensure that the planning process is student-centered, with their goals and preferences leading the discussion.

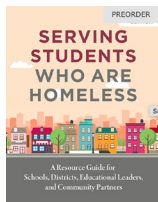
- ⇒ While the tool can be beneficial for students experiencing homelessness, the process could work for all students — especially for students from low-income backgrounds or who will be the first in their family to attend college. As such, a school or district could broaden the scope and integrate transition plans into their overall programming.
- ⇒ We developed initial templates to provide guidance, but institutions should consider how to customize these tools to reflect their students' needs.
- ⇒ Students will be at different stages in identifying goals and strategies for being successful as they transition out of high school. Some students will have a clear vision of their goals while others may need guidance exploring the possibilities. The transition plans help both the student and educators to understand where the gaps in knowledge are for each student.
- ⇒ The tool empowers students. Involve students in the decision-making process and encourage them to take ownership of their transition plans. Provide them with the tools and resources they need to make informed choices about their futures.
- ⇒ Incorporate flexibility. Transition plans should be adaptable to address changing circumstances and emerging needs. Regularly review and update the plan to ensure it remains relevant and supportive.
- ⇒ Students and educators should leverage community resources. Connect students with local organizations and services that can offer additional support, such as housing assistance, mental health services, and college preparation programs.
- ⇒ Educators should focus on students' strengths. Highlight each student's strengths and use these as a foundation for building their transition plan, helping them to see their potential and feel more confident about their future.

⇒ Additional Resources

[Schoolhouse Connection](#) is a national nonprofit organization that focuses on improving educational access and success for students experiencing homelessness. They provide practical recommendations and resources for teachers, administrators, families and community partners. They have a page dedicated to [higher education](#) resources, including a tip sheet for homeless liaisons and a tip sheet related to helping students prepare for college.

[The National Center for Homeless Education](#) provides guidance related to the federal Education for Homeless Children and Youth (EHCY) Program. They have a page dedicated to [higher education](#) resources, including a toolkit to guide discussions with students and families, and resources related to filling out the financial aid forms.

For more information about the goals of college transition plans or advice for educators integrating this tool into their work with students and families, please review this complementary brief. In addition, the plans for 11th and 12th grade students can be accessed on our website.



Check out “[Serving Students Who Are Homeless](#)” second edition book by Ronald E. Hallett, Ann M. Aviles and Linda Skrla, out September 2025 from Teachers College Press.



The Pullias Center for Higher Education Promoting Equity in Higher Education

The world’s leading research center on student access and success in higher education, the Pullias Center for Higher Education advances equity in higher education and provides innovative, scalable solutions to both improve college outcomes for underserved students and to enhance the performance of postsecondary institutions. The Pullias Center is located within the USC Rossier School of Education.

Suggested Citation:

Woelki, W. T., Hallett, R. E., & Aviles, A. M. (2025). *Increasing Access to Higher Education for Students Experiencing Homelessness: Utilizing Transition Plans to Empower Students*. Pullias Center for Higher Education at the University of Southern California.

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