



## *CoC and ED Collaboration Case Studies: CoC and District of Columbia Schools Partnership Focuses on Data*

### *Summary*

The Community Partnership for the Prevention of Homelessness (TCP) and the Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE) in Washington, D.C. have developed a comprehensive data sharing arrangement that benefits each agency, while significantly improving services for children and youth experiencing homelessness. A sophisticated, collaborative data sharing system and strategy inform both planning and client-specific practice.

### *Background Info*

TCP is both the Collaborative Applicant and HMIS lead for the Continuum of Care (CoC) that serves the District of Columbia (DC). TCP's Director chairs the D.C. Interagency Council on Homelessness (ICH), with OSSE acting as a key stakeholder.

### *Promising Practice Description*

The OSSE's Statewide Longitudinal Data System (SLED) is a comprehensive repository of student and education-related data that gathers information across systems in DC. SLED provides extensive educational data to schools, the District of Columbia, and the CoC. The system enables better planning, trend analysis, performance projections, program evaluation, and stakeholder empowerment, while helping improve educational and services outcomes. The DC system has been recognized as a model among SLED implementations.

SLED receives data from several sources:

- Local homeless education liaisons provide data daily (demographics, attendance and school enrollment);
- TCP HMIS provides monthly data on school-age children in homeless families and youth-specific projects;
- Special education information is entered as a separate data stream;
- English proficiency information is also gathered;
- The DC Department of Human Services provides key family data - including information on participants in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF); and
- The DC Department of Health provides data utilized to determine need for the School Lunch Program

In the near future, SLED plans to incorporate additional types of data -- including information on school truancy, youth rehabilitation, children in public housing (from the District Housing Authority), and data from the Department of Employment Services -- that can help homeless education liaisons better meet the needs of students.

Because the system creates a unique student identifier, it has capacity to help track students who change schools, and as they move through varied community services. Service providers from different community systems have the authority to identify children and youth and document their living situations for the purpose of determining their eligibility for homeless and other local community services programs. It is important to note that a key guiding principle underlying the success of local data sharing has been the willingness to set aside differences in definitions of homelessness across programs and to focus on establishing a better system of care for young people in need, regardless of housing status.

Disparate data collection points feed information into OSSE's data repository, which makes sharing of information and coordinated care more feasible. For example, on identifying a child as homeless, a school sends the child's demographic and enrollment information to OSSE. If a family shelter admits the same child, it will be able to access school enrollment data as well. The shelter is then in a better position to work with the District's Homeless Education Coordinator to ensure addressing all the needs of the child and the family.

All contributing agencies have begun to establish data sharing agreements so they may access the SLED data system. By maintaining focus on the shared long-term goal of helping each other to identify and assist children in need, District agencies are overcoming historical turf separations.

SLED therefore has the ability to generate a multi-year picture, including enrollment and assessment data, throughout a student's educational career. These longitudinal profiles enable CoC project staff to "speak the same language" as their school system counterparts.

## *Resources & Relationships*

**Local resources support community-focused response.** Initially funded through the federal Statewide Longitudinal Data Systems (SLDS) Grant Program, OSSE is now locally funded and able to support staff to work on unique student identifiers and conduct community-focused data analysis. Other staff working as information technology specialists are building out the system and assist the partners with data interfaces. SLED encouraged buy-in from potential partners by avoiding the addition of any data entry requirements to participation. This decision was tied to OSSE's vision -- that SLED should augment, not replace, any partner's current data system, becoming a responsive hub for all local youth and children's information

**Benefits of bringing new data to the table.** The SLED data repository provides a wider range of information on children and youth experiencing homelessness than the HUD Point in Time (PIT) count, which only provides information on children that CoC programs are already serving. This substantially enhances the community's capacity for planning and response.

**OSSE has been a driving force in fostering data sharing across systems.** From the outset, OSSE staff have actively explained the mutual benefits of collaboration to all potential partners, making certain that data sharing is seen as having value as a two-way street and encouraging broad participation.

## *Challenges & Barriers*

**Legal difficulties at the outset.** The biggest barrier to getting SLED's data sharing effort off the ground was the development of a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) that satisfied the legal counsel of all parties involved. This process took three years to develop, and required many formal and informal meetings during this time.

**Data confidentiality considerations.** OSSE diligently follows Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) rules and has established its own guidelines and policies to ensure that data sharing is FERPA-consistent. In this regard, OSSE has determined that SLED data may be shared with any agency that is addressing a child's educational needs. As such, since the CoC is committed to improving the educational outcomes of children and youth experiencing homelessness, CoC projects may have access to SLED data.

**Data access is not completely unfettered.** While SLED regularly receives input from the TCP HMIS, SLED data does not feed back into HMIS. Instead, appropriate CoC project staff are granted read-only access to SLED. The CoC can access only records for clients with whom CoC project staff are working; and CoC project staff have no ability to browse the SLED database freely.

## *Key Lessons Learned*

**Use MOUs to support collaboration.** The process of creating a data sharing MOU, while initially cumbersome and requiring vetting across multiple systems, is essential to data systems collaboration. The OSSE MOU was especially thoughtfully crafted, and can serve as a model or template for use by other communities.

**Local funding is sufficient as a source of support.** Other communities may be able to replicate at least a portion of what is being accomplished in the District with local resources — as the District has been able to transition from initial dependence on federal funding to reliance on local support.

**Commit to continuous improvement.** Asking for feedback from everyone involved in accessing data facilitates improvement of data-sharing protocols, and helps build both confidence and good will. Communities that adopt a commitment to continuous improvement in data practices are more likely to succeed.

**Flexibility overcomes barriers to collaboration.** Initially, OSSE had insisted that partner agency systems export their data in a specific template. As time went on, OSSE decided to accept whatever data formats that partner agencies could provide and then convert the data to a standard template. OSSE learned through this process that it's sometimes better to be flexible in approach when seeking to cultivate cross-systems collaborations.

**Respect data privacy.** CoC requests for OSSE-based reports are made for specific, well-defined, and clearly communicated reasons. Any CoC reports that include SLED data are made available as separate documents direct from OSSE, and are not incorporated as part of the HMIS data base. This protocol helps to increase users' sense of confidence in the respect that the system pays to data privacy.

**Success in one arena can lead to progress in others.** District agencies are now working together to develop a homeless youth-focused coordinated entry model for hard-to-serve youth, in part based on the positive cross-systems history with SLED. HMIS and SLED data are already being collected on an ad hoc basis for homeless youth, and will be built into the formal coordinated entry system.