



## EVALUATION BRIEF

# Assessment & Building Capacity Tool (ABC Tool): Impact and Key Learnings

## Background

When students experiencing homelessness are supported in schools, that experience lays the groundwork for their academic and future success. However, for this to be possible, school staff need to be adequately equipped with tools, funding, and partnerships to support students experiencing homelessness in their districts. That is why Building Changes developed the Assessment & Building Capacity Tool (ABC Tool), a framework that helps school staff assess current processes and services for students experiencing homelessness and guides them to create, strengthen, and sustain services that build capacity to best serve these students. The goal of the ABC Tool is to assist school staff with forming strategies and devising specific plans that improve support for students and families experiencing homelessness in their communities.

In Washington State, nearly 40,000 K–12 public school students experienced homelessness during the 2021–22 school year, and the majority (64%) were youth of color.<sup>[1]</sup> Student homelessness creates barriers to participation in school, such as high mobility, lack of documentation and transportation, poor health, and lack of food, clothing, and school supplies. Homelessness also impacts student academic outcomes. For example, according to a report by Building Changes, in 2021–22, about one-quarter (24%) of students experiencing homelessness were proficient in English language arts, compared to 53% of housed students.<sup>[1]</sup> In that same year, 14% of students experiencing homelessness were proficient in mathematics, compared to 40% of housed students. Additionally, students experiencing homelessness who are living doubled-up have academic outcomes that are similar to those living in hotels/motels and shelters and those who are unsheltered.

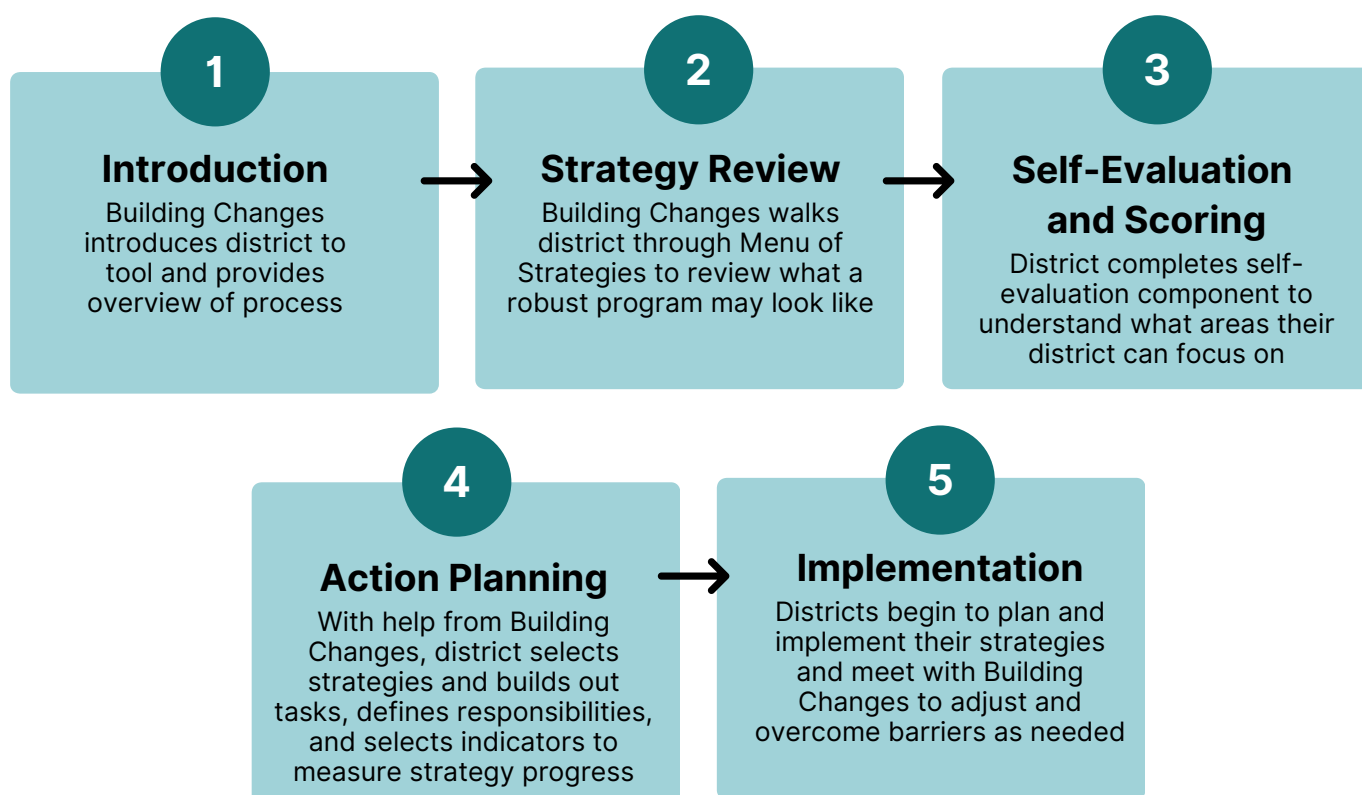
<sup>1</sup> Building Changes. (2023). Students Experiencing Homelessness in Washington's K–12 Public Schools: 2015–2022 Trends, Characteristics, and Academic Outcomes. Seattle, WA: Building Changes. Retrieved from [https://buildingchanges.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/2015-2022\\_K-12\\_OutcomesReport\\_Updated110723\\_2.pdf](https://buildingchanges.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/2015-2022_K-12_OutcomesReport_Updated110723_2.pdf)



McKinney-Vento liaisons, school staff who support students experiencing homelessness, help identify students and match them with additional services to increase access to basic needs and educational instruction. One challenge facing these liaisons is the inability to accurately and efficiently identify students experiencing homelessness to provide services. Additionally, McKinney-Vento is an underfunded mandate, with one report showing just \$29.44 in federal funds spent per homeless student in Washington State, only half the national average of \$60.[2] Another issue is understaffing: a 2019 report from the Washington State Auditor showed districts were only able to spend an average of 20 minutes with each homeless student per month.[3] McKinney-Vento underfunding and understaffing limit the capacity to identify and provide adequate services and supports to students experiencing homelessness.

The ABC Tool aims to address these challenges by providing McKinney-Vento liaisons with a framework that consists of a self-assessment paired with an action plan. The process of working with the ABC Tool is detailed in Figure 1. Building Changes helps navigate this process by walking our partnering school districts through the tool, facilitating monthly check-ins, and providing support for liaisons so they can move their ideas into implementation. In addition, Building Changes helps contribute to district implementation plans by sharing our **Menu of Strategies**, a working collection of recommendations compiled by Building Changes and informed by students and families experiencing homelessness, school districts, and community-based organizations statewide (see Table 1). During the 2023-24 school year, Building Changes provided ABC Tool tailored technical assistance to seven school districts, including one charter school, and facilitated \$6,071 in flexible funding from the Biella Foundation to support strategy implementation and students experiencing homelessness in each district.

**Figure 1.** ABC Tool and the Tailored Technical Assistance Process.



2 National Center for Homeless Education. (2021). Federal Data Summary School Years 2016-17 Through 2018-19: Education for Homeless Children and Youth. Greensboro, NC: University of North Carolina, National Center for Homeless Education. Retrieved from <https://nche.ed.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Federal-Data-Summary-SY-16.17-to-18.19-Final.pdf>

3 Office of the Washington State Auditor. (2019). Performance Audit Report Highlights: Opportunities to Better Identify and Serve K-12 Students Experiencing Homelessness. Retrieved from <https://sao.wa.gov/reports-data/audit-reports/opportunities-better-identify-and-serve-k-12-students-experiencing-homelessness>



**Table 1. ABC Tool Strategies by Focus Area.**

Strategy focus area	Definition	Examples
<b>Training</b>	All school and district staff are trained annually on the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, including ways to identify, respond to, and support students.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Deliver trainings that explain definitions of homelessness, how to look for signs that a student may be experiencing homelessness, and educational rights protected through the McKinney-Vento law. Trainings should be in easily accessible formats (e.g., webinars, in-person, summer institutes) and focus on practical applications.</li> <li>• Deliver trainings on confidentiality and mandated reporting, and how to meet requirements in culturally responsive ways.</li> </ul>
<b>Culturally responsive communication</b>	Schools ensure consistent, accessible communication with students and families on their rights and available services, and create a welcoming environment for all.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ensure all materials are provided in different languages, accessible to everyone, and tailored to engage diverse populations.</li> <li>• Specially create and curate a newsletter to share resources with families.</li> </ul>
<b>Housing partnerships</b>	Schools and districts have ongoing partnerships with local homeless housing systems, Coordinated Entry (CE), community organizations, and public agencies that assist students and families.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use eco-mapping to identify partners and resources in the community and to create coordination between the district and external partners.</li> <li>• Use Homeless Student Stability Program funding, local foundations, employee union organizations, and parent/teacher associations to support programs and services for students, including those living doubled-up.</li> </ul>
<b>Racial equity</b>	Schools have policies and practices in place to monitor and address racial disproportionality, as well as promote a culturally responsive and diverse staff who reflect students' communities.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Implement frequent and systematic reviews of disaggregated data to identify disparities.</li> <li>• Operate district- and school-level equity departments, teams, or committees that meet frequently to solicit input from students and parents.</li> </ul>
<b>Basic needs</b>	Schools and districts build collaborative connections and relationships to ensure access to food and supplies for students and families.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Utilize flex funds to address student needs, such as in-school food programs like food backpack programs.</li> <li>• Ensure students have devices and internet access.</li> </ul>

Strategy focus area	Definition	Examples
<b>Expanded learning opportunities</b>	Schools offer or facilitate access to programs outside of school hours, as well as structured social emotional and behavioral programs.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Create new afterschool programs with specific supports for students experiencing homelessness (e.g., food, transportation).</li> <li>• Provide students with emotional support or counseling in school or connect them with community mental health services.</li> </ul>
<b>School success</b>	Schools implement structured, individualized, student-centered interventions to support academic success.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Pair students with adult mentors or staff who encourage them to attend school, have dedicated time to build relationships with students, and check in with them daily.</li> <li>• Offer before- and after-school activities that increase students' desire to attend school.</li> </ul>

## Impact and Key Learnings

While these strategies and focus areas are helpful to see how the ABC Tool is being used, it is also important to take note of the impact this tool is having on our partner districts, and by extension, students experiencing homelessness. One way impact was assessed was through a survey of all districts and staff who received ABC Tool tailored technical assistance from Building Changes between 2021 and 2024.

### Helping McKinney-Vento liaisons and school staff

Our school partners identified that this tool helped focus their work and increased their proactivity through data collection efforts, goal setting, and monitoring of progress on those goals. Schools were able to set up tracking systems for student referrals, services, and other mandates because of their use of the ABC Tool.

### Supporting students and families experiencing homelessness

According to the survey, 79% of our school partners “Agreed” or “Strongly Agreed” that the ABC Tool helped them identify previously unidentified students who were experiencing homelessness. Additionally, 80% “Agreed” or “Strongly Agreed” that since starting to use the ABC Tool, the structures and policies in place in their district have improved to better serve students and families experiencing homelessness. This illustrates that our school partners’ support for students is impactful on both systems and individual levels, which creates better outcomes for our students.

### Encouraging school and community partnerships

This includes internal partnerships (i.e., relationships across school departments) that can indirectly support students experiencing homelessness, such as staff providing data and tracking support. It also includes external relationships with community partners. Some examples of these action steps to improve partnerships include establishing regular meetings with new housing partners and their staff to educate them on the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act and inviting existing community partners to collaborate on a joint resource fair. Such efforts can go a long way toward creating more comprehensive services for students and families.



## **Enhancing racial equity**

The ABC Tool was also found to have enhanced racial equity practices in our partnering school districts. A vast majority, 79%, of our school partners mentioned their district had taken steps to address racial equity and culturally responsive practices since starting to use the ABC Tool. An example includes ordering posters from the Washington State Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction in the primary languages of district families to improve representation and accessibility for all families.

## **Effective collaboration and systems of accountability**

The school districts that received ABC Tool tailored technical assistance have shared the importance of the technical assistance piece provided by Building Changes. As one school partner noted, “If we were given that tool without support, it wouldn’t have been meaningful.” Partners shared that Building Changes helped guide school districts in the right direction through collaborative practices. Partners appreciated the expertise of Building Changes staff as well as learnings from previous successful action plans that helped to jumpstart the brainstorming process. Additionally, the frequent check-ins with Building Changes staff helped districts feel more accountable for upholding their identified strategies for implementation. School partners also spoke of the importance of the emotional support from Building Changes in doing this work. “[Building Changes] took something that could have been very tedious and made it not feel tedious. They were friendly, patient, and professional. We had a lot of fun every time we met together.”

*The ABC Tool and technical assistance support school staff serving homeless students and families by encouraging partnerships, enhancing racial equity, and creating systems of accountability.*