

# Evaluation of the Rental Assistance Pilot for Homeless or Highly Mobile Families with School-Age Children

February 2017



## Key Findings

- Existing data and research show that housing instability has a significant impact on school attendance and educational performance.
- All students entering the pilot were experiencing housing instability or school changes, and two-thirds were homeless or doubled up on the day they entered the program.
- At the end of the pilot, 90 percent of the students with a known housing status were stably housed.
- The students who achieved stable housing during the pilot had stable and better attendance than homeless students statewide.
- In contrast, homeless students who did not receive rental assistance missed enough school to be considered chronically absent.

## Background

In 2013, the Minnesota Legislature appropriated \$2 million through the Housing Trust Fund for an initial rental assistance pilot project for families with school-age children who have changed schools or homes at least once in a school year.<sup>1</sup> The goal of the pilot was to improve school attendance by stabilizing their housing. Minnesota Housing collaborated with the Minnesota Department of Education (MDE) to develop and conduct the evaluation. The students in the pilot and study were selected by each of the pilot administrators: Northside Achievement Zone (NAZ) with Project Pride for Living (PPL), Saint Paul Promise Neighborhoods (SPPN) with the Wilder Foundation, and Clay County.

For the 2014-15 school year, the administrators enrolled 121 eligible families and 277 students in the pilot, with most of the students in elementary school. As initially designed, the families received up to two years of rent assistance for the 2014-15 and 2015-16 school years, allowing them to spend only 30 percent of their income on rent with the assistance subsidizing the rest of their rental costs. The purpose of the assistance was to improve housing stability and school attendance and ultimately academic performance.

This evaluation assesses housing stability and school attendance, but not academic performance, which generally takes several years to measure an impact and is beyond the timeline of this evaluation. Statewide standardized academic assessments do not show academic performance for individual students, since those assessments are scaled across all students and are designed to determine how effectively schools are delivering academic standards, not individual student performance.

## Program Descriptions

### *Northside Achievement Zone (NAZ)*

NAZ is a collaboration of organizations and schools partnering with families to prepare children to be ready for college when graduating from high school. Families and children move through a “cradle-to-career” pipeline that provides a range of support services from prenatal through college to career. NAZ concentrates programming and services within a 13- by 18-block area in North Minneapolis. It is

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<sup>1</sup> Although the threshold for participants in the legislation was changing schools or moving homes at least once in a year, the administrators targeted families with significantly more than one school change or moves within a year.

designated a federal Promise Neighborhood and encompasses an area of Minneapolis with disproportionate poverty and violence. Residents face high unemployment and rates of homelessness and school changes. NAZ families have an unemployment rate of 63 percent and an annual median income of around \$18,000. In the 2015-16 school year, 7.9 percent of the students in the NAZ partner public schools were identified as homeless, compared to 5.6 percent for all other schools in the Minneapolis Public School district.<sup>2</sup>

Achievement coaches who provide wraparound services are central to NAZ's model. These coaches work with each NAZ family to determine their needs, help them connect with resources, and provide support. They are located at each partner school to support NAZ families and students.

#### *Saint Paul Promise Neighborhood (SPPN)*

The goal of SPPN is to stabilize lives and improve student achievement for residents. The SPPN zone includes the Frogtown and Summit-University neighborhoods of Saint Paul, spanning a 250-block area with an estimated 22,000 residents. SPPN received a federal Promise Neighborhoods planning grant in 2010. The zone has a high rate of children (35 percent compared to 25 percent statewide) and people of color or Hispanic ethnicity (78 percent compared to 17 percent statewide). The zone includes a large number of recent immigrants, and more than one-third of residents speak a language other than English at home. Residents also have high rates of poverty; nearly all children in SPPN qualify for Free and Reduced Price Lunch program. In the 2015-16 school year, the rate of homelessness for students attending SPPN schools was 4.4 percent, compared with 2.1 percent for all other Saint Paul Public Schools.

Participating families receive various wraparound supports including tenant training, employment training, and peer-support networking. These supports are provided through community navigators who are co-located in each of the partner schools.<sup>3</sup> Navigators work with each family to determine what supports they need and help them get those supports. For families participating in the rent assistance pilot, navigators also work closely with the SPPN rental assistance housing specialist to help families find and maintain housing.

#### *Clay County Housing and Redevelopment Authority*

The Clay County Housing and Redevelopment Authority (HRA) partnered with the Moorhead Public School District to implement the pilot. The HRA's main role was to provide rental assistance and housing; they worked closely with other organizations that provide supportive services, including mental health providers and social service organizations. The HRA's relationship with Churches United for the Homeless and Lakes and Prairie Community Action Partnership (CAP) was particularly valuable in providing families additional support. Households in the pilot were supported by access to employment training, vocational rehabilitation, education programs and treatment programs. In addition to collaborating with other entities to provide support, the HRA benefited from the strong coordinated assessment and referral infrastructure in the community. In the 2015-16 school year, Moorhead Public Schools had a homelessness rate of 0.9 percent across its student body.

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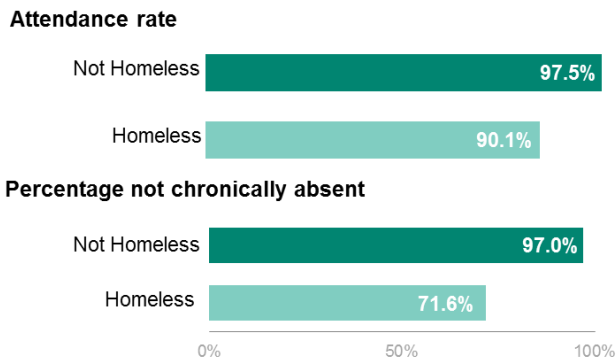
<sup>2</sup> The NAZ partner schools were: Ascension Catholic School, Elizabeth Hall International Elementary School, Harvest Prep and Seed Academy, KIPP Stand Academy, Nellie Stone Johnson School, North High School, Patrick Henry High School, PYC Arts & Technical High School, and Sojourner Truth Academy Elementary School. Included in this report are data only from public school NAZ partners. All the public schools were in the Minneapolis Public School District.

<sup>3</sup> The SPPN partner schools include Jackson Elementary, Maxfield Elementary, and Saint Paul City School. Benjamin Mays Elementary School was added to the SPPN partner schools later and not included in the study. All the public schools were in the Saint Paul Public Schools District.

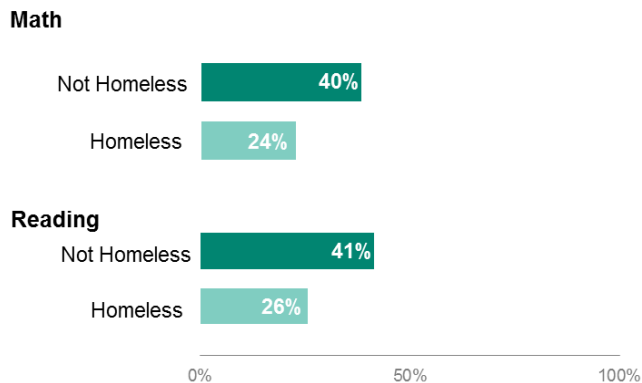
## Context

A growing body of research shows that housing instability has a negative impact on a child’s academic success.<sup>4</sup> As shown in Figures 1 and 2, children who qualify for free and reduced-priced lunch and experience homelessness have lower attendance and perform worse on statewide standardized tests than students who qualify for free and reduced priced lunch but are not experiencing homelessness.<sup>5</sup>

**Figure 1:** Attendance - Students receiving free and reduced-priced lunch



**Figure 2:** Academic proficiency - Students receiving free and reduced-priced lunch



These data show that housing instability impacts educational success beyond the educational disparities for low income students. These impacts can be lasting, particularly when they occur in elementary school.<sup>6</sup> By sixth grade, low attendance correlates with low academic achievement and low graduation rates.<sup>7</sup> In terms of proficiency, homeless third graders are 37 percent less likely than their low income but housed peers to demonstrate reading proficiency and 34 percent less likely to demonstrate math proficiency.<sup>8</sup> Low reading proficiency in third grade correlates with significantly lower academic success.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Reynolds, Arthur, Chin-Chih Chen and Janette E. Herbers. “School Mobility and Educational Success: A Research Synthesis and Evidence on Prevention.” University of Minnesota, 2009.

<sup>5</sup> Eligibility for the USDA’s free and reduced price lunch program is based on income and is a proxy for low-income.

<sup>6</sup> Hernandez, D.J., 2011. Double Jeopardy: How Third-Grade Reading Skills and Poverty Influence High School Graduation. Annie E. Casey Foundation.

<sup>7</sup> “Destination Graduation: Sixth Grade Early Warning Indicators for Baltimore City Schools: Their Prevalence and Impact.” Baltimore Education Research Consortium, 2011.

<sup>8</sup> “Minnesota Report Card.” Minnesota Department of Education. Retrieved February 21, 2017 from <http://rc.education.state.mn.us>.

<sup>9</sup> Early Warning: Why reading by the end of third-grade matters. The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2010.

In addition to the impacts that housing instability has on attendance and educational success, homelessness also has a fiscal impact on school districts. All school districts in the state are responsible for maintaining school stability through periods of homelessness by providing transportation to homeless students to help them stay in their school. The table below shows the higher annual transportation costs for homeless students.

**Table 1:** Transportation costs per student per year  
(2015-16 School Year)

	Minneapolis Public Schools	Saint Paul Public Schools	Moorhead Public Schools
Homeless students	\$5,224.06	\$2,705.24	\$326.24
Housed students	\$402.66	\$399.90	\$511.94

## Pilot Results<sup>10</sup>

### Housing Stability

**All students entering the pilot were experiencing housing instability or school changes, and two-thirds were homeless or doubled up on the day they entered the program.<sup>11</sup>**

**Figure 3:** Housing situation prior to program entry  
n=(277)



**At the end of the pilot, 90 percent of the students with a known housing status were stably housed.<sup>12</sup>**

**Figure 4:** Housing situation at program exit  
n=(277)



<sup>10</sup> The pilot housing data for this evaluation were collected from the Homeless Management Information System in spring 2016. This data get periodically updated throughout the year. School attendance data were extracted from the Minnesota Automated Reporting Student System (MARSS) updated by school districts on a regular schedule.

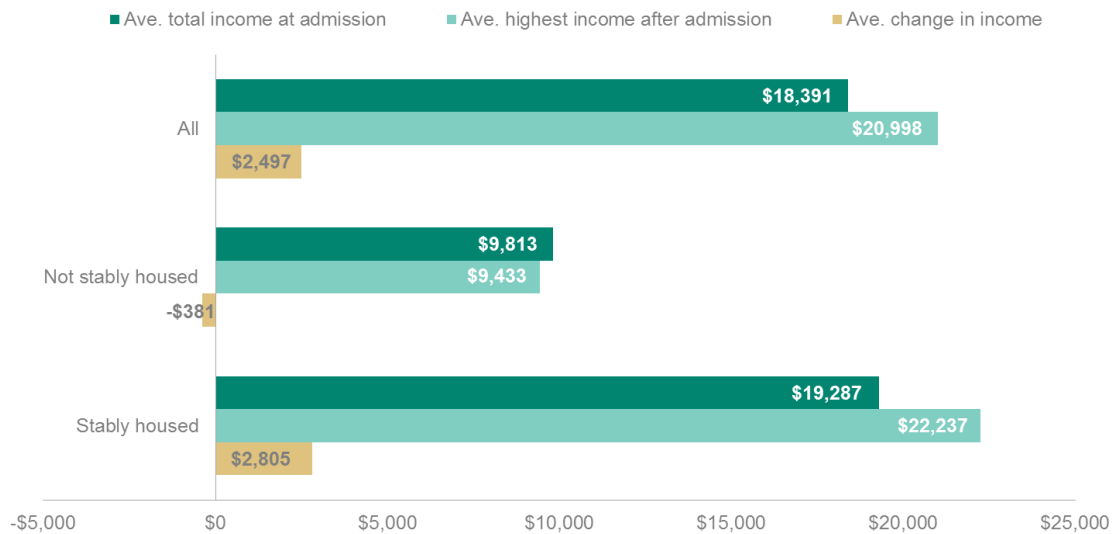
<sup>11</sup> Students in the pilot program were considered *housed* if they lived in rental housing without a subsidy or were in foster care. *Doubled-up* students were staying or living with a family member or friend. Students considered *homeless* were in an emergency shelter, hotel or motel paid for with an emergency shelter voucher, or living in a place not meant for habitation. Many in the “doubled up” group likely meet the federal definition of homeless.

<sup>12</sup> Students who left the program with a positive exit and those who remained in their housing with rental assistance by the end of the program (June 30, 2016) were considered *stably housed*. Positive exit scenarios include transitioning to unsubsidized housing, receiving Section 8 or another permanent housing subsidy, purchasing a home, an increase in gross monthly income exceeding programs limits, and a changed type of housing subsidy. Students were considered *not stably housed* if they had a negative exit from the program. Negative exits include being legally evicted or receiving a notice to vacate for criminal or drug activity or other lease violations, including not paying rent.

**Families that achieved housing stability had higher incomes and were less likely to have a member with a disability.**

Stably housed families in the pilot had higher average annual incomes at program entry than households that did not achieve housing stability (\$19,287 compared to \$9,433). In addition, the average annual income of stably housed households increased by 15 percent during the pilot, while the annual income of those that were not stably housed decreased slightly.

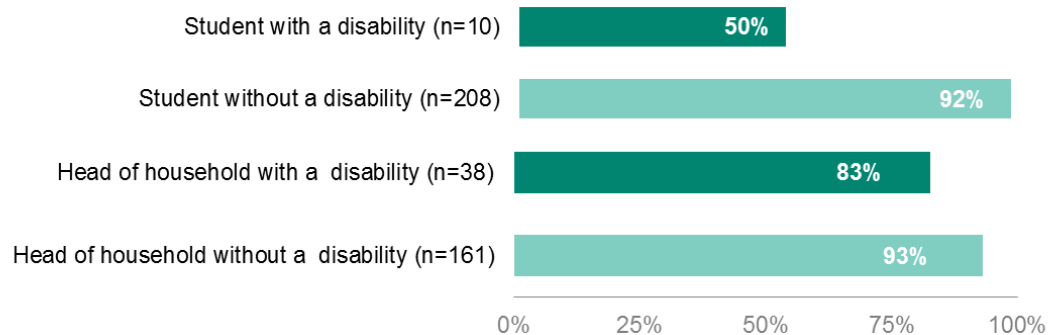
**Figure 5: Average Annual Income**



Having a family member with a disability was correlated with a struggle to achieve stable housing. This indicates these families may need more supports to achieve stable housing.

**Figure 6: Percentage achieving housing stability**

**Achieved stable housing**



## Attendance and Other Improvements

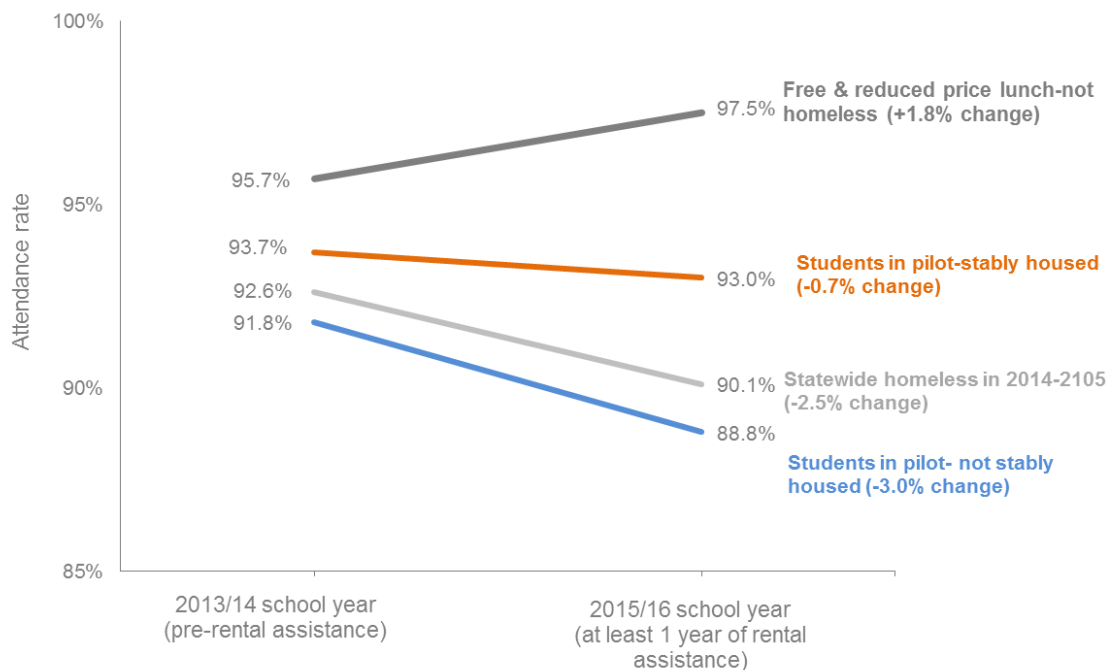
**The students in the pilot who achieved stable housing had stable and better attendance than homeless students statewide.**

We compared the attendance rates for the 2013-14 school year (the year before the families in the pilot first received rent assistance) to the 2015-16 school year (the second year of the pilot), and made the comparison for three groups:

1. All students in the rental assistance pilot (broken out between those stably housed and not stably housed during the pilot).
2. All students in the state who were identified as homeless in the 2014-15 school year.
3. All students in the state who qualified for free and reduced price lunch but were **not** homeless in 2014-15.

Figure 7 shows the change in attendance rate for these groups before and after families received the rental subsidy. The attendance rate for the pilot students who were stably housed stayed essentially the same (a 0.7 percentage point decline from 93.7 to 93.0 percent). In contrast, the attendance rate for pilot students who were not stably housed at program exit decreased by 3 percentage points (from 91.8 to 88.8 percent). For context, the attendance rate during the same period for all students statewide who experienced homelessness in the 2014-15 school year decreased by 2.5 percentage points (from 92.6 to 90.1 percent).

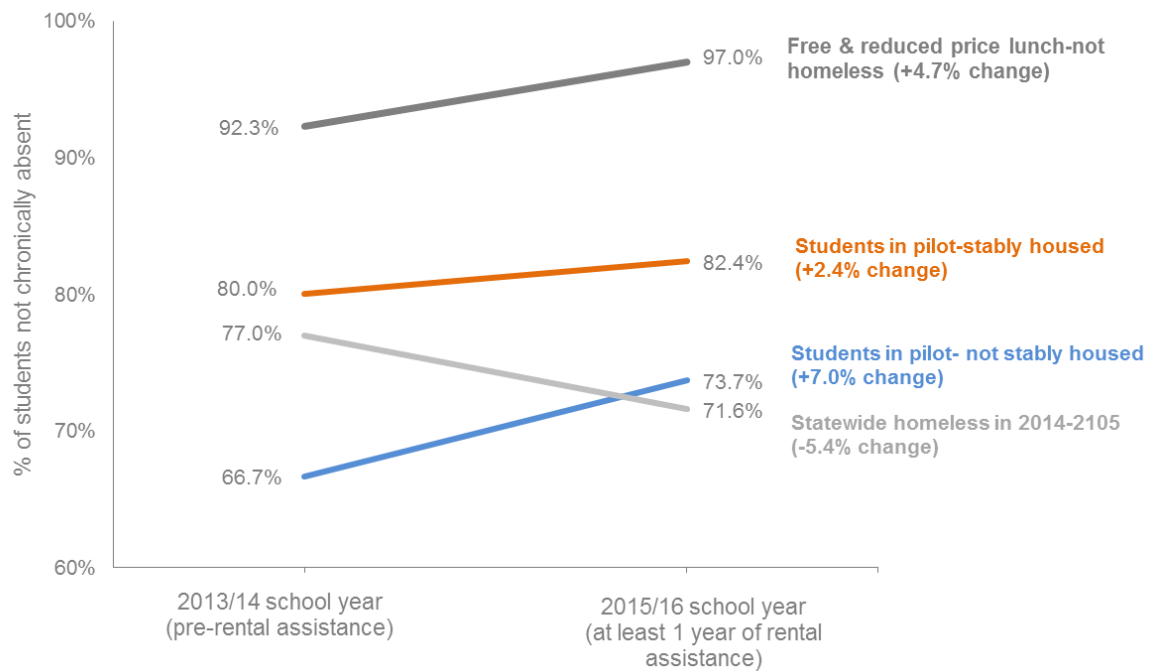
**Figure 7:** Attendance rates pre- and post-rental assistance



Another measure of attendance is chronic absenteeism. A student is considered chronically absent if they are absent for 10 percent or more school days or present for less than 90 percent of school days in a school year. Figure 8 shows the change in the percentage of students who were *not* chronically absent.

An increase in the percentage indicates an improvement in attendance. For homeless students statewide, the not-chronically-absent rate decreased by 5.4 percentage points—meaning that the number of chronically absent homeless students increased during the pilot period. However, for students in the pilot who were stably housed, their not-chronically-absent rate increased by 2.4 percentage points—a decrease in the number of chronically absent students. The rate for students in the pilot who were not stably housed increased by 7 percentage points, however it is hard to draw conclusions from this change because the overall number of these students was low (only 19 students).

**Figure 8: Not chronically absent rates pre- and post-rental assistance**



**Experience of Families**

Program administrators also heard directly from families about the positive impact of the rental assistance.

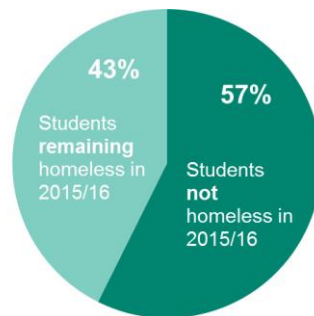
- A NAZ parent shared that since participating in the pilot her children are no longer experiencing the behavioral issues they had the prior year and her daughter has been on the honor roll all year.
- Another NAZ family described that before receiving the rental subsidy they were told their son would have to move to a special education school as a result of behavioral problems. However, after stabilizing their housing, their seventh grade son is reading at a 10<sup>th</sup> grade level and was recently recognized as a talented and gifted student by the state.
- A dad from Clay County said that his two children with learning disabilities have shown great improvement at school since they moved into stably housing. And another Clay County parent has seen her three children’s grades improve and an added benefit is that they can participate in extracurricular activities at school now that they have housing.



## Conclusions

Data on the length of time students experience homeless show that many homeless families resolve their housing instability within a year, while other families struggle to achieve stable housing. Over half (57 percent) of the students statewide who were identified as homeless during the 2014-15 school year, were not homeless the following year (Figure 9). The remaining 43 percent were once again identified as homeless the following year.

**Figure 9:** Homeless status in the 2015-16 school year of students flagged as homeless in the 2014-15 school year  
(n=6,593)



These results suggest that assessing needs and providing tiered assistance may be the most effective strategy for serving students experiencing homelessness.

- Families that are likely to resolve their housing instability with a small amount of support should receive short-term assistance, similar to what is provided under Minnesota Housing’s Family Homeless Prevention and Assistance Program (FHPAP). This will prevent homelessness for these families or minimize how long it lasts.
- Families that need longer-term assistance but do not need additional supports would benefit from longer-term rent assistance.
- Families that struggle with housing stability even with rent assistance would likely benefit from supportive housing (i.e., housing with services), particularly those families who have an adult or child with a disability.

Rental assistance successfully helped families achieve stable housing. Ninety percent of students with a known housing status were stably housed during the pilot. In addition, students achieving housing stability through rental assistance had stable and better attendance than all homeless students statewide. These findings indicate that rental assistance was an important factor in helping students stabilize their school attendance after experiencing housing instability.

Assessing changes in school performance is more difficult. To see the smaller and more incremental improvements that we would expect from housing stability, we would need to track students over a longer period of time or collect data that would capture student academic growth and do so more frequently than the Minnesota Comprehensive Assessments (MCA), the statewide assessment tool. Some schools conduct such assessments, which could help for future evaluation efforts, if available.