

WHAT WOULD IT TAKE?

DISCUSSION PAPER

**Preventing Youth Homelessness in
the Canadian Education System:
Young People Speak Out**

Jayne Malenfant, Kaitlin Schwan, David French,
Stephen Gaetz, & Melanie Redman



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This report draws from the conceptual framing and scholarship of [A New Direction: A Framework for Homelessness Prevention](#), [The Roadmap for the Prevention of Youth Homelessness](#), and [Coming of Age: Reimagining the Response to Youth Homelessness](#). The recommendations build upon the recommendations of several policy briefs published by the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness and A Way Home Canada. We wish to thank all authors of these documents for their insights, and hope this document will extend the impact of their work.

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YOUTH HOMELESSNESS PREVENTION SERIES - DISCUSSION PAPER #1: EDUCATION

In Canada, we have primarily responded to youth homelessness *reactively* rather than *proactively*. We provide emergency supports to young people once they are already on the streets, missing many opportunities to intervene beforehand. Research also tells us that many public systems (e.g., child welfare, education, criminal justice) contribute to young people's risk of homelessness. While youth homelessness is often framed as the responsibility of the youth homelessness sector, the truth is that many public systems affect the housing status of young people. Youth who struggle in the education system, have interactions with the law, or are unable to get their healthcare needs met are more likely to experience homelessness. Likewise, housing precarity makes it difficult to find employment, make progress in school, or build supportive social networks. Youth who worry about where they will sleep or if they will be abused each night are less likely to succeed in or benefit from systems that are neither designed for, nor acknowledge, their circumstances. It is time to transform our public systems to improve outcomes for all youth and reduce the risk of homelessness for any young person.

This discussion paper is part of a series focused on the important roles that public systems can play in preventing youth homelessness in Canada. The foundation of this paper is [*What Would it Take? Youth Across Canada Speak Out on Youth Homelessness Prevention*](#), a study conducted by the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness and A Way Home Canada. As part of this study, over 100 youth with lived experience of homelessness were consulted on how to prevent youth homelessness in Canada. Across 12 communities and 7 provinces and territories, youth told us that public systems should be the engine of youth homelessness prevention in Canada.

This discussion paper also builds on previous work conceptualizing prevention, including specifically [*A New Direction: A Framework for Homelessness Prevention*](#) and [*Coming of Age: Reimagining the Response to Youth Homelessness*](#). This paper also builds on [*The Roadmap for the Prevention of Youth Homelessness*](#), which provides a definition of youth homelessness prevention, a prevention typology, and a common language for policy and practice in this area. *The Roadmap* provides a guide for how to implement youth homelessness prevention across

the country and beyond, centred on research evidence and the voices of young experts who have experienced homelessness.

This series aims to amplify the voices and wisdom of these young people in order to drive public systems change. Through these discussion papers, professionals and policy makers across public systems will be provided with concrete recommendations for how they can participate in youth homelessness prevention.

In the context of COVID-19, public systems will be critical to assessing and meeting young peoples' needs. As the Canadian education system adapts to the pandemic, schools have the opportunity to play an enhanced role in the lives of youth and families who are homeless, precariously housed and/or at-risk of homelessness. Schools need to be adequately resourced and supported by the broader community of services to do this work. This discussion paper outlines some key avenues for action, grounded in the voices of young people themselves.

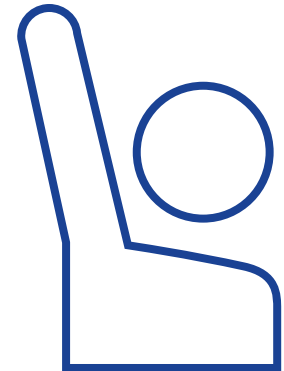


EDUCATION & YOUTH HOMELESSNESS: WHAT DO WE KNOW?

“Nobody told me I was going to end up homeless and on the streets.”

ST. JOHN'S YOUTH

Educators, administrators, counselors, and parents aim to ensure that all students in their school environments are supported, healthy, and meaningfully engaged in learning. However, young learners who have experienced or are currently experiencing homelessness often fail to have these needs met, disengage from school, and/or drop out (Gupton, 2017; Mahwinney-Rhoads & Stahler, 2006).



Education is key to the well-being, success, and stability of all young people. The [*Without a Home: The National Youth Homelessness Survey*](#) found that the drop-out rate for homeless youth was **53.2%** across Canada, compared to a national average of **9%** (Gaetz et al., 2016). The report also found that amongst Canadian youth experiencing homelessness:

- 48% had not graduated from high school, and 46% of these were not in school
- 9% had less than a grade 9 education, and 50% of these were not in school
- 50.5% of youth were not in employment, education, or training (NEET)
- 50% reported having been tested for a learning disability while at school
- 83% reported being bullied at school

Research shows that young people who drop-out of school have shorter life expectancies (Montez et al., 2012), are at greater risk of chronic illnesses (Zimmerman & Woolf, 2014), often experience social exclusion (Liljedahl et al., 2013), and are less likely to secure stable employment (Noble, 2012). Youth experiencing homelessness are also at risk of educational interruptions due to relocation (e.g., moving between shelters, couch-surfing, etc.) (Moore, 2013; Liljedahl et al., 2013). As a result, young people often lose important relationships that support their learning (Moore, 2013) and are more likely to experience social and emotional issues (Mahwinney-Rhoads & Stahler, 2006). Many of these young people also suffer from poor health as a consequence of malnutrition, untreated infections, stress, and incorrect or absent medications (Courtney et al., 2014), all of which negatively impact their educational attainment.

The longer a young person is without a home, the more detrimental the impacts on their education, which can cause further difficulties finding work (Jensen, 2013). This leads to a cycle of instability that often follows them into adulthood (Baker-Collins, 2013).

“Educating teachers, principals, guidance counselors ... to what kinds of services are available and how to access those, in case they see a child, like, a student, literally falling asleep every day in the middle of class. Because, you know, in my case, I didn’t have anywhere to go, but I sure as hell wasn’t missing out on school, you know. I was working every day, I was going to school every day—I just didn’t have a place to sleep. The most that they could do for me, regarding the teachers, was give me a little extra food from the cafeteria or, you know, let me take a break from gym class so I could go and have a nap somewhere else. That’s really the best that teachers are going to be able to do for students that are put into a situation like that. Things have got to change a little bit.” - EDMONTON YOUTH

MAKING THE CASE: WHY SHOULD SCHOOLS BE INVOLVED IN HOMELESSNESS PREVENTION?

Preventing youth homelessness requires more than providing four walls and a roof. As outlined in [The Roadmap for the Prevention of Youth Homelessness](#), youth homelessness prevention can be defined as:

“Policies, practices, and interventions that either (1) reduce the likelihood that a young person will experience homelessness, or (2) provide youth experiencing homelessness with the necessary supports to stabilize their housing, improve their wellbeing, connect with community, and avoid re-entry into homelessness. Youth homelessness prevention thus necessitates the immediate provision of housing and supports for youth experiencing homelessness, or the immediate protection of housing, with supports, for youth at risk of homelessness.” (Gaetz et al., 2018, p. 20)

Schools can play a critical role in preventing homelessness and can be (often are) important [sites of early intervention](#). In fact, youth see schools as the key site that could have prevented their homelessness (Schwan et al., 2018). [Should we place expectations on the school system to help prevent youth homelessness? If so, what might school involvement in prevention look like?](#)

First of all, preventing homelessness can assist young people in their academic achievement. Research shows that preventing youth from becoming homeless can stop educational disruptions from compounding, with stable housing being a key predictor of high school completion (Soloman, 2013, p. 84). Educators and schools are well-positioned to recognize and react to youth’s needs for interventions, and teachers may be the first adult outside the home who becomes aware that a young person is struggling. Most youth in the national [What Would it Take?](#) study wanted to succeed in school and recognized the advantage education would give them in the job market but faced incredible barriers within the education system. Teachers and school staff are in a strong position to help them overcome these barriers, and principals and school boards can support staff to do so. [The Roadmap for the Prevention of Youth Homelessness](#) (Gaetz et al., 2018) outlines some of the key change management pieces required to support this work and to position school-based interventions within an early intervention system of care.

Second, young people have important human rights, including the right to education and housing, under the [Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#) (UDHR), the [International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights](#) (ICCPR), the [International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights](#) (ICESCR), the [Convention on the Rights of the Child](#) (CRC), and the [International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination](#) (ICERD). Canada's acknowledgement of these rights means that young people must be assured access to education, healthcare, and housing. These rights are indivisible and interdependent, which means that none of these rights can be fully enjoyed without the others. Human rights approaches, and their implementation through policy, emphasize the responsibility we all share in ensuring that basic rights are realized [for everyone](#), including young people.

Third, the [Calls to Action](#) articulated by Canada's *Truth and Reconciliation Commission* identify education as a key site to begin processes of reconciliation and recognition of the damaging effects of colonialism. This is echoed by provincial adoptions of First Nations, Metis, and Inuit Education Policy Acts in [Ontario](#), [Manitoba](#), and [Alberta](#), thus far. Recommendations from the Commission argue for more equitable access to education, as well as culturally appropriate lessons. Curricula which erases the experiences of Indigenous peoples within history and the current Canadian landscape directly contributes to stigmas and exclusion of First Nations, Metis, and Inuit peoples ([Thistle, 2017](#)). For Indigenous youth, high drop-out rates are often related to experiences of alienation and anti-Indigenous racism in schools (Baskin, 2007). In the *What Would it Take?* study, 36% of youth who were homeless identified as Indigenous, and many emphasized that the education system could support their housing stability by connecting them with their culture(s). Schools can begin the work of reconciliation by maximizing opportunities for Indigenous communities to develop and lead educational opportunities for their young people, ensuring Indigenous youth feel reflected in the curriculum and are supported to connect with culture, community, and spirituality.

YOUTH'S EXPERIENCES IN CANADIAN SCHOOLS: MISSED OPPORTUNITIES FOR HOMELESSNESS PREVENTION

What Would it Take? revealed that the Canadian education system not only misses some key opportunities for homelessness prevention but that particular school-based practices and policies may put young people at further risk of homelessness.

“A lot of times when I’d have to go to another school because I got suspended for doing something stupid . . . the teacher and principal would literally put me right in front of the class of 30 students and say, “This is [name], he is going to be here once or twice a week and then you guys aren’t going to see him for the rest of the week. And then he’ll come back the next week.” And, it’s like, they don’t know what’s wrong with me, they don’t know what these diagnoses are - like, they would literally say the diagnosis and not explain it to kids... there were a LOT of times I felt that these kids were TERRIFIED of me, like I was some kind of inter-dimensional crazy monster that was just going to rip their heads off at the slightest drop of a hat. So...it does start in schools when it comes to mental health. And there’s no education on it.” - EDMONTON YOUTH

Firstly, many young people felt that teachers and school staff often did not understand the issues they were facing outside of school. Young people explained that their behavior was regularly disciplined, instead of being viewed as a consequence of homelessness, housing precarity, or other challenges they were facing at home or in the community. This contributed to further isolation, distrust, and school disengagement.

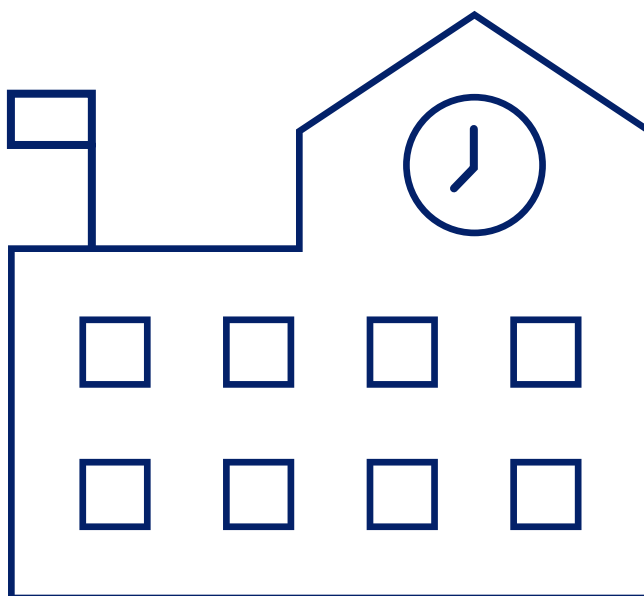
Disconnection between schools and social or health services was frequently mentioned by youth, many of whom noted that school personnel often lack knowledge regarding relevant service providers and referral processes. A lack of connection to, or provision of, mental health supports and information about healthy relationships was also an overarching issue. In rural or smaller communities, a lack of services or information about services often meant young

people were unable to maintain attendance as they had to travel to larger centers to access help or shelter.

Youth reported having a hard time keeping up with attendance because they had to work (or look for work) to support themselves or their families or because they were coping with trauma or health challenges. After-school programs often followed the same strict attendance guidelines that youth struggled to meet. More broadly, youth felt that the poor funding of the education system, as well as low salaries for teachers, led to a poorer quality education and inadequate supports and resources for teachers and students alike. Some youth identified that cultural education was similarly lacking from most school curriculum.

Skills like cooking, job searching, home economics, carpentry, and budgeting were viewed as lacking within secondary schools and also skills which could directly support young people to maintain housing.

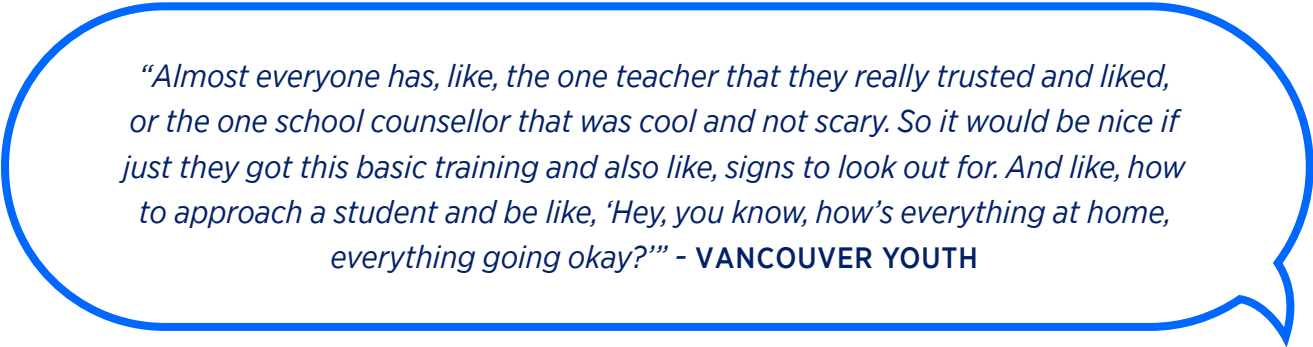
Despite this, school was seen as a point of aspiration, and educational achievement was viewed as a way to gain employment, stability, and autonomy. Graduation may also be seen as an important rite of passage for some young people transitioning into adulthood. Young people named schools as *the* site where youth homelessness prevention work would be most effective. If this is the case, how do we get there?



WHAT DO YOUTH WANT?

With at least 35,000 youth experiencing homelessness in Canada every year (Gaetz, 2014), it is not always easy to identify which students are experiencing homelessness or housing precarity. Nor is it always easy to know what supports to offer, or how to offer them, when you suspect a youth lacks stable housing. During the [What Would it Take?](#) consultations, young people experiencing homelessness identified four key areas where schools could better support their housing stability and educational goals.

1. IMPROVED CURRICULUM



“Almost everyone has, like, the one teacher that they really trusted and liked, or the one school counsellor that was cool and not scary. So it would be nice if just they got this basic training and also like, signs to look out for. And like, how to approach a student and be like, ‘Hey, you know, how’s everything at home, everything going okay?’” - VANCOUVER YOUTH

Youth explained that curriculum must:

- Prepare young people for today’s competitive job market.
- Ensure all young people have access to – and successfully complete – courses that are compulsory for apprenticeship and other post-secondary opportunities.
- Provide opportunities for paid internships, apprenticeships, and co-operative education opportunities – especially in the summer months.
- Ensure all youth have access to life skills – not just cooking and hygiene, but opportunities to develop financial literacy, basic legal knowledge (e.g., about tenancy rights), and institutional navigational skills.
- Include curriculum and community-based educational opportunities focused on Indigenous cultures, histories, ancestry, spirituality, and cultural practices, including local Indigenous culture and history.

- Support knowledge and development of social and emotional skills for young people.
- Prioritize education about healthy relationships and wellness.
- Be rooted in relevant and appropriate topics of interest to youth who may not be engaged or interested in traditional areas of study.

“I feel like the government education system is failing to educate youth on how to properly take care of themselves as adults. They’re assuming everyone comes from a perfect, nuclear family and that they’ve been taught skills, simply as easy as how to make a meal for yourself or even do laundry. A lot of people are coming from families where it’s very dysfunctional and they don’t have the tools necessary to survive on their own. Once they get out of school, as flawed as that system is, at least it’s some kind of structure. As soon as a kid’s 16 and they can leave school or 18 when they have to leave school, they’re, like, left out for the wolves.” - TORONTO YOUTH

2. INVESTMENTS IN TEACHER EDUCATION, TRAINING, & RESOURCES

When teachers and other frontline educational staff are supported, educated, and resourced to better understand the realities of homelessness from young people’s perspectives, they are able to:

- Learn to identify signs that a young person is at risk of trafficking and/or exploitation.
- Understand and notice indicators that a student who is acting out may actually be malnourished, sleep-deprived, or engaging in coping behaviours as a result of housing precarity or other issues.
- Provide resources to students who are housing insecure and may not understand their own situations or what resources are available to help them.
- Support youth struggling with mental health issues.

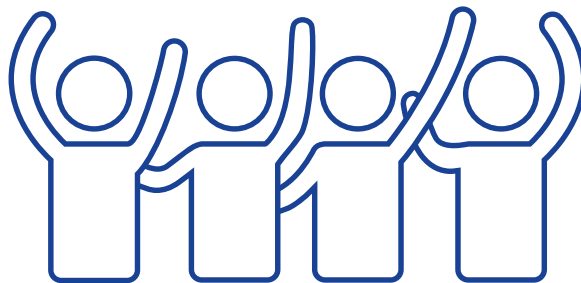
- Understand and apply the principles of harm reduction.
- Combat stigma and shift negative perceptions of homelessness.
- Teach and model practices for ensuring ongoing consensual interactions with others.
- Engage the student body in school-wide or community initiatives that seek to address and prevent youth homelessness.

“Teachers have to be understanding with what’s going on now. It’s not just crack cocaine ... It’s prostitution. It’s meth. It’s gangs. And kids are being intimidated and scared, and this is all happening in the main campus.”

WINNIPEG YOUTH

“I was awful when I was a child, and I was placed into positions a lot of the time and the way it felt the way I was being approached was not necessarily the way that’s looking out for me. It was like, is this kid going to continue to screw with us. It’s like, it wasn’t thinking about my future. It was like, is he too much to handle ‘cause it’s sort of like, they were writing me off if um – ‘cause I’ve been expelled seven times.”

EDMONTON YOUTH

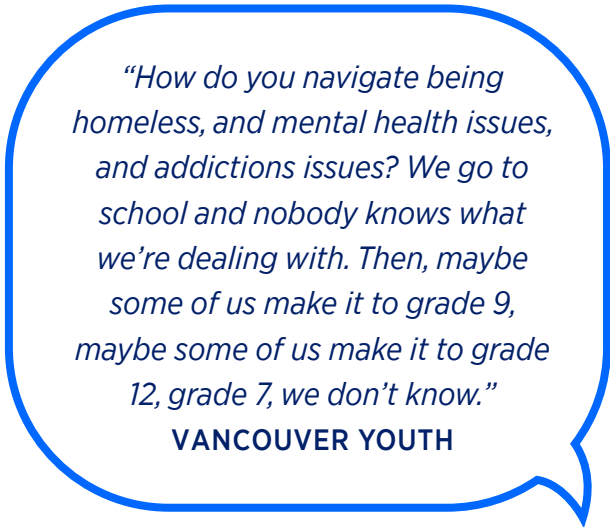


Educating school staff about the realities of homelessness for young people today can help personnel know how to recognize when a student might need help to access services, counseling, or supports. Providing resources and supports to teachers, counselors, and administrators in schools can empower teachers to connect young people to resources that can help prevent or end their homelessness (Moore, 2013). [The Roadmap for the Prevention of Youth Homelessness](#) also provides some excellent examples of information and awareness programs that help teachers and students to understand the “harsh realities” of homelessness and identify risks to homelessness, including the [Schools Training and Mentoring Project](#) (St. Basils, Birmingham, UK) and [Safe Place](#) (United States).

3. MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORTS AND RESOURCES IN SCHOOLS

Consistent with findings from existing research (Gaetz et al., 2016; Kidd et al., 2018; Sulkowski & Kurt, 2014), 48% of the youth consulted in the *What Would it Take?* study reported having received a mental health diagnosis at some point in their lives. Youth viewed increased supports, education, and awareness for mental health challenges as integral at all levels of education. Youth particularly wanted to see regular mental health check-ins with all students, providing the opportunity to identify emerging issues and prevent crises.

In tandem with the Ministry of Health and Long-term Care, the Ministry of Education can provide mental health resources and capacity to support schools and their students, including providing school staff with training on mental health issues and trauma-informed responses.



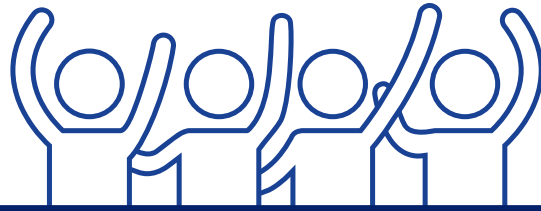
“How do you navigate being homeless, and mental health issues, and addictions issues? We go to school and nobody knows what we’re dealing with. Then, maybe some of us make it to grade 9, maybe some of us make it to grade 12, grade 7, we don’t know.”

VANCOUVER YOUTH

4. SCHOOL-COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

While youth see schools as *the* place where prevention can be most effective, they are often also in contact with other institutions. Teachers and administrators often see the effects of youth’s negative interactions within other public systems (e.g., foster care, the criminal justice system), but they may feel they don’t have the tools to help. Other times, teachers may be unaware of barriers youth face in other institutions like the child welfare or judicial system.

Many youth hoped that schools could become organized as a “hub” wherein multiple services and supports could be coordinated or co-located. Youth hoped such a hub model would engage on their own terms and prevent young people from “falling through the cracks.” In particular, they hoped for more earnest and coordinated partnerships with youth and foster-care workers, as well as education and support for families and parents. Investment in these types of programs can help prevent youth from becoming homeless or dropping out and may support their transitions into adulthood.



PRACTICE SPOTLIGHT: Foundry

Foundry Kelowna (BC) is a wellness hub that “unites 25 partner organizations that will address the health care needs of youth ages 12 to 24 and their families.” Focused on early intervention and place-based, youth-centred supports, Foundry works with BC schools to foster linkages between their services and schools in Foundry centre communities. Foundry also offers resources and tools to help people working in schools learn more about mental health and support student mental wellness.

Internationally and in Canada, we can look to innovative programs that show what school-based prevention looks like. The Upstream Project Australia (formerly known as [The Geelong Project](#)) is one such project. The Upstream Project aims to prevent youth from dropping out of school, becoming homeless, or entering the criminal justice system. In schools, Upstream uses screening mechanisms to monitor indicators that might suggest youth are homeless or at risk of homelessness and focuses on providing young people and their families with supports. Its model – an innovative, place-based model called ‘[Community of Schools and Services](#)’ (COSS) – is founded on the interlocking pillars of:

- Early identification (through a survey of students’ needs)
- Tracking, Screening, and Referral to Services
- Ensuring Appropriate Service Delivery and Family-focused Support
- Collaboration with Community (including clearly defined roles for community services)

Within 5 years the program has already demonstrated significant results:

- The number of youth entering the homelessness support system **has declined by 40%** since the implementation of the program
- School engagement **has improved from 8.9%** of students at high-risk of school disengagement (2013) **to 4.6%** (2016)
- Youth leaving school early has been **reduced by 20%** in schools piloting the program

These results demonstrate clearly what outcomes we can achieve if we do implement effective, evidence-based prevention programs in schools. Further, Upstream provides examples for how positive outcomes for students can be measured long-term. These innovations by The Upstream Project Australia are currently being developed for local adaptation in the Canadian context. Numerous stakeholders have expressed interest in implementing this model to address youth homelessness in their communities. The Making the Shift Youth Homelessness Social Innovation Lab is currently working in partnership with two Canadian communities to demonstrate proof of concept for future scaling.

“At the end of the day, the bottom line is that the education system has not been changed in 50-some years. My mother is a teacher and she’s the reason why I would never be a teacher. I’ve watched the politics and lived in the school system and know how corrupt it is, but there are no opportunities. They send you to school to send you to school. You don’t learn what you need to learn. It is a place to keep you during the day. We need an education re-education. We need revamps, we need options.” - CALGARY YOUTH

CONCLUSION

Youth's expressed needs — as outlined in [What Would it Take? Youth Across Canada Speak Out on Youth Homelessness Prevention](#) — provides us with a starting point to imagine school-based youth homelessness prevention. This prevention work is a shared responsibility across all levels of the education system and also requires working in tandem with other systems that young people have identified as key points of intervention. In schools, teachers provide an important 'first line of defense,' but they must be adequately supported to do this challenging work. Everyone in the education system – including school administration, teachers, school boards, and the provincial or territorial Ministry of Education – must be informed of the daily barriers to education that homeless youth encounter and how they can play a role in addressing these challenges.

It is critical that school-based homelessness prevention is grounded in the expertise of young people. Shifts in the education system will be more effective if they are driven by youth's self-identified educational needs and desires. Teachers who learn about the everyday realities of their students are more likely to recognize student assets and better support them (Moore, 2013). Educating teachers about the challenges that students may be facing in their daily lives (e.g., criminal victimization, gang involvement, sex work) can be an important first step in ensuring schools are not contributing to young people's housing precarity and are doing important work to prevent it.

PRACTICE SPOTLIGHT: The Carriage House

The Carriage House in Peterborough, ON, provides an “alternative classroom”: a no-barrier space for young people, who may or may not be accessing housing supports, to continue their education and graduate. It works closely with in-school programming, including the Peterborough Alternative Continuing Education (PACE), to ensure housing instability does not result in educational disengagement and young people are able to learn and graduate in ways that are supported and adaptable.

This does not mean that teachers should be expected to take on this work alone. Youth were clear in their desire to learn about services that already existed in their communities and how to recognize signs that someone may be at risk of becoming homeless. Teaching about homelessness in classrooms can help young people learn how they can contribute to preventing homelessness, as well as help youth identify if they are experiencing housing precarity themselves—something many youth realize only once they are on the street or in a shelter. The Homeless Hub offers [educational resources, lesson plans, and curriculum](#) for teaching students about youth homelessness, ongoing education for students on what homelessness is, the causes and consequences of youth homelessness, what to do if they become homeless, and services available in their community.

In addition to greater education about homelessness, curriculum can address the greater need to teach youth about financial and emotional literacy, as well as important skills such as cooking, cleaning, and tools to enter the labour market. Youth in this study describe curriculum as having little bearing on their every day lives, as they are often encountering issues that are not typically associated with “adolescence.” Young people emphasized using existing services and resources in connection with educational environments to provide these supports to students. The aforementioned Upstream Project and the Community of Schools and Services’ (COSS) model demonstrates how the introduction of screenings and support can play a role in ensuring young people are referred to the supports they need before they may recognize they need them.

PRACTICE SPOTLIGHT: Emmett Johns School

The Emmett Johns School in Montréal, QC, is based out of [Dans la Rue](#), a community organization serving homeless and precariously housed youth. The school is located within their day-centre, amidst services like a music program, mental health supports, regular meals, animal care, an art studio, a clothing depot, and employment programs. Students can finish their secondary education while being accompanied by a counselor and may choose to access funds for post-secondary education as well (e.g., tuition, transit passes, grocery vouchers, and housing costs).

The findings from *What Would it Take?* highlight why it is critical that the education system not view the behaviours of precariously housed youth as signs of “bad students,” but instead understand that educational access and achievement is inextricably linked to housing. Building on the insights and expertise of youth who have experienced homelessness, the education system can become a tool to support housing stability and educational success amongst youth. To do so, we must change the way we imagine the role of institutions in preventing youth homelessness. Schools, child welfare, the criminal justice system, and other systems can learn to work in conversation with each other in order to ensure that young people are not falling through the cracks and ending up without a home. Through this cross-system work, young people can be provided with the opportunity to thrive in school, in housing, and in their communities.



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