Getting Started: A Case for Intervention Research by School Social Workers

The United States National Association for Social Workers (NASW) established a series of standards for school social work services. According to these standards, school social workers are to provide "Interdisciplinary Leadership and Collaboration" (NASW, 2012, p.13). As interdisciplinary leaders, school social workers are experts on engaging the systems around vulnerable students to provide consultation, training, advocacy, and understanding. Furthermore, school social workers "shall also provide leadership and collaboration in the implementation of comprehensive school-based and school-linked programs that promote student well-being and positive academic outcome" (NASW, 2012). Intersecting this standard of practice for school social work, is the demand for data-driven, evidenced-based decisions in the school setting. School systems often used multi-tiered systems of support to provide intervention for students: as student need increases so does the tier of intervention support (Positive Behavior Intervention & Supports, 2021; Sulkowski & Joyce-Beaulieu, 2014). Note that these are not just any interventions, but those that are data-driven and evidence-based. In this cross section between the standards for school, social work services and the need for evidence-based practice in schools is an opportunity, even a call, for school social workers to lead in the development of evidence-based interventions.

What follows is a case example of the intervention development process. *Champions for Teens* is a school-appointed advocate program for youth experiencing homelessness in the initial stages of intervention development. Champions for Teens recruits, screens, trains, and provides ongoing support for volunteers from the community to meet in school systems with youth who are identified as homeless through the McKinney-Vento Act (MVA). The volunteers or Champions meet weekly with students to build a relationship and complete a student-centered, goal-planning curriculum called The Growth Guide: Exploring Possible Selves. The Champion is prepared to be an advocate, connecting the student to school and community support systems. This case example is to be an encouragement for other school social workers to lead school-based intervention development.

Intervention Research is for School Social Workers

In the United States, public education is a complex system governed by laws and policies, operating as the quintessential bureaucracy. Bureaucracies are meant to produce perfect efficiency, working like a machine that results in an institution that transcends the individuals that are within the organization. The laws and policies that guide the practice inside of the school system are meant to standardize

education, however, not every student is the same. Many students do not "fit" in the educational bureaucracy mold (Stone, 2015). This is precisely the space where school social workers should and can lead. In contrast to the bureaucratic nature of school systems, the profession of social work is guided by our ethical code which includes a value for relationships, service, social justice, the dignity and worth of the individual, integrity, and competence. In a school setting, social workers often operate in the space between the school's ability to respond to student needs and the academic mission of education (Stone, 2015). A school social worker is possibly one of the most adept at developing solutions in the educational setting for complex social issues.

Whether with an individual, organization, or community, social workers practice along a continuum of the planned change process that includes engagement, assessment, intervention, evaluation, and termination. Fraser, et al. (2009) defines "intervention" as a "purposive action that is intended to alter a behavior, reduce risk, or improve outcomes". Intervention research uses the scientific method to provide evidence for the effectiveness of design and development of these purposive actions. By using a series of scientific methods to evaluate an intervention, one can determine that an outcome or change is due to the effectiveness of the intervention thereby creating an evidence-based intervention. The integrity of the profession of social work relies on evidence-based practice: both evaluating the current research and adding to the development of our professional knowledge base. By bringing together the ethical values of social work and our professional knowledge base, school social workers are particularly poised to meet the educational setting's need for evidence-based response to multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS).

Gitlin and Czaja (2016) offer the analogy of a pipeline to describe intervention development and research. However, pipelines generally move in only one direction. To their admission, Gitlin and Czaja (2016) note that intervention development is not a linear process, and their application of development is derived from a medical model that is often divorced from practice. In contrast, a core competency of social work education is to develop research-informed practice, and practice-informed research (CSWE, 2022). Social work research is almost always anchored in practice. Therefore, speaking specifically to the social work professional audience, Fraser et al. (2009) offer a six-phase approach to intervention development conceptualized by Rothman and Thomas (1994). Fraser's six-phase includes: problem analysis and project planning, information gathering and synthesis, design, early development and pilot testing, evaluation and advanced development, and dissemination. This approach will be used to describe the development of this intervention for youth experiencing homelessness, in hopes that other school social workers may be an example of intervention development in

the school setting. Therefore, encouraging school social workers, with a pathway towards intervention research.

Problem Analysis and Project Planning

According to Fraser et al. (2009), this phase of intervention development involves identifying a problem and conceptualizing a potential intervention to address it. To develop the intervention, the problem must first be well understood. In the process of understanding the problem to be solved, one must also understand the feasibility of the proposed intervention, including the development of a specific project plan. As social workers, we know that problems are not understood in isolation, and so this is also a key time to engage stakeholders in the process. In this phase of the development of Champions for Teens, families and students experiencing homelessness and school leaders were interviewed by community partners, and a preliminary review of the literature was conducted. Next, the feasibility of intervention was examined by identifying the role of a school social worker as well as completing an environmental scan to determine if the environment would support such an endeavor.

Problem Identification

The development of Champions for Teens began as a community collaboration. An exponential growth in student homelessness was apparent, in school districts across the nation and specifically, in this case, in the surrounding school districts in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania. Local homeless liaisons and school social workers expressed that there were no resources or interventions available either by the school or the community due to the differing definitions of homelessness between these two systems. The community generally provided services based on the Housing and Urban Development's definition of homeless, therefore services were available for those that met the criteria for emergency housing assistance. On the other hand, the McKinney-Vento Act (MVA) requires that students have access to their education and includes youth who are not living with a parent or guardian, those that are living in hotels and motels, and those that are in doubled-up housing. Although MVA provides access to education, the resources provided are minimal and not intended to secure housing stability. These two systems are at an impasse, leaving students (and their families) who are homeless in school systems languishing without the resources to stabilize their housing. Fortunately, this garnered the concern of Lancaster County's homeless coalition as they were revisioning their work within the county. The homeless coalition completed a needs assessment by talking to families and students identified as homeless in the school districts, as well as other community stakeholders. In this process, students expressed that they needed significant support in transitioning to adulthood. Tasks

that might seem straightforward—such as obtaining identification documents, learning to drive, or securing employment—were experienced as highly complex due to limited resources.

Youth homelessness is a social problem that is both wide and deep. It is wide in that there are more than 1.2 million students identified as homeless in the school systems in the United States (National Center for Homeless Education [NCHE], 2020). It bears mentioning that this number does not include family members not registered in school, and which is substantially higher than the 102,000 recorded by The United States Department of Housing and Urban Development (2019). It is deep because homelessness in itself is a traumatic event and it is often preceded by trauma, incurring detrimental academic and emotional impacts. Up to 30% of youth experiencing homelessness report experiencing sexual abuse and 60% report experiencing physical abuse (Edidin, et al., 2012). youth experiencing homelessness are more than twice as likely to be diagnosed with a psychiatric disorder, leading to extreme feelings of hopelessness resulting in 40-80% of youth experiencing suicidal ideation and 23-67% attempting suicide (Edidin, et al., 2012; Perlman, et al., 2014; Thompson, et al., 2010). One can easily imagine that this sort of external and internal turmoil does not lend itself to academic stability. Only 25% of youth experiencing homelessness graduate from high school, and their school experience entails more behavioral and attendance infractions (Rahman, et al., 2017; Uretsky, & Stone, 2016)

The literature seemed to be full of studies regarding the risk factors associated with homelessness, but little in regard to what is being done about it. Are there evidence-based practices elsewhere that could be implemented? The answer to this question seemed to be a resounding “no". There were traces of several interventions that had been adapted for youth experiencing homelessness. For example, Camacho (2016) utilized the evidence-based intervention “Check In/Check Out” as a part of an after-school program for children experiencing homelessness. The participants showed a decrease in problem behavior and an increased engagement in tasks. Similarly, Nabors et al. (2004) utilized an evidenced-based curriculum “Empowerment Zone " to develop a summer program for at-risk youth, including those experiencing homelessness. Both students who were homeless and those that were not, were satisfied with the program. The authors state that other than what is provided by school social workers, there is nearly no record of school-based programs for homeless students. Of note, although school connected, these programs were not school-based. Zooming out further, there seemed to be a large gap in intervention research in general, not just in schools. Atlena et al. (2019) found in a review of the literature only 13 unique intervention studies. These interventions included intensive case management, cognitive behavioral counseling, independent living programs, supportive housing,

motivational interviewing, and mentoring programs. Slight positive effects were found in a substance abuse treatment with a mentoring component and an intervention that increased social support. Generally, interventions that target one risk factor have been ineffective (Slesnick et al., 2009). An ecosystem perspective—central to the social work profession—is particularly warranted when addressing complex social issues such as homelessness, as it emphasizes the interconnectedness of individuals and their environments. This approach allows social work practitioners to recognize and respond to the multitude of risk factors that exist across various domains, including individual, familial, community, and systemic levels. By considering these layered influences, social workers can more effectively develop interventions that are holistic, contextually grounded, and responsive to clients' lived realities.

The problem was complex and multifaceted. First, schools were seeing a growing number of students experiencing homelessness, reflecting broader systemic and housing instability. Second, homelessness was recognized as profoundly detrimental to youth development, impacting academic performance, mental health, and overall well-being. Third, there was a noticeable gap in targeted interventions within school systems to support this vulnerable population. Most critically, students themselves reported a lack of consistent social support, which left them struggling to navigate the academic, social, and logistical challenges of high school.

Feasibility

Is it our role? The question of whether developing an intervention for youth experiencing homelessness falls within the scope of school social work is addressed by drawing on foundational professional guidelines. Both the *Grand Challenges for Social Work* (GCSW) and the *NASW Standards for School Social Work Services* affirm the profession's responsibility in this area. The GCSW(2018) identifies ending homelessness and supporting positive youth development as central goals for the field, urging social workers to develop evidence-based, preventive interventions that foster stability and resilience. Similarly, the NASW standards highlight the role of school social workers in designing interventions that enhance educational experiences, involve collaboration with families and communities, and advocate for systemic change on behalf of students (NASW, 2012).

These standards make it clear that school social workers are not only empowered but also obligated to take leadership in addressing the needs of vulnerable students, including those experiencing homelessness. While no single intervention can resolve the broader issue of youth homelessness, initiatives like *Champions for Teens* align directly with the profession's ethical and practical

mandates. Therefore, such work is not only appropriate—it is a necessary expression of the school social worker's role.

Furthermore, schools are uniquely positioned to support youth experiencing homelessness, making them an essential setting for intervention research. Under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), schools are required to use data-driven, evidence-based practices (NASW, 2012). Most schools implement a Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS), which provides interventions based on student need (NASW, 2012; PBIS, 2021; Sulkowski & Joyce-Beaulieu, 2014). Embedding interventions for homeless youth within MTSS increases feasibility and uptake, while highlighting the need for research to develop effective school-based models. Although the McKinney-Vento Act ensures access to education, MTSS creates a pathway to address the broader academic, emotional, and social needs of homeless students.

Environmental Scan. To assess the practicality of implementing the *Champions for Teens* intervention, an environmental scan was conducted using a SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats) analysis. This scan evaluated conditions at multiple levels—within the school district, the county, and at state and national scales—to determine the capacity and readiness of existing systems to support the program. This multilayered analysis ensured that the intervention was not only theoretically justified but also contextually grounded in the realities of the implementation environment.The SWOT model was completed on three levels: first in the school district (Table 1), second in the county (Table 2), and state and national levels (Table 3).

Table 1: SWOT analysis at school district level.

School District SWOT Analysis	
Strengths	**Weaknesses**
• The new administration in the has embraced a shared leadership model. • Superintendent, has gone so far as to say that the work that he does in the school district is all about relationships • The administrative team have gone out of their way to create a strategic plan with the input of the community. • Social capital dense: clubs, extracurricular activities, experts on many subject areas. • Two social workers that are well-integrated in the community. • Very active and involved homeless liaison. • All faculty and staff have received training on homelessness and students at-risk. • Well-developed school based mentoring program.	• The bureaucratic structure of public education is not responsive. • School District, like other most education systems, are not equipped to meet social needs. • Despite education regarding student homelessness, there continues to be stigma and misunderstanding on how to address these issues. • Due to the multiplicity of student needs, and the cost associated with homeless students, they can be perceived as a nuisance rather than a vulnerable population.
Opportunities	**Threats**
• Partnership with Homeless Coalition. • Multiple community engagement/education opportunities. • Community groups have provided help and are willing to partner.	• Historical lack of community engagement: community stakeholders have commented on the "impenetrable walls of the School District." • Value for "District Pride" • Conservative values of community may impact engagement on social issues. • Fewer social services close by, and an unwillingness to work collaboratively. • Increased stigma and value for self-reliance in rural communities • Community espouses a charity mindset, rather than empowerment. • Recently raised local taxes to meet shortfall in budget, likelihood of services to be cut.

Table 2: SWOT analysis at the county level.

County	
Strengths	**Weaknesses**
• Many coalitions throughout the county. • Collective impact programs are working successfully throughout the county. (United Way of County only funds collective impact) • Many social services throughout the county, particularly in Lancaster City. • Educational consortium is well resourced • Local school social work network is very active and strong.	• Fractured attempts to address social justice issues. • City centric services.
Opportunities	**Threats**
• Partnership with Homeless Coalition, School's First Initiative. • Homeless Coalition is a part of Penn Medicine which provides valuable resources for training and other talent. • Programs within the county that have similar components: Advantage Lancaster, Benchmark, CAP Navigators, Atlas. • Shared communication software is used throughout the county • Educational opportunities could serve as a connection to training, materials, and similar efforts in other districts.	• Conservative values of community may impact engagement on social issues. • Homeless service providers who do not serve McKinney-Vento defined homelessness.

Table 3: SWOT analysis at the state and national level.

State and National	
Strengths	**Weaknesses**
• McKinney-Vento federal law that allows immediate enrollment of students, free lunch and breakfast, transportation services, access to educational testing and support, and secure enrollment in school regardless of physical living location. • Education for Children and Youth Experiencing Homelessness Program (ECYEH): Ensures access to education and information regarding identifying and supporting education of homeless youth. • National Center for Homeless Education (NCHE): provides data and technical assistance. • National Association for the Education of Homeless Children (NAEHC): membership association that provides information and resources regarding the education of homeless youth.	• Multiple definitions of homelessness, all of them insufficient. • Entities such as ECYEH and NCHE help collect important data and protection for education of homeless youth but have limited their focus on education.
Opportunities	**Threats**
• Advocacy facilitated by Homeless Coalition with legislature. • Governor Wolf is actively involved in social justice issues, particularly in regard to schools. • Coalition applies for grants and funding for services that support individuals experiencing homelessness. • There are a number of statewide programs to connect to for direction: Housing Alliance for Pennsylvania, Homelessness Program Coordination Committee/ Interagency Council.	• Coronavirus response and state requirements may delay program implementation. • Conservative control over legislature. • This program would be swimming in a sea of initiatives, alliances, coalitions, organizations, etc. • Current programming is generally focused on housing adults and families. • Extremely divisive political environment could slow progress of growth of program. • The amount of funds reserved from Title 1 for students that are homeless is up to the discretion of the school district.

The SWOT analysis was valuable for both the process and the content. The content of the SWOT analysis revealed strengths that can be maximized, such as the relationship with the county homeless coalition and an alignment with the school district's administrative goals. On the other hand, threats such as the coronavirus and stigma surrounding homelessness were exposed as barriers that would have to be overcome. The process of completing the SWOT analysis, provides the school social worker with a thorough understanding of the environment and key stakeholders, potentially saving an exorbitant amount of time when running into an expected barrier further down the pipeline. The process also allows for the development of strategies and talking points to advocate for intervention development.

Information Gathering and Synthesis

Phase two of intervention development helps to determine what programs exist as solutions to the problem. This phase helps determine whether innovation is necessary, or perhaps if existing programs need to be made more responsive to the problem at hand. In this process, studying closely related programs or even unsuccessful programs provide valuable insight into potential solutions. Therefore, this is a key time for a thorough review of the literature.

For Champions for Teens, the review of the literature included interventions for youth experiencing homelessness, the impact of social support, and interventions that increased the social support of at-risk youth such as mentoring

programs and the Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) program. In summary, the literature review established that there were few interventions for youth experiencing homelessness (Atlena, et al., 2019; Ferguson & Xie, 2007; McCay, et al., 2011; Rafaelle-Mendez & Randle, 2021; Slesnick et al., 2009). Specifically, studies involving interventions for youth experiencing homelessness in schools were minimal, despite the prevalence and requirement for youth experiencing homelessness to be enrolled in school and the school's requirement for data driven, evidence-based interventions (Nabors et al., 2004; NASW, 2012; Sulkowski & Joyce-Beaulieu, 2014). Further evidence showed that many youth experiencing homelessness generally lacked social support and that social support that they did have was often emotional in nature and risk inducing (Barman-Ahikari et al., 2016; de la Haye et al., 2012; Kennedy et al., 2017). Several studies were promising in that they found that increasing social support increased resilience, and that social support was crucial to their survival (Barman-Adhikari et al., 2016; Barman-Adhikari and Rice, 2014 de la Haye et al. 2012). Specifically, having a caring adult involved in their life improves academic performance, the use of employment services, and access to higher education, and additionally is protective against human trafficking and substance use (Barman-Adhikari and Rice, 2014; Ferguson and Xie, 2012; Chisholm-Straker et al., 2018; Skobba et al., 2018). Is it no wonder that researchers call for interventions that expand the social support of youth experiencing homelessness (Barman-Adhikari and Rice, 2014; Barman-Adhikari et al., 2016; Chisolm-Straker et al., 2018; Cronley & Evans, 2017; Duke et al., 2017; Herrera et al., 2007; Kennedy et al., 2017; Tudor, 2018).

Mentoring and the CASA are two programs widely used to pair students facing adversity with caring adults in the community. Studies show that mentoring has positive health, behavior, and personal and professional outcomes, but is negatively correlated to psychological stress and deviant behaviors (Eby et al., 2009) . Big Brothers, Big Sisters, a well-known mentoring program, demonstrated that compared to students who were not mentored, mentored children showed improvements in academic performance, quality of classwork, completion of more assignments, while conversely, were less likely to skip school, and had fewer infractions (Grossman et al., 2002; Herrara et al., 2007). In support of mentoring specific to the population of youth experiencing homelessness, Bartle-Harting et al. (2012) found that youth experiencing homelessness who utilized substance abuse treatment with mentoring components had better outcomes in that they attended more sessions and had fewer consequences associated with their substance use. The long-term impacts of mentoring are similarly significant. In a longitudinal study, Ahrens et al. (2008) found that youth who were in foster care who had a non-parental adult in their life had less suicidal ideation, better overall health, and higher levels of education than those that did not. Because these findings are specific to

foster care youth, the National CASA Association for Children (CASA) is a relevant segue. CASA assigns adult community volunteers to children in the child welfare system to help determine the best interests of the child (National CASA Association, 2024). Children that have an assigned CASA volunteer are less likely to go back into the foster care system, are more likely to secure a permanent home, and also experience success in school and be connected to support in the community (Litzelfilmer, 2002; National CASA/GAL Association, 2024).

The literature review confirmed that there were few to no interventions in schools for youth experiencing homelessness that respond to the complexity of needs that youth experiencing homelessness have. However, there were findings that indicated the need for social support, and similar interventions that assigned mentors or advocates to at-risk youth. This meant that developing an advocate program for youth experiencing homelessness could be similarly successful and beneficial.

Design

In phase three of intervention development, the intervention itself is designed as methods to measure its effectiveness (Fraser et al., 2009). To do so, one must apply what has been understood from the literature, while also keeping a keen eye on how similar interventions were measured and how theory has been applied. Designing such an intervention requires a balanced integration of literature, practice experience, and theory—forming a three-legged stool that supports effective and measurable intervention development.

In developing *Champions for Teens*, it became evident that while the literature extensively documents the risks associated with youth homelessness, there is a significant lack of targeted, school-based interventions. A few adapted models, such as mentoring programs and after-school behavioral supports, have shown promise, but comprehensive, evidence-based approaches remain scarce. This gap highlights the need for interventions that are not only grounded in research but also responsive to real-world practice and guided by theoretical frameworks.

The development of *Champions for Teens* was grounded in theory, particularly Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory and Social Capital Theory—both of which provide strong explanatory frameworks for understanding the experiences of youth experiencing homelessness. Bronfenbrenner posited that development is shaped by the interaction between individuals and their environments. When children are surrounded by stress, instability, and minimal supportive relationships, their development is often disrupted. Conversely, when

positive and consistent relationships exist in a child's ecosystem, development is more likely to be healthy and resilient.

Applied to the context of homelessness, Bronfenbrenner's theory helps explain the distressed development often observed in youth experiencing homelessness as a result of chronic stress and fractured relational environments. However, it also supports the idea that intentionally cultivating positive relationships can foster resilience. This perspective is echoed in the resilience literature, which consistently identifies the presence of caring adults as a key protective factor (Center on the Developing Child, 2021a; Brendtro, 2006; Masten, 2018; Lee, 2012).

Social Capital Theory further illuminates the critical role of relationships in mobilizing resources and improving outcomes. Specifically, "bridging social capital" refers to the connections that link individuals to new resources, opportunities, and supports across social groups (Putnam, 1995; Barman-Adhikari et al., 2016). In the context of youth experiencing homelessness, these types of social ties can be life-changing. Studies have found that youth with greater social capital experience shorter durations of homelessness and are more likely to access employment and services (Barman-Adhikari & Rice, 2014). Conversely, a lack of stable social capital—often due to the transience of homelessness and disconnection from stabilizing institutions like schools or community organizations—leaves these youth vulnerable to negative outcomes, including substance use and high-risk behaviors (Ferguson & Xie, 2012; de la Haye et al., 2012).

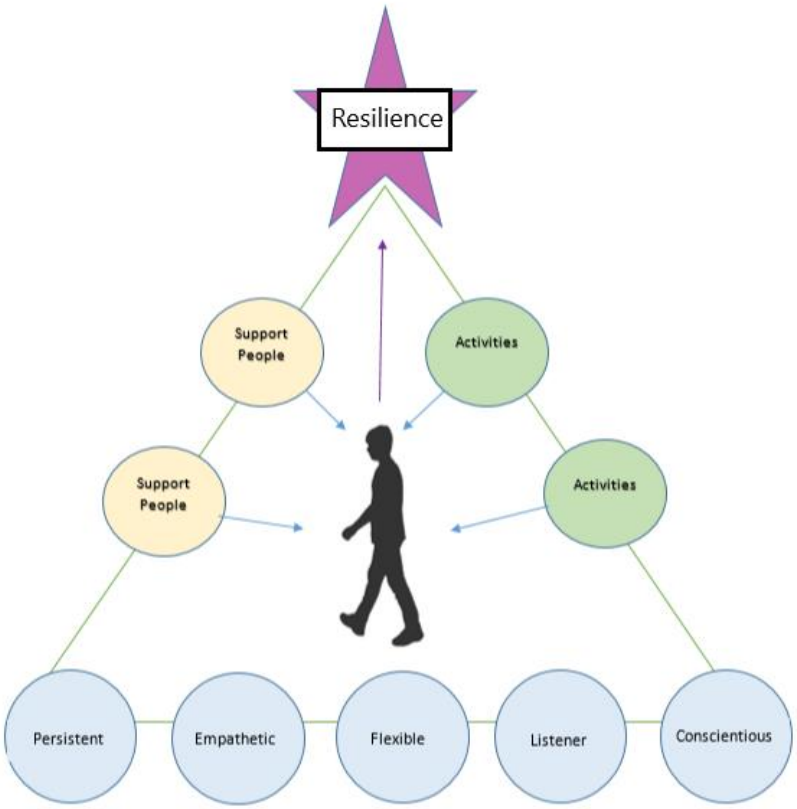
With this in mind, *Champions for Teens* was designed to act as a bridge—intentionally connecting youth experiencing homelessness to stable, caring adults in their ecosystem. These adults serve not only as a source of emotional support but also as conduits for resource access and opportunity. By increasing the social capital of homeless students through expanded social support, *Champions for Teens* aims to strengthen their resilience and promote long-term well-being.

Due to the limited availability of structured, evidence-based advocacy models for youth experiencing homelessness, the development of *Champions for Teens* required an additional step: translating real-world practice into a replicable framework. Fortunately, within the school community, several informal advocates—community members—had already been supporting homeless students in meaningful, though undocumented, ways. These individuals were familiar figures to many school social workers: reliable, empathetic, and deeply invested in youth well-being.

To better understand what made these informal advocates effective, a focus group was conducted with three such individuals (Helfrick, 2022). The goal was to explore how these adults supported youth experiencing homelessness and what characteristics or actions defined their role. Findings from the focus group revealed that effective advocacy was less about specific tasks and more about the traits and relational approaches of the advocates themselves. Core characteristics included empathy, persistence, active listening, conscientiousness, and flexibility. These traits enabled advocates to engage in supportive activities, form lasting connections with students, and mobilize others within the school or community to provide additional help.

The insights from this practice-based inquiry were essential in shaping the *Champions for Teens* model. By combining theoretical grounding with on-the-ground realities and existing literature, the *Champions for Teens* program emerged as a well-rounded, contextually informed intervention aimed at increasing the resilience of youth experiencing homelessness through structured, relationship-centered support.

Figure 1: Champions for Teens Advocate Model



Practical wisdom also suggested that one simply could not put an unknown stranger in a room with an adolescent and expect a relationship to appear. There had to be a mechanism to build a relationship and there had to be some gatekeeping to ensure the safety of the youth. As a tool to build a relationship, the curriculum called *Possible Selves* was incorporated into the framework (Hock, Schumaker, & Deshler, 2003). *Possible Selves* is a program designed to boost student motivation by helping them explore and set personal goals based on their hopes, expectations, and fears for the future. Research shows that students who participated in the program identified more goals, earned higher GPAs, and had higher graduation rates compared to control and career-counseling groups. Champions for Teens used this curriculum to provide a roadmap to have meaningful conversations about the students' hopes and fears.

In order to equip volunteers to engage with youth already in a stressed ecosystem, a training regimen was created. Similar to the CASA program, which requires upwards of 30 hours of training, an application, and multiple interviews for their volunteers, it was decided that for *Champions for Teens*, Champions would

have to complete clearances and be provided with 10 hours of training. For the initial training, volunteers completed 4 hours on poverty and homelessness, 2 hours on trauma, 1 hour on the advocate model, 2 hours on the Possible Selves Curriculum, and 1 hour on being an advocate. Further, it was decided that Champions would have an opportunity to continue meeting for group consultation on a monthly basis in order to feel supported throughout the implementation of the program.

In summary, the design components of the *Champions for Teens* program were thus: Champions were caring adult volunteers who exhibited the characteristics of empathy, persistence, active listening, conscientiousness, and flexibility. They used these characteristics to complete activities and bring others alongside in support of the youth experiencing homelessness. The Possible Selves curriculum was offered as a tool to forge the relationship. Champions were also required to submit their criminal background checks, FBI clearance, and child welfare clearance, as well as go through ten hours of training. Champions would also receive monthly group consultation.

Early Development and Pilot Testing

At this point the reader may begin to wonder when we actually get to try out some innovations. Of the six phases, it is no wonder that the first three are research and planning. Now, nearly halfway through the proverbial pipeline, in this fourth phase the intervention is tested for the first time (Fraser et al., 2009). The research design for pilot testing often includes case studies or single-case design that does not require the rigor of a control group. In this phase the hope is to implement the program so that it can be refined.

The preparation for piloting *Champions for Teens* continued in this phase. This was the time to activate stakeholders in the work. Because so much preparation had taken place, the district administration was supplied with a two-page summary of the research conducted so far. The summary also included the logic model, the intervention concept, as well as the expected timeline and benchmarks. Upon their approval, the community connections that are common to school social workers were leveraged: information on the pilot was sent to the local chamber, the ministerium, and the community newspaper to call for volunteers. A community information session was held via zoom. From these efforts five community volunteers committed to becoming Champion.

The most important stakeholders to engage were the homeless students themselves. Each student was individually informed about the program, and provided with the opportunity to ask questions. Notably, some students did not

respond well to suggesting that they have an advocate to "help" them. The terms that they responded to best was having an extra adult on their team to help create a plan for the future. Three students agreed to and completed the program. After agreeing to the program, the students were set up on a "meet and greet" with their Champion. At the meet and greet, the Champion and student were able to ask questions, exchange contact information, and agree on a weekly meeting time.

And then they were off! Students and Champions met weekly. Incidentally, the development of this intervention was concurrent with the COVID-19 pandemic, so there were contingency plans for how the intervention could take place given the limitations of the pandemic. At times a student would meet via zoom with their Champion, particularly if the student was quarantined from having contact with someone with COVID. The risk factors associated with homelessness did complicate meetings: frequent moves, attendance issues, and unstable phone service all meant that Champions had to remain flexible but persistent in their work.

With confidence, it is clear that school social workers are developing interventions such as *Champions for Teens*. However, here is where the road may diverge: completing the intervention development as intervention research so that it can be replicated scientifically. A few words on research design are necessary here in order to encourage the practitioner to complete their work in such a way that it can be recorded and written about as research. Social workers are innovators and change agents, and too often they are developing programming and no one knows about it. The research design of this pilot program is meant to be an encouragement to do likewise.

The initial pilot for Champions for Teens was a mixed methods, multiple baseline single-case design over 16 weeks. Single-case design is often used in social science (Rubin & Babbie, 2017). Most simply, in single-case design the participant is both the control and experimental group. This is done by measuring the targeted variable before the intervention (phase A), introducing the intervention, and measuring afterwards. Best practice would be to complete multiple measures before and after the intervention. A multiple base-line is possible when participants have a staggered introduction to the intervention, in that the first participant starts the intervention and as there is an improvement, the next participant starts, and so on (Nugent, 2010). This lessens the chances that an extraneous variable is to blame for changes in behavior.

For the pilot, as a forerunner of resilience, social support was the variable to be measured. Given the need to measure multiple times with teenage participants, having a measurement tool that was easy to use and understand was of high importance. The SSQ6 (Social Support Questionnaire – 6 item version) was

selected for the *Champions for Teens* (C4T) intervention because it provides a concise, reliable way to assess perceived social support—a key factor the program seeks to enhance (Sarason et al., 1983). Social support, especially in the form of caring adult relationships, is known to build resilience among youth. The SSQ6 measures both the number of individuals a participant feels they can turn to in times of need and their satisfaction with that support. Compared to the original 27-item SSQ, the SSQ6 is shorter (5–7 minutes to complete) and more practical for use with youth experiencing homelessness, who may experience survey fatigue. It has strong reliability and validity and has been used in similar populations, making it appropriate for this non-clinical, school-based setting. Academic performance and attendance data for participating youth was also collected from existing school records.

At the conclusion of the school year, and the 16-week pilot, a focus group took place with the Champions, and both Champions and students completed a satisfaction survey. As mentioned above, piloting the intervention helps smooth out processes. Although measuring some initial effect is good, it is not expected that these results would generalize without replication. Instead, what is most valuable is to determine the program improvement strategies.

The pilot of Champions for teens showed a significant increase in social support for the participants. Although grades and attendance are variables less susceptible to short term change, evegrades of the student in the program the longest showed a positive effect. The qualitative component of the focus group and satisfaction survey, did demonstrate that a connection was made with a caring adult. Furthermore, the following components were suggested to be revised: A training on mental health was added, and all the training components were moved to online. The "Possible Selves Curriculum" was revised into "The Growth Guide." "The Growth Guide" was developed into a workbook for both Champions and Students to complete together, making the curriculum easily usable for volunteers. Furthermore, recruitment for Champions will begin in the spring prior to the new school year in order to allow maximum time for relationship building.

Looking Forward

Evaluation and Advanced Development

For Champions for Teens, the two remaining phases—rigorous testing and dissemination—are currently underway in collaboration with university research faculty. In this partnership, the school social worker continues to lead the intervention's implementation, while the university team provides support in designing the study protocol and guiding the IRB approval process. The academic

partners contribute methodological expertise, while the practitioner offers deep contextual understanding of the target population and setting—creating a mutually beneficial collaboration that strengthens both research and practice. As Fraser et al. (2009) emphasized, effective social work practice and strong research are natural allies: research-informed practice enhances outcomes, and practice-informed research results in more relevant and impactful interventions. While one does not need to hold a doctorate to conduct meaningful research, school social workers are encouraged to seek partnerships with local universities, many of which are eager to collaborate. Ethical research also requires important procedural steps, such as gaining approval from an Institutional Review Board (IRB), to ensure the protection and rights of participants are upheld throughout the study.

In comparison to the previous phase, in this phase the outcomes take precedence over intervention development. There is always room for improvement and development, however, at this point the rigor of implementation is increased so that results can be generalized. This means an experimental design, ideally with random assignment to experimental and control group.

It may be necessary to pilot the program multiple times to ensure it is feasible and ready for replication. Conducting several field tests is essential to confirm the program's effectiveness for the intended population. These tests should include diverse settings—such as rural, suburban, and urban environments—since each presents unique challenges and opportunities that may require program adaptations to ensure success.

Ongoing monitoring of outcomes and gathering feedback from participants and stakeholders are critical to making sure the program meets the needs of schools, students, and families. This input offers valuable insights for continuous improvement and helps identify areas where adjustments may be needed to better serve the population.

Numerous studies underscore the importance of ongoing evaluation. For example, O'Connell et al. (2018) emphasized that programs engaging in continuous assessment and feedback are more likely to achieve positive outcomes, highlighting the value of a continuous improvement process in educational settings.

Dissemination

Dissemination is the last stop on the intervention development pipeline. Once results are known, it is time to disseminate the findings. This may be in the form of writing for research or in distributing the intervention materials. With all of the steps thus far, a refined user-friendly intervention manual can be created and

disseminated so that others can replicate the program. Submittal for publication and the peer review process allows for constructive criticism that can spawn further development.

Disseminating research findings is an essential element of evidence-based practice as it helps to bridge the gap between research outcomes and their practical applications in real-life settings. While the significance of evidence-based research outcomes cannot be denied, practical considerations must also be taken into account when implementing interventions.

Feedback from practitioners can be extremely valuable in the dissemination process. They offer insights into real-world aspects such as ease of implementation and compatibility with existing organizational structures. One next step planned by the authors of *Champions for Teens*, is to use a qualitative and quantitative data collection to ensure that the voices and needs of unaccompanied youth and students experiencing homelessness are heard. Another next step is the collection and analysis of homeless liaisons. These inquiries can further inform our own program and practice. It is just as critical is to ensure that the needs and voices of those who implement the intervention are met as it is for those intended for the intervention treatment to receive it. These reports may include aspects such as the materials used, demands and burdens associated with the intervention, convenience of use, and satisfaction of end-users.

Overall, dissemination efforts should account for both the strength of research outcomes and the practical aspects associated with implementation. By collecting feedback from practitioners and other stakeholders, and using it to inform dissemination efforts, researchers and practitioners can collaborate to promote the effective implementation of evidence-based interventions in real-life situations.

Conclusion

The development of Champions for Teens is an initial step in creating a school-based advocacy initiative specifically designed to support homeless high school youth. Despite the large number of youth experiencing homelessness in the United States and their exposure to numerous risk factors, there are few effective interventions available for this population. The pilot study demonstrated that facilitating a relationship between a caring adult and a youth who is homeless can increase the youth's social support—an important precursor to positive development. Based on these findings, program improvements have been identified, including extending the intervention duration, adding training on mental health and education, adapting the Possible Selves curriculum to better fit the population, implementing a screening process for Champions, and creating

opportunities for Champions to learn from experienced peers. Ongoing support for Champions will focus on providing consultation, encouraging connections beyond the direct Champion-student relationship, using Possible Selves to help students set goals and build hope, and emphasizing key qualities in Champion recruitment.

Intervention development and research within educational settings offer important leadership opportunities for social workers, especially in supporting vulnerable populations, aligning with both their expertise and ethical commitments. Within complex educational systems, social workers provide a critical relational perspective that fosters hope for at-risk students. *Champions for Teens* continues to move along the intervention development pipeline, proving that completing research is within the realm of possibilities for school social workers. Few others in the school environment have such an in-depth understanding of the ecosystems surrounding the students in order to develop interventions for the school's most vulnerable students. Few others within the school environment are trained to amplify the resilience and strengths of students. Undoubtedly, school social workers are designing and implementing programs nationally and internationally, but this is a call to do so in such a way so that they can be written about and replicated as research that we might benefit from one another's work.

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