



THE Shift

Creating Equity
Through Education

JUNE 2026

REDEFINING THE POSSIBLE

A MESSAGE FROM AJ JEFFERSON
PRESIDENT AND CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER

Momentum & Mission

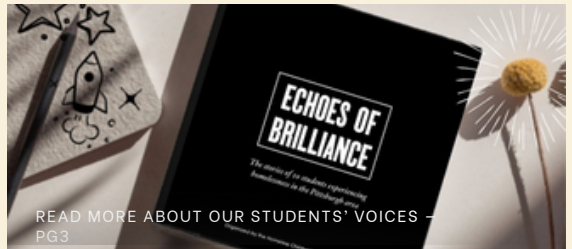
Billions of dollars are spent every year addressing youth homelessness. Yet phones at places like Homeless Children's Education Fund ring every day from callers looking for assistance. The problem is not money.

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MOMENTUM & MISSION

Sustaining momentum — missing piece for youth experiencing homelessness

Billions of dollars are spent every year addressing youth homelessness. Yet phones at places like Homeless Children's Education Fund (HCEF) ring every day from callers looking for assistance. The problem is not money.

Momentum — that's the issue. Sustaining it. Until advocates for children and youth experiencing homelessness figure out what to do about that, wheels will spin with little progress. Lots of motion without real movement.

The tension it takes to operate a manual transmission is what tackling youth homelessness will look like here in The Shift. Getting a five-speed automobile to move requires finding the equilibrium between the accelerator and the clutch. You have to give it some gas while easing off the clutch in order to change gears. If that give and take is off, then the vehicle stalls and sometimes cuts off.

That's a picture of what has to happen in order to sustain movement while offsetting youth homelessness. The work is multifaceted. Changing gears is a given. Doing so without losing momentum is the challenge. It requires a shift, albeit not among those experiencing homelessness.



Blind Spots



There's a teenager named Miley who gets out of sorts when she's reading and comes across with Bs and Ds. And not only is she overcoming dyslexia, the 17-year-old, more than once, has had to recalibrate after changing addresses. Sometimes she was staying with her grandma. Other times she lived with her aunt. It's just Miley and her mom now. Those address changes meant switching schools and the hard job of being the new kid on campus trying to make friends.

The social pressure plus the dyslexia made things tough for her academically. Miley connected with HCEF and received tutoring and mentorship that she said filled her with the confidence she'd been lacking. What's important to understand as Miley heads to 11th grade is the wherewithal to overcome her circumstances was within her all along.

HCEF isn't getting her through high school — Miley is using HCEF's resources to arrive on the graduation stage. Big difference, and it makes a point:

youth experiencing homelessness are not deficient.



On the other hand, individuals adjacent to unhoused young people have blind spots when trying to help. A mindset shift is in order to overcome generalizations about homelessness. Generalizing would exclude young people like Miley because she has a roof overhead. The temporary structure of her living situation would get overlooked, never mind that it meets the definition of homelessness in Pennsylvania, 70% are doubled-up. So Miley is subject to the residual impacts associated with unstable housing, such as being 87% more likely to drop out of high school.

And where would that leave her?

Miley is going to be fine. She is overcoming the statistics, on pace to finish high school — on time. HCEF intervention worked. Job well done.

Which is where organizations in the work have been getting it wrong.

Research out of Simon Fraser University in Canada zeroed in on youth experiencing homelessness returning to it in adulthood. Let's say Miley found herself unhoused a few years after finishing high school. That would put her at around 21 years old and no longer eligible for the assistance she received as an adolescent. According to the research, early intervention at that point in Miley's adulthood would be critical toward keeping her homeless experience from becoming chronic. Without it, Miley's momentum stalls. Not because of a lack of funding, but instead due to the improper allocation of resources resulting from inadequate tension curtailing the type of visionary leadership that iterates and future-proofs systems.

The Shift will maintain that tension. It's a platform to force hard pivots and create expectations for bold decisions. It'll interrogate systems, guided by the north star that young people like Miley falling through the cracks is not an option.

HCEF authors launching *Echoes of Brilliance* during gala

Some stories are too important to stay unheard.

This June, young people from Homeless Children's Education Fund will take their place at The I AM Gala presented by Dollar Bank not just as students or participants...



..but as authors.

Echoes of Brilliance is a sacred collection of truth written by HCEF youths navigating homelessness and housing instability across Allegheny County.

Not stories written about them.

Written by them.

The essays hold honesty, uncertainty, resilience, humor, fear, hope, and vision. Together, they offer readers something statistics never could: proximity to the lived experiences of young people too often misunderstood.

For many of the students, this will be the first time seeing their words published.

That matters.

Because authorship changes things.

It shifts young people from being spoken for...to being heard directly.

Guests attending The I AM Gala will receive the first look at Echoes of Brilliance while celebrating students for their leadership, growth, and impact throughout the community.

The evening is intentionally designed so young people understand they belong in rooms with elected officials, business leaders, and decision makers.

Not someday.

Now.

And this time, they're arriving with something powerful in their hands:

Their own stories.

BUY THE BOOK

Can't make it to the gala?

Get your copy of Echoes of Brilliance by emailing info@homelessfund.org.

In fact, grab two... and share one.





Employer Advisory Council

Redefining workforce pathways

Workforce development cannot begin at the interview stage.

For young people navigating homelessness and housing instability, it starts much earlier with exposure, relationships, mentorship, and access to environments where opportunity feels real.

That's the thinking behind Homeless Children's Education Fund's Employer Advisory Council (EAC), a coalition of regional employers helping shape workforce pathways for students in HCEF's Teen CEO (Career Exploration Opportunity) program.

Led by Samantha Hartzman of Duquesne Light Company, the EAC brings together organizations across sectors including Pittsburgh Water, ALCOSAN, Dollar Bank, Allegheny County Airport Authority, Giant Eagle, UPMC, and others committed to building stronger connections between education, workforce readiness, and long-term economic mobility.

The goal is not simply placing students in internships.

It's aligning employers around a shared responsibility for developing future talent while helping young people build stability beyond high school.

Teen CEO participants engage in paid internships, career readiness training, financial literacy, mentorship, and professional networking while still in high school.

This summer, HCEF will place 100 students across 60 worksites throughout Allegheny County through Teen CEO, a Partner4Work Learn & Earn worksite program.

Students earn \$16.50-\$18 per hour, open checking accounts, and gain real-world experience inside workplaces across Southwestern Pennsylvania. More than 30% of graduating Teen CEOs secure employment connected to their internship experience, transforming exposure into long-term opportunity.

But the deeper value of the EAC is coordination.

Senior-level leaders across industries are not simply offering opportunities independently. They are sharing insight, identifying workforce gaps, and thinking collectively about the future economic stability of Greater Pittsburgh.

Roughly 300 youths experiencing homelessness graduate from Pittsburgh-area high schools each year, entering adulthood at a moment when access, exposure, and professional networks can significantly shape long-term outcomes.

That matters in a region with one of the oldest labor pools in the country.

And it matters for young people experiencing homelessness, who are too often excluded from the relationships and exposure that shape long-term opportunity.

The EAC is helping change that.

Not through one-time experiences. Through sustained partnership, shared investment, and a collective belief that workforce development should begin long before a young person submits a resume.



Inspire Change

HCEF youth proves seeing is believing, belonging

Exposure matters.

There Donnie Washington was chatting it up with NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell.

The commissioner was in town for the league's draft. Donnie, 18, got access after Homeless Children's Education Fund huddled with the NFL's Inspire Change social justice initiative.

"I've only seen him on TV," Donnie said. "At first, I ain't gonna lie, I definitely was looking at it like it was a big deal and all that."

It wasn't long before Donnie understood he's his own big deal.

"Whenever we were chopping it up or whatever, we were saying how people are nervous to meet him," Donnie said. "He just was telling us everybody is human at the end of the day. We don't gotta look at him like he's better than us just because he's unique."

Donnie is a high school senior with options. Trade school. College. Plus, he's got connections. Through HCEF's Teen CEO program, Donnie's had paid internships with DSEN radio and Dollar Bank. Teen CEO took him on college tours and provided a headstart on building his professional network.

"I've got a lot of connections due to the program," Donnie said.

He was swapping elevator pitches with the NFL commissioner, for crying out loud! The more they talked, the more comfortable Donnie got standing with the principal person for America's No. 1 sport.

Hard having imposter syndrome after that.

Donnie said he'll still hold Goodell in high esteem the next time he sees him on TV. But he'll also remember what he took away from the time he shared space with the man.

"After what he was saying, I don't think there is such a thing as not belonging in the room," Donnie said. "You get put in rooms for a reason."

SUSTAIN THE MOMENTUM.

Help sustain the momentum that supports youth experiencing homelessness when you stop by for the latest at homelessfund.org.



THE Shift

Our newly imagined newsletter from Homeless Children's Education Fund.

This isn't just a name change—it's a reflection of who we've become. We've shifted from a small nonprofit with a big heart to a regional force driving systems of change for students experiencing homelessness. As we grow in size, scope, and strategy, this space will bring you deeper into the journey: the models we're building, the voices we're lifting, and the futures we are fighting for. We're not chasing what's probable—we're redefining what's possible.

