

Identifying Students in Homeless Situations



Subtitle VII-B of the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, reauthorized by Title X, Part C, of the No Child Left Behind Act, ensures educational rights and protections for children and youth experiencing homelessness. This brief explains the key provisions in the Act concerning the identification of homeless children and youth and offers strategies for implementing the Act in a school district. Additional briefs on various topics in the law may be found at <http://www.serve.org/nche/briefs.php>.

Key Provisions

- Every Local Educational Agency (LEA), otherwise known as “school district,” must designate an appropriate staff person as a local homeless education liaison. This person may also be a coordinator for other federal programs.
- Local liaisons must ensure that children and youth in homeless situations are identified by school personnel and through coordination activities with other entities and agencies; once these students are identified, the local liaison must ensure that they receive the services and supports they need to have equal opportunity to enroll and succeed in the district’s schools.
- The state McKinney-Vento plan must describe procedures that the State Educational Agency (SEA) will use to identify homeless children and youth in the state and to assess their special needs.

(See Endnotes for the text of the law.)

Children and youth experiencing homelessness are difficult to identify for many reasons and often go unnoticed by school personnel. Students and parents may try to hide their situation because they are embarrassed by their homelessness. In addition, the fear of having children taken away often prevents families from revealing their living circumstances to school officials. Unaccompanied youth may not report their homeless status for fear of being returned to unsafe family environments. Homeless children and youth who are not enrolled in school and are living in places other than shelters, such as doubled-up with another family or in a low-cost motel, are even more invisible to schools and their communities. Finally, school personnel often do not understand the nature of homelessness and its causes, or the breadth of the federal definition of homelessness (*see sidebar*).

Yet students must be identified as homeless if they are to receive the full protections of the McKinney-Vento Act, including the help

Who is homeless? (Sec. 725)

The term “homeless children and youth”—

- (A) means individuals who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence ...; and
- (B) includes—
 - (i) children and youths who are sharing the housing of other persons due to loss of housing, economic hardship, or a similar reason; are living in motels, hotels, trailer parks, or camping grounds due to the lack of alternative accommodations; are living in emergency or transitional shelters; are abandoned in hospitals; or are awaiting foster care placement;
 - (ii) children and youths who have a primary nighttime residence that is a public or private place not designed for or ordinarily used as a regular sleeping accommodation for human beings ...
 - (iii) children and youths who are living in cars, parks, public spaces, abandoned buildings, substandard housing, bus or train stations, or similar settings; and
 - (iv) migratory children who qualify as homeless for the purposes of this subtitle because the children are living in circumstances described in clauses (i) through (iii).

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they need to enroll, attend, and succeed in school. The law, therefore, requires all school districts, led by the local liaison and in coordination with school personnel and other agencies, to identify students in homeless situations. Identifying students in homeless situations is also an important way to create greater awareness of homelessness in the school district and community.

Strategies for Implementation

- Identify community service agencies, such as shelters, soup kitchens, food banks, transitional living programs, street outreach teams, drop-in centers, community action agencies (especially in rural areas, where there may be no shelters), welfare departments, housing departments, public health departments, and faith-based organizations. Set up meetings with them to begin to collaborate on issues such as the identification of homeless families and youth, the school enrollment process, transportation, and other student services.
- Contact managers of low-cost motels and campgrounds and inform them of the school enrollment assistance and other school services that are available to children and youth experiencing homelessness. Leave written materials for them and the families and youth who stay there; make sure that the contact information of the local liaison is included. Ask that they help you identify homeless families and youth by contacting you if they believe someone staying in their facilities may fit the McKinney-Vento definition.
- Become familiar with low-income neighborhoods, areas where young people who are out of school might congregate during the day, locations of public laundry facilities, Head Start centers, migrant housing developments, and public housing complexes. Develop relationships with people who operate services or programs in these areas and with the people who use the services.
- Provide outreach materials and posters at the above-mentioned and other facilities where there is a frequent influx of low-income families and youth in high-risk situations. Make sure that supplies of materials are always well-stocked and that the materials include information on educational rights, who is considered homeless, and a local phone number to call for school enrollment and other assistance. Posters for parents and for unaccompanied youth may be found on the NCHC website at <http://www.serve.org/nche/products.php>.
- Engage the local homeless task force, homeless coalition, and homeless assistance Continuum of Care as partners in the identification of students who are homeless. A list of resources by state can be found at http://www.serve.org/nche/states/state_resources.php.
- Compile addresses of shelters, motels, transitional living programs, and campgrounds frequently used by families and youth who are homeless, and provide these addresses to district registrars and school secretaries. Registrars and secretaries can help identify these students as homeless by the addresses they list on school paperwork and provide expedited enrollment and referrals to services they may need discreetly. Communicate with school secretaries, who are often a good source of information for students who are “doubled-up” (living temporarily with another family) or who have made numerous school transfers.
- Develop relationships with truancy officials and/or other attendance officers. Train truancy officers on how to recognize school absences that may be the result of homelessness. Provide officers with information so that they may refer students to appropriate services discreetly.
- Provide awareness activities at districtwide professional development training sessions. Invite service agency personnel and homeless families to help conduct sensitivity training

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for school staff (registrars, secretaries, school counselors, school social workers, school nurses, teachers, bus drivers, administrators, etc.). Such activities should include training on how to recognize common signs of homelessness (see the *Common Signs of Homelessness* flyer on the next page).

- Use creative, yet respectful and sensitive, techniques to identify homeless unaccompanied youth, such as administering surveys to peers, using enrollment questionnaires, or providing specific outreach to areas where out-of-school students might congregate.
- Make special efforts to identify preschool children who are in homeless situations, including asking about younger siblings of school-age children; once identified, refer these children to local preschool programs, such as Head Start or a program administered by the school district.
- Provide a districtwide residency questionnaire to all students upon enrollment. Questionnaires that may indicate homelessness should be sent to the local liaison for a final determination of homeless

status and, if affirmative, lead to the provision of referrals and other assistance. A sample residency questionnaire is included in Appendix D of the NCHC *Local Homeless Liaison Toolkit* at http://www.serve.org/nche/downloads/toolkit/app_d.pdf.

- Avoid using the word “homeless” in initial contacts with school personnel, families, or youth. For many, the word “homeless” evokes stereotypical images of adults, not children or youth in classrooms. School personnel may be unlikely to recognize students who are homeless initially but often respond affirmatively when asked if they know of students who are staying temporarily with relatives or another family, are staying at campgrounds or in their car, are living at motels, or have moved several times in a year. Families and students who are homeless may not think of themselves as “homeless” because of the stigma. Therefore, outreach posters and materials placed in shelters, campgrounds, motels, and public housing projects should describe different living arrangements that qualify as homeless rather than simply refer to a person’s “homeless” status.

Endnotes

(g) STATE PLAN-

(1) *IN GENERAL-* Each State shall submit to the Secretary a plan to provide for the education of homeless children and youths within the State. Such plan shall include the following:...

(B) *A description of the procedures the State educational agency will use to identify such children and youths in the State and to assess their special needs.*

(J) *Assurances that--*

(ii) *local educational agencies will designate an appropriate staff person, who may also be a coordinator for other Federal programs, as a local educational agency liaison for homeless children and youths, to carry out the duties described in paragraph (6)(A); and*

(6) LOCAL EDUCATIONAL AGENCY LIAISON-

(A) *DUTIES-* Each local educational agency liaison for homeless children and youths, designated under paragraph (1)(J)(ii), shall ensure that--

(i) *homeless children and youths are identified by school personnel and through coordination activities with other entities and agencies;*

McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act Sec. 722; 42 U.S.C. 11432

Common Signs of Homelessness

Note: While these are considered common signs, please recognize that they only offer general guidance. There is significant variability within the school-age homeless population. Individual students may differ significantly from the following general characteristics.

Lack of Continuity in Education

- Attendance at many different schools
- Lack of records needed to enroll
- Inability to pay fees
- Gaps in skill development
- Mistaken diagnosis of abilities
- Poor organizational skills
- Poor ability to conceptualize

Poor Health/Nutrition

- Lack of immunizations and/or immunization records
- Unmet medical and dental needs
- Respiratory problems
- Skin rashes
- Chronic hunger (may hoard food)
- Fatigue (may fall asleep in class)

Transportation and Attendance Problems

- Erratic attendance and tardiness
- Numerous absences
- Lack of participation in after-school activities
- Lack of participation in field trips
- Inability to contact parents

Poor Hygiene

- Lack of shower facilities/washers, etc.
- Wearing same clothes for several days
- Inconsistent grooming

Lack of Personal Space After School

- Consistent lack of preparation for school
- Incomplete or missing homework (no place to

- work or keep supplies)
- Unable to complete special projects (no access to supplies)
- Lack of basic school supplies
- Loss of books and other supplies on a regular basis
- Concern for safety of belongings

Social and Behavioral Concerns

- A marked change in behavior
- Poor/short attention span
- Poor self-esteem
- Extreme shyness
- Unwillingness to risk forming relationships with peers and teachers
- Difficulty socializing at recess
- Difficulty trusting people
- Aggression
- “Old” beyond years
- Protective of parents
- Clinging behavior
- Developmental delays
- Fear of abandonment
- School phobia (student wants to be with parent)
- Anxiety late in the school day

Reaction/Statements by Parent, Guardian, or Child

- Exhibiting anger or embarrassment when asked about current address
- Mention of staying with grandparents, other relatives, friends, or in a motel, or comments, such as
 - “I don’t remember the name of the last school.”
 - “We’ve been moving around a lot.”
 - “Our address is new; I can’t remember it”
 - “We’re staying with relatives until we get settled.”
 - “We’re going through a bad time.”



Common signs adapted from flyers developed by the Illinois and Pennsylvania Departments of Education. For more information on homeless education, visit the National Center for Homeless Education website at <http://www.serve.org/nche>.

This brief was developed collaboratively by:

National Center for Homeless Education
800-308-2145 (Toll-free Helpline)
<http://www.serve.org/nche>

National Association for the Education of Children and Youth
<http://www.naehcy.org>

National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty
<http://www.nlchp.org>

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Every state is required to have a State Coordinator for Homeless Education, and every school district is required to have a local homeless education liaison. These individuals will assist you with the implementation of the McKinney-Vento Act. To find out who your State Coordinator is, visit the

NCHE website at *http://www.serve.org/nche/states/state_resources.php*.



For more information on the McKinney-Vento Act and resources for implementation, call the NCHE Helpline at 800-308-2145 or e-mail *homeless@serve.org*.



Local Contact Information: