



Increasing School Stability for Students Experiencing Homelessness

Overcoming Challenges to Providing Transportation to the School of Origin

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NCHE Profile

The National Center for Homeless Education (NCHE) is a national resource center of research and information enabling communities to successfully address the needs of children and their families who are experiencing homelessness and unaccompanied youth in homeless situations. Funded by the U.S. Department of Education, NCHE provides services to improve educational opportunities and outcomes for homeless children and youth in our nation's school communities. NCHE is housed at SERVE, a consortium of education organizations associated with the School of Education at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

The goals of NCHE are the following:

- Disseminate important resource and referral information related to the complex issues surrounding the education of children and youth experiencing homelessness.
- Provide rapid-response referral information
- Foster collaboration among various organizations with interests in addressing the needs of children and youth experiencing homelessness
- Synthesize and apply existing research and guide the research agenda to expand the knowledge base on the education of homeless children and families, and unaccompanied youth

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Increasing School Stability for Students Experiencing Homelessness

Overcoming Challenges to Providing Transportation to the School of Origin

Executive Summary

Underscoring the importance of school stability for children and youth experiencing homelessness, the McKinney-Vento Homeless Education Assistance Act, reauthorized as Title X, Part C, of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, requires that school districts provide transportation to enable children and youth to remain in their school of origin (the school a student attended when permanently housed or the school in which the student was last enrolled). Although this mandate increases the complexity and expense of pupil transportation, school districts have developed resourceful strategies to provide children and youth experiencing homelessness transportation to their school of origin.

In order to provide ideas to school districts that experience challenges to implementing the mandate for transportation to the school of origin and those that seek additional implementation strategies, in 2003-2004, the National Center for Homeless Education (NCHE) interviewed local homeless education liaisons and pupil transportation directors from eight school districts that have instituted a variety of approaches to ensuring that children and youth experiencing homelessness receive transportation services to their school of origin.

Following is a summary of recommendations to school districts for providing transportation for children and youth experiencing homelessness to attend the school of origin:

(1) Establish strong networks of community support.

- Initiate conversations with the department of social services, housing authorities, foster care, juvenile justice, child protective services, and public and private transportation agencies
- Create partnerships with shelters, group homes, and community agencies
- Develop memoranda of understanding to clarify roles and expectations
- Participate in local homeless coalitions or councils
- Sponsor meetings to familiarize these agencies with educational needs for children and youth experiencing homelessness and to identify strategies for collaboration

- Identify a contact in each agency with whom routine communication takes place
 - Sensitize private sector businesses to the needs of children and youth experiencing homelessness
- (2) Develop a strong partnership between the homeless education program and the department of pupil transportation.*
- Develop a team approach to coordination between the homeless education program and department of pupil transportation
 - Provide training to department of pupil transportation staff to increase sensitivity to and buy-in for the needs of homeless children
 - Review data on homeless children and youth in the district to identify what the transportation needs are and how the current transportation system might meet those needs
- (3) Establish inter-district collaboration.*
- Have frequent communication between local liaisons and pupil transportation directors across districts
 - Designate which district has the primary responsibility to ensure that children and youth do not “fall through the cracks”
 - Host collaborative cross-district meetings of local liaisons and pupil transportation directors to plan strategies and review their effectiveness
- (4) Establish formal procedures for equity, transparency, and consistency.*
- Involve all stakeholders in the development of procedures and publicize them in the school system and community
 - Establish inter-district policies and memoranda of agreement
 - Review procedures periodically and revise as needed
 - Develop forms for intake and record keeping
 - Develop informational brochures for parents
 - Develop procedures for inter-district transportation and put in place before the need arises
- (5) Establish policies to support federal legislation.*
- Develop state and/or local policies that reinforce the McKinney-Vento legislation
 - Develop state and/or local policies that clarify roles and responsibilities related to transporting children and youth experiencing homelessness to their school of origin
 - Review policies from other states or districts to serve as models

(6) Establish a database and system for data collection.

- Establish an electronic database that can be shared among school and school district staff, shelters, and other agencies involved with homeless children and youth
- Attend to confidentiality issues
- Ensure regular and accurate data input
- Use data to facilitate and expedite transportation arrangements
- Use data to report on the transportation needs of homeless children and youth for advocacy and funding purposes

(7) Seek economical and creative solutions.

- Seek the most economical solutions first
- Identify potential resources in the community
- Involve private sector businesses and foundations
- Plan ahead; have resources identified and procedures in place
- Be flexible with bus routes and use of special education or magnet school buses

(8) Keep in mind the safety of the child or youth

- Ensure that transportation modes for transporting children to the school of origin are equally as safe as those for other children
- Follow state and local policies related to approved vehicles and drivers
- Ensure taxis and public vehicles meet guidelines outlined in the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration *Guideline #17: Pupil Transportation Safety* (<http://www.nhtsa.dot.gov/nhtsa/whatsup/tea21/tea21programs/402Guide.html#g17>)
- Screen all drivers for background checks and driving records

(9) Inform policymakers of the need for school stability for highly mobile children

- Provide accurate and concrete data
- Visit the website of NAEHCY (www.naehcy.org) to become aware of national advocacy efforts

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Increasing School Stability for Students Experiencing Homelessness

Overcoming Challenges to Providing Transportation to the School of Origin

Introduction

Underscoring the importance of school stability for children and youth experiencing homelessness, the McKinney-Vento Homeless Education Assistance Act, reauthorized as Title X, Part C, of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, requires that school districts provide transportation to enable children and youth to remain in their school of origin (the school a student attended when permanently housed or the school in which the student was last enrolled).

Many school districts have devised resourceful strategies for implementing the mandate. Local homeless education liaisons, now required in every school district, work with pupil transportation directors and other administrators, community agencies, municipal transportation systems, or private transportation providers seeking ways to coordinate efforts and pool resources to ensure that children can remain in their school of origin when they or their families become homeless. States and local districts throughout the nation have developed policies that support the federal legislation and facilitate inter-district transportation when necessary.

Many school districts implemented systems to keep children in their school of origin even before the 2001 legislation and have lessons to share on ways to establish an effective transportation system for this purpose. Other school systems are just beginning the conversation and are struggling to meet the requirement.

Increasing School Stability for Students Experiencing Homelessness: Overcoming Challenges to Providing Transportation to the School of Origin, developed by the National Center for Homeless Education (NCHE), targets school districts that are in the initial stages of addressing the school stability and transportation needs of homeless students and those that wish to refine their current system. Information from interviews with local administrators in eight school districts that successfully provide transportation to the school of origin provides strategies and guidelines for establishing effective transportation programs to serve the needs of homeless children and youth.

Included in the publication are:

- Rationale for school stability
- Overview of the McKinney-Vento legislation relating to transportation to the school of origin
- Challenges and strategies for transporting homeless children to their school of origin—summary of interviews
- General recommendations for implementing the mandate for transporting children to their school of origin

Rationale for School Stability

Currently, an estimated 1.35 million children are homeless in the United States (NCH, 2003; Noll & Watkins). Families with children now represent the fastest-growing segment within the homeless population (Noll & Watkins, Nunez & Collingnon, Stronge & Hudson). An inevitable reality of homelessness for these families and children is a life of frequent moves. Families who are experiencing homelessness often must move from shelter to shelter, as their allowable stays come to an end. They may move in with family members temporarily, stay at hotels or motels for short stints, live out of their cars or live in temporary housing through government or non-profit programs. In cases where these families must move a distance to find temporary housing, they are not only burdened with the stresses of a new living situation, but often are moving into different school districts and faced with the possibility of their children having to enroll in a new school with new teachers, curriculum, and classmates.

Not surprisingly, children and youths who move frequently, due to their families' homelessness or other unstable work and home situations often related to high poverty, are vulnerable to educational difficulties. It is important to note, however, that not all children and youths move because of crisis or other difficulty. There are those who move for "strategic" reasons to enter a better educational situation, according to Rumberger, and those who make "reactive" school changes "due to intolerable social or academic situations" (2003). Students moving for reactive reasons, such as homelessness, were more likely to report negative educational impacts in Rumberger's study of mobility in California schools (1999).

Despite the different motivations for moves, there is a significant body of research to show that highly mobile students often perform less well than their stable peers (Attles, 1997; Alexander, Entwisle, & Dauber, 1996; Family Housing Fund, 1998; Temple & Reynolds, 1999; Hofstetter, 1999; Lee & Smith, 1999; Wood, Halfon,

Scarla, Newacheck, & Nessim, 1993). In a national study of third-graders conducted by the U.S. General Accounting Office, students who had changed schools frequently were more likely to have repeated a grade or have performed below grade level on reading assessments (1994). One study conducted by the Texas Education Agency in 1997 found that the difference between mobile and non-mobile students' standard test scores positively increased with the students' grade level; that is, the higher the grade level, the greater the gap between the mobile and non-mobile students' achievement, with the mobile students falling further and further behind. Even after controlling for previous test scores and socio-economic status, mobile students still performed one to two points lower than their non-mobile counterparts (Texas Education Agency). School mobility has also been found to be associated with higher dropout rates in high schoolers (Rumberger, 1995; Swanson & Schneider, 1999; Teachman, Paasch, & Carver, 1996). In these instances, it was clear that highly mobile students were at an educational disadvantage.

In addition to educational difficulties, highly mobile students have been found to experience other significant problems. The same study of third-graders conducted by the U.S. General Accounting Office found nutritional and health deficiencies in these highly mobile students. Other studies found that students who change schools often experience more behavioral problems (Simpson & Fowler, 1994; Wood, Halfon, Scarla, Newacheck, & Nessim, 1993; Swanson & Schneider, 1999), including an increased risk for violent behavior (Ellickson & McGuigan, 2000). According to Mantzicopoulos and Knutson (2000), frequent school moves and the transitions associated with them may overburden young children's limited emotional resources as they try to cope with such major changes.

While it is clear that children and youths can benefit from remaining in their school of origin, the *U.S. Department of Education's McKinney-Vento Report to Congress for Fiscal Year 2000* cited transportation as the primary barrier for children attempting to enroll in and regularly attend their school of origin. Fortunately, with the reauthorization of the McKinney-Vento legislation, local school districts are now required to not only remove barriers to enrollment, but to provide students transportation services to their school of origin when requested, once remaining in the school of origin is determined to be in the best interest of the child or youth.

With both the legislative mandate and increased awareness of the critical nature of school stability for homeless children and youth, new collaborations abound among school districts and state and federal agencies. Building on a 2000 NCHE national symposium on transportation for homeless children and youth, a strong partnership

between NCHE and the National Association of State Directors of Pupil Transportation Services (NASDPTS) resulted in a NASDPTS resolution committing to serving the transportation needs of homeless children and youth. (See Appendix D). In addition, the National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth (NAEHCY) has facilitated many opportunities for states and school districts to share transportation strategies through its annual conference, listserv, and newsletters. (See Appendix J.)

Overview of Provisions of the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act of 2001 Relating to Transportation to the School of Origin

McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act (Title X, Part C, No Child Left Behind Act). Key provisions in the McKinney-Vento legislation related to transportation to the school of origin include:

- Local Education Agencies (LEAs), otherwise known as school districts, must provide students experiencing homelessness with transportation to and from their school of origin, at a parent or guardian's request, once remaining in the school of origin is determined to be in the best interest of the child. The LEA must provide transportation to the school of origin whether or not it receives funding through a McKinney-Vento subgrant. In addition, the LEA must provide transportation to the school of origin even if it does not provide transportation to non-homeless students.
- For unaccompanied youth, LEAs must provide transportation to and from the school of origin at the LEA homeless liaison's request.
- "School of origin" is defined as the school that the child or youth attended when permanently housed or the school in which the child or youth was last enrolled.
- If the student's temporary residence and the school of origin are in the same LEA, that LEA must provide or arrange transportation. If the student is living outside the school of origin's LEA, the LEA where the student is living and the school of origin's LEA must determine how to divide the responsibility and cost of providing transportation, or they must share the responsibility and cost equally. (See Appendix A for relevant portions of the statute.)

U.S. Department of Education 2004 Non-Regulatory Guidance. Further clarification of the statute is provided in the July 2004 *Non-Regulatory Guidance* issued by the U.S. Department of Education (See Appendix B for relevant portions of the *Guidance*.) The *Guidance* reinforces that State Education Agencies (SEAs) and LEAs are responsible for reviewing and revising policies, including transportation policies that may act as barriers to the enrollment and retention of homeless children and youth.

In determining a child's or youth's best interest for school placement, an LEA must, to the extent feasible, continue a homeless child or youth in the "school of origin" for the duration of homelessness unless contrary to the wishes of the child or youth's parents or guardian. Factors that an LEA may consider when determining feasibility include the age of the child, the distance of a commute and the impact it may have on a student's education, personal safety issues, a student's need for special instruction (e.g., special education and related services), the length of the anticipated child's stay in a shelter or other temporary location, and the time remaining in the school year. Determining the most appropriate placement for a child or youth experiencing homelessness is a student-centered, individualized determination.

If the student continues to live in the area served by the LEA in which the school of origin is located, then the LEA must provide or arrange for transportation to and from the school of origin. If the student is continuing his or her education in the school of origin but begins to live in an area served by another LEA, the LEA of origin and the LEA in which the child or youth is living must agree upon a method to apportion the responsibility and costs or share the costs equally. LEAs should establish inter-district agreements, where appropriate, that address potential issues that may arise as homeless students transfer from one district to another.

The *Guidance* recommends a team approach to addressing the transportation needs of homeless and other highly mobile students. Based on the best interest of the student and in consultation with the parents or guardian, the LEA will determine the mode of transportation. The LEA transportation director is a key figure in the process and should work with district leadership, the local liaison for homeless education, neighboring districts, and service providers.

If the appropriate school placement of a child is in dispute, the LEA must provide or arrange for transportation to and from the school of origin until the dispute is resolved. Inter-district transportation disputes should be resolved at the SEA level.

Regarding the use of Title I or other federal funds to support the transportation of a child or youth to the school of origin, although

LEAs are required to set aside Title I, Part A, funds to serve homeless children and youth, these funds or other federal funds may not be used to provide transportation to the school of origin, due to supplanting issues.

The legislation allows a child or youth who becomes homeless during the academic year to continue in the school of origin for the remainder of the academic year if he or she becomes permanently housed. It is within the intent of the McKinney-Vento legislation to continue to provide transportation to the school of origin in order to prevent fragmentation of school services for formerly homeless students who may not be able to maintain the continuity of their education in the school of origin if transportation support is no longer provided. An LEA may use district Title I, Part A funds reserved under Section 1113(c)(3)(A), other Title I, Title V or McKinney-Vento subgrant funds to pay the excess costs of transportation for formerly homeless students remaining in their school of origin.

Challenges and Strategies for Transporting Homeless Children to their School of Origin Summary of Interviews

In 2003, NCHE invited its national partners (National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth, National Coalition for the Homeless, and National Law Center on Homelessness & Poverty) to recommend school districts that have implemented effective systems for transporting homeless children to their school of origin. Of the ones recommended, NCHE staff selected eight that were willing to provide interviews. (See Appendix E for the Interview Questionnaire.) The LEAs represented in the interviews are Anchorage (AK), Cincinnati (OH), Houston (TX), Putnam County (FL), San Antonio (TX), Spokane (WA), St. Paul (MN), and Vancouver (WA). Following is a summary of issues and strategies compiled from the interviews. (Readers are strongly encouraged to review individual district responses to the interview questions in Appendix F.)

Profile of Participating School Districts. Table 1 provides an overview of the eight districts included in this document. Although most of the districts are urban, the Putnam County (FL) district is rural. The San Antonio Independent School District covers 16 local districts in the metropolitan area, and ESD 112 in Vancouver (WA) covers six counties that include urban, suburban, and rural districts through their transportation cooperative. All of the districts included in the interviews provide bus transportation to their students, and

most are able to utilize the public transportation system to assist with providing transportation to the school of origin. Six out of the eight districts receive funding through McKinney-Vento subgrants, yet five out of the six use only a small portion of their McKinney-Vento subgrant for transportation. Most of the districts are able to provide transportation through additional or extended bus routes. They most frequently supplement school district transportation with public transportation, taxis, and reimbursement to families for mileage.

Table 1: Profile of School Districts Interviewed

LEA	Type	Est. No. Homeless Children	Est. No. Homeless Children Transported	School Transportation System?	Public Transportation Available?	McKinney-Vento Subgrant?	% M-V Subgrant Spent on Transportation	Top 3 Modes of Transportation Most Frequently Used
Anchorage, AK	urban	2,121	759	Yes	Yes, but limited	Yes	0-10%	Taxis, mileage reimbursement, additional or extended bus routes
Cincinnati, OH	urban	2,000	300	Yes	Yes	Yes	0-10%	Contracted transportation services with additional or extended bus routes, public transportation, taxis
Houston, TX	urban	1,600	1,520	Yes	Yes	Yes	0-10%	Existing bus routes, public transportation, additional or extended bus routes
Putnam Co., FL	rural	736	700	Yes	Yes, but limited	Yes	0-10%	Additional or extended bus routes, personal vehicles, mileage reimbursement
San Antonio, TX (1 LEAs in the metro region)	urban	1300	340	Yes	Yes	Yes	0-5%	Additional or extended bus routes, public transportation, special education buses
Spokane, WA	urban	572	400	Yes	Yes	Yes	10-25%	Public transportation, additional or extended bus routes, taxis
St. Paul, MN	urban	1,000	900	Yes	Yes	Yes	75-100%	Existing bus routes, LEA program vans, public transportation, additional or extended bus routes
Vancouver, WA (6 county region, not school district)	rural, suburban, urban	235	235	Yes - Cooperative	Yes—approximately 10%	No	NA	Special education buses only

Challenges and strategies—funding. Funding is overall the biggest challenge for LEAs to provide transportation to the school of origin. Because the McKinney-Vento Act requires school districts to provide transportation to the school of origin, school districts may not use federal funds from other programs to do so. However, many LEAs have committed district funds for this key to school stability for homeless children and youth and have resourcefully sought additional

funds and strategies to implement the mandate. Even districts that receive McKinney-Vento subgrants generally seek additional funding sources, rather than use their subgrants solely for this purpose.

The LEAs participating in interviews each rely primarily on district funds to support the transportation of homeless children to their school of origin. LEAs from Texas and Washington receive additional support from the state level. Cincinnati and St. Paul receive foundation, local agency, and/or donor support as well. Some school districts have explored funding sources from the Department of Health and Human Services, their state Department of Transportation, and from federal programs such as Medicaid and TANF.

Many school districts are creative and economical in their use of resources to provide transportation to the school of origin. Most of the districts interviewed for this document extend or add on to existing bus routes, and some are able to use special education buses. The homeless education liaison from the Houston Independent School District states, “The district has been willing to place students on any route that is necessary to accommodate them. For example, the district has placed elementary-aged students on high school routes, used ambulatory special education routes, and even transferred students from one route to another, to make sure that they were transported where they needed to go.”

The Vancouver (WA) Specialized Transportation Cooperative is a unique approach to transporting students with special needs. Initiated in 1988, the cooperative is funded by the state and 23 LEAs that pay annual fees. Participating districts pooled resources to purchase a fleet of buses to transport students on a daily basis to education, treatment, and specialized programs in the region. In 2002, members voted to add to the cooperative the responsibility of transporting homeless children to their school of origin. In 2003-2004, the Cooperative transported 235 homeless children and youth, averaging 27 per day. Local liaisons approve applications for transportation and send them to the Cooperative.

Challenges and strategies—intra-district logistics and coordination. Because of the variation in each family’s needs and mobility, arranging for transportation to the school of origin can be logistically complex. Compounded by school bus availability and schedules, shelter schedules, and geographical distance, LEAs must coordinate with departments within the LEA, external agencies, and other school districts to arrange transportation in a timely way. Community partnerships are key to coordinating transportation.

- The Anchorage (AK) school district has established partnerships with shelters, group homes, and community

agencies (housing, medical, mental health, children's services).

- Project Connect (Cincinnati, OH) staff members attend meetings of the community homeless coalition.
- The Houston (TX) homeless project schedules regular visits to local shelters, and staff members attend meetings of the homeless coalition where other homeless providers are present.
- St. Paul (MN) school staff works each day with families in shelters to determine the best ways of providing transportation for their children.

The San Antonio Independent School District (TX) played a pivotal role in establishing the San Antonio Area Homeless Education Council that includes shelter personnel, community agency representatives, health agencies, social service agencies, child protective services, juvenile justice, and LEAs. The Council provides a setting in which to train service providers on the rights of children and youth in homeless situations, a forum to discuss issues and strategies for interagency collaboration, and an entry point for community members into the school system.

The San Antonio Area Homeless Education Council holds meetings and workshops during brown bag lunch sessions.

The Anchorage (AK) homeless education program convened a transportation summit in 2004 that included the LEA director of pupil transportation, transportation director for Head Start, district Title I coordinator, risk management and safety director, and a representative from United Way and a taxi company to discuss ways to meet the school transportation needs of homeless students.

Most of the LEAs interviewed stated that no formal agreements exist between the department of social services or child protective services. As a result, placing families and children near their school of origin is generally not a high priority among these agencies. However, some of the LEAs have working relationships with the department of social services or child protective services that encourage placement of children and families near their school of origin. The Texas Department of Protective and Regulatory Services (child protective agency) has created a new staff position whose role is to work with schools regarding children placed in foster care or other temporary placements and work with LEAs to support the educational continuity of the children in the child protective agency system. At this time, formal agreements are not in place but are under consideration.

Houston school administrators and shelter providers link with homeless education staff to discuss issues such as rerouting bus services and relocating pick up and drop off to avoid stigmas associated with being homeless.

The Spokane (WA) Neighborhood Action Program works with the LEA to place children and families near the school of origin. Also, agreements exist through the Putnam County (FL) school board to

work with the division of children and youth services that includes children in foster care and adjudicated children and youth.

Interaction between homeless education staff and other district program staff is critical to arranging transportation for homeless children and youth. The LEA staff members interviewed generally agreed that the local homeless education liaison is a key figure to provide awareness to other departments on the McKinney-Vento legislation and to initiate the establishment of a system to serve the transportation needs of homeless children and youth. In addition, the liaison should seek funding and troubleshoot.

The role of the director of pupil transportation is to coordinate his or her staff, vehicle availability, and bus routes to ensure that children and youth are picked up and dropped off safely and efficiently. Regarding the role of the transportation director, the homeless education liaison from St. Paul(MN) stated: “It’s important to understand that in some cases, the director of transportation runs a huge program, of which McKinney-Vento is just one piece. Despite this, it is imperative that he/she understands the McKinney-Vento Act, supports the transportation mandates, and trains his/her staff to support it as well. The transportation director must also have access to enough vehicles and staff to make it work effectively, for example, hiring part time staff to cover as needed.”

Several of the LEAs reinforced that collaboration is necessary for the system to work. The homeless education liaison from Spokane (WA) said, “The only way to make this program work is to share the responsibility. No one person or department takes these families on as their own. We all must work together to see each situation through ... We must have good communication and mutual respect for the process to work.”

The LEAs interviewed emphasized the importance of having a system in place so that all parties know their roles in facilitating transportation to the school of origin. In Project Connect (Cincinnati, OH), for example, homeless families typically contact McKinney-Vento program staff after being referred from a shelter or other agency. For homeless students who come to school without contacting the McKinney-Vento program, the schools know to send them to Project Connect. Staff members at Project Connect arrange transportation, which is more efficient than schools trying to make arrangements. The McKinney-Vento staff contacts the pupil transportation department via phone or email, and transportation is arranged individually in each case.

Similarly, in Spokane (WA), a McKinney-Vento program staff member interviews families experiencing homelessness and assesses their transportation needs. The staff member uses a form that details

“The intake form has been a lifesaver. It holds the family accountable, communication is clear and concise, everyone is on the same page, and parents know what is expected.”
(Spokane, WA)

In outlying rural areas of Putnam County (FL), the LEA assists homeless parents with getting their children to school by providing reimbursement for gas when necessary.

the types of transportation, policies for each, and expectations the family must meet. All relevant phone numbers are included as well. (See Appendix G for a copy of the form.) A family signs the form and is told that staff will notify them of the district's transportation arrangements. The McKinney-Vento staff member faxes the request to the pupil transportation department. Pupil transportation department staff looks at existing bus routes first, then at special education bus routes, then at public transportation, and then at taxi or mileage reimbursement for parents. The transportation department makes a decision and emails the McKinney-Vento staff with arrangements, and the staff contacts the family, school, taxi company, etc.

Details are crucial. For example, more than one school might need to be notified, as in the case of a child who will walk to a nearby school to catch an "overflow" bus to take him or her to the school of origin. The nearby school must be notified of its responsibility to welcome the child and ensure that he or she catches the bus. To address the problem of coordinating transportation with differing school schedules, the San Antonio homeless education program developed a master calendar and schedule of all schools (see Appendix G) to ensure that schools where children are taken will be open or will have supervising staff available to meet them.

Because of the importance of ensuring the child attends school while LEA transportation arrangements are being made, in Spokane, a family is given temporary means for transportation, such as bus tokens for public transportation. Social workers and shelters frequently take responsibility for making initial transportation arrangements.

Homeless shelters in Anchorage fax the homeless education program staff a list with the names of children staying there and include signed releases for them to attend school. The children are added to the list for the Shelter Shuttle, which picks up children from shelters and motels. For children not staying in shelters, families self-refer or are referred by school staff. Once a student or family is identified as homeless, a homeless education program staff member contacts the family and decides on a transportation plan. Two administrative staff members assist with daily dispatching of information.

In Putnam County (FL), if a family is staying at a shelter, the shelter program staff makes the initial call to McKinney-Vento program staff. Parents are referred to the transportation department by McKinney-Vento program staff in order to make arrangements because it may be easier for parents to discuss pick up locations, etc., with the route supervisor.

St. Paul (MN) facilitates transportation arrangements through the use of an electronic database. A McKinney-Vento staff member

Project Connect (Cincinnati, OH) arranges public bus transportation while planning school bus service. For young children, bus tokens are provided for a parent or guardian to accompany the child to and from school.

In San Antonio, homeless parents are provided with transportation brochures in English and Spanish on policies, modes, and procedures. Parents are informed of what they need to do, how to keep in touch, etc. (See Appendix G for a copy of the brochures.)

meets with the parents, assesses the transportation needs, and makes a transportation plan (program van, tokens, cab, existing route, or request for an additional route). Then he or she informs the parents, the school, and the shelter staff of the plan. All alternative route requests are made through the district transportation department with an ongoing log (form), which is faxed daily. The transportation requests are entered in the database and used for planning, cost analysis, and program evaluation. If the child is on an alternative route outside of the district, a form is given to the parent indicating who they need to call if they are not going to need the transportation that day or if a vehicle is late in picking them up. This helps with not sending vehicles out when they are not needed. The transportation department also calls the McKinney-Vento staff daily telling them which students did not ride the alternative bus that morning. The staff calls each school and asks them to call if the child arrives to school and will need the bus home in the afternoon. This helps with not having to send a bus at the last minute for a stranded child. The Anchorage program also utilizes an electronic database that inputs every school transfer.

The San Antonio homeless education program reinforces the importance of communication. The San Antonio coordinator of family/student services said, “Staff from two offices (transportation and McKinney-Vento) are working together, communicating through about 10-15 emails/phone calls per day to see that all services are in place and all parties are notified.” The San Antonio program also convenes transportation and homeless education staff annually to review the year’s activities. The program continually refines and retunes its approach, forms, and procedures.

Challenges and strategies—inter-district coordination. Many LEAs face particular challenges with arranging inter-district transportation. In San Antonio, for example, because the district houses 27 homeless shelters, it is required to transport a large number of children and youth out of the district to their school of origin.

The LEAs interviewed report various levels of cooperation from districts regarding the sharing of transportation responsibilities. LEAs that have policies and collaborations relating to inter-district transportation for homeless children and youth are more successful in arranging transportation expediently and in sharing the costs fairly than those that do not.

Formal or informal agreements are helpful in designating responsibility so that homeless children do not “fall through the cracks.” The Spokane school district developed an informal agreement with surrounding districts stating that the school district where a child

Spokane homeless education staff provides a list to all homeless shelters in adjoining districts with the homeless education program contact person and phone number in each. Also included is information for how to initiate the process of arranging transportation to the school of origin.

In San Antonio, interdistrict coordination entails first getting students onto the appropriate bus routes, then working with district transportation departments to coordinate bus routes, allowing for convenient and safe locations for children to transfer buses.

is currently residing is responsible for coordinating transportation services back to the school of origin. Although all districts must work together, the district of residence holds the primary responsibility.

In explaining the background of this agreement, the Spokane homeless education liaison explains, “As we received students in the shelters from other districts, we discovered we were doing all the leg-work and frequently did not hear back from the other districts because they did not understand the McKinney-Vento legislation. We finally decided that we would train the shelters to call the school where students were enrolled and allow *them* to begin the process with their school district’s transportation director, who would then contact the Spokane transportation director. That way they had some buy-in. It worked so well that it became an informal agreement.”

The Houston pupil transportation department maintains collaborative relationships with surrounding school districts to coordinate transportation services for homeless students. The department hosts meetings of transportation directors to establish a system to receive and conduct referrals. Designated staff members in each of the surrounding districts handle inter-district transfers on a case-by-case basis throughout the year.

State and local policies that support transportation to the school of origin. State and local policy support ranges from documents sent to LEAs and schools by the State Coordinator for Homeless Education, local superintendent, or legal counsel outlining responsibilities under the McKinney-Vento legislation, to state and local policies developed and implemented to clarify and supplement the McKinney-Vento legislation.

Minnesota has a state policy that specifically addresses the transportation needs of homeless children and youth. While mirroring the federal legislation, it both bridges homeless education policy with Minnesota education statutes and includes specific requirements for ways to provide transportation for homeless children and youth above and beyond what is required in the federal legislation.

Most of the LEAs included in this document have local policies in place. The Houston Independent School District established Board Policy FBD 10192 on Admissions and Attendance: Intra-district Transfers. The policy indicates that the parent or person standing in parental relation to any student may request, by petition in writing, the assignment of the student to a designated school or to a school to be designated by the Board of Education. This policy is also indicated in TEC 25.033(1), 26.003(a)(1). Additionally, the Board of Education must grant the request made in the petition unless the Board

In 2002, the Houston Independent School District convened a meeting of neighboring school districts and developed a cooperative agreement to ensure timely creation of routes that cross district lines. A list of neighboring districts was created to assist local liaisons in advising parents how to arrange transportation services when their family moves.

determines that there is a reasonable basis for denying it. This policy is indicated in Education Code 25.034(e).

Local policy in Putnam County (FL) supports and clarifies requirements in the McKinney-Vento legislation and has helped facilitate the smooth implementation of transportation to the school of origin throughout the district. (See Appendix G for a copy of the local policy.)

State-level support. The LEAs stated that state-level support (beyond state policies that supplement the McKinney-Vento legislation) entails primarily funding through subgrants and assistance from State Coordinators in answering questions and resolving difficult situations.

In Texas, school districts receive reimbursement from the state for transporting children to their school of origin on the same basis as for transporting all children. Local funds must provide for the additional costs of transporting children to the school of origin.

In 2004, through advocacy on the federal level, the Washington Department of Transportation received a one-time million-dollar grant to assist with transportation for homeless children and youth. Initial discussions on how to allocate the funds have brought together a variety of stakeholders and representatives from both the school district and private sector. Plans for disbursement will be forthcoming.

General Recommendations for Implementing the Mandate for Transporting Homeless Children to their School of Origin

(1) Establish strong networks of community support. Many community stakeholders are vested in the wellbeing of children and families in homeless situations. Schools are just one element in a continuum of services. Therefore, the local homeless education liaison should be involved with all agencies that impact the lives of homeless children and youth. Community partners can provide valuable resources and strategies to assist with transportation and school stability.

Even more importantly, however, because schools and school districts have not historically been part of community discussions surrounding the needs of homeless children and youth, many agencies do not consider educational and school placement needs when determining social services and placement of families. Community agencies need to be informed of the educational needs of and legislative requirements for homeless children and youth. In particular, local liaisons should initiate conversations with the department of social services, housing authorities, foster care, juvenile justice, and child

protective services. In addition to providing information to these agencies, the LEA may wish to host meetings to familiarize agencies with one another's culture, procedures, funding, etc. The LEA may explore formal collaborative strategies with agencies such as developing memoranda of understanding for how a community agency and LEA can support one another's services. The local homeless education liaison should have a contact person in each agency with whom routine communication takes place.

Public and private transportation agencies should also be part of the conversation. Many are willing to provide services for free or at a reduced rate as a community service. Also, public transportation agencies must become aware of and sensitized to the needs of homeless children, youth, and families so that their services are safe, efficient, and non-stigmatizing. With a wealth of experience in providing transportation, these agencies may contribute valuable ideas to LEAs on meeting the transportation needs of homeless children and youth.

LEAs should involve local foundations and private sector businesses. Local foundations and businesses, when sensitized to social issues, are great sources of funding and support. Educational stability helps ensure well-educated, self-sufficient citizens of the future. This provides a great economic incentive for businesses to help meet the current educational and transportation needs of homeless children and youth. Local homeless education liaisons should promote the homeless education program to the private sector.

(2) Develop a strong partnership between the homeless education program and the department of pupil transportation. LEAs that are able to provide transportation services for homeless children and youth have developed a team approach to coordination between the homeless education program and department of pupil transportation. In districts where this collaboration does not exist, the homeless education liaison should initiate conversations with the director of pupil transportation to underscore the importance of school stability and to familiarize him or her with the McKinney-Vento legislation. In addition, the homeless education liaison should provide awareness training on homeless issues for the transportation staff to increase sensitivity to the needs of homeless children and create buy-in.

The homeless education liaison and director of pupil transportation should review data on homeless children and youth in the district to identify what the transportation needs are and how the current transportation system might meet these needs. A collaborative approach to identifying strategies and resources will reinforce the concept that homeless children are everyone's responsibility.

(3) Establish inter-district collaboration. Inter-district collaboration is essential to establish and smoothly implement procedures and policies for transporting children and youth to their school of origin. Local liaisons and pupil transportation directors from LEAs where homeless families frequently cross district lines should communicate regularly and determine how transportation responsibilities and expenses will be shared. Although some transportation arrangements to the school of origin can be planned ahead of time, such as in an area where students frequently move with their families to a shelter across district lines, staff members from both LEAs must also be willing to problem-solve on a case-by-case basis when necessary.

Regular meetings of local liaisons and pupil transportation directors from LEAs that frequently share homeless students help to identify emerging issues and provide opportunities to review the effectiveness of existing policies and procedures.

Inter-district collaborations that designate which district has the primary responsibility to make arrangements (such as the district where the child is currently residing) help ensure that children and youth “do not fall through the cracks.”

(4) Establish formal procedures for equity, transparency, and consistency. A key to providing transportation for homeless children and youth is helping all stakeholders to understand the procedures by which these services are provided and their role in the process. The local homeless education liaison and pupil transportation director should develop a procedure to identify points of contact both in the school system and in the community. Shelter and service providers and parents should be made aware of the system and invited periodically to provide input on how the system could be improved.

Forms for intake facilitate tracking and record keeping. Informational brochures for parents and service providers detailing both children’s rights under the McKinney-Vento legislation and procedures by which the LEA enacts the legislation will also help everyone understand how the children’s needs will be met.

LEAs that typically share homeless children and families across school districts should develop procedures for inter-district transportation. Disputes arise when school districts are unsure about how the transportation responsibilities for homeless children and youth are shared. Unnecessary delays and ill will frequently result when districts wait until the occasion arises to develop transportation and funding arrangements while under pressure to make arrangements for a child as quickly as possible.

(5) Establish policies to support the federal legislation. Though clear in its mandate to provide transportation to the school of origin, federal legislation provides flexibility for states and LEAs to implement the mandate in ways most appropriate to their locality. Many states have developed policies and procedures outlined in their state homeless education plans to further guide LEAs in areas such as enrollment and inter-district transportation. In addition, many LEAs create local or school board policies to further clarify and institutionalize the implementation of the mandate.

The local homeless education liaison should review current policies and initiate a process to develop policies related to homeless education if none exist. Sample policies are available from the National Law Center on Homelessness & Poverty (See Appendix J), and states and local districts are generally very willing to share their policies.

(6) Establish a database and system for data collection. An electronic database can be an effective technological solution for keeping up with the high mobility of homeless families. Information on homeless children and youth can be input and shared immediately among LEAs, schools, school districts, shelters, and other agencies.

However, electronic databases are not without their complications. Confidentiality issues over which agencies can share information and what information can be shared often create barriers to an efficient use of a database. Also, a database is only as good as the information put into it. Information must be entered continually, and staff time must be allocated for this purpose. Still, the benefits outweigh the effort spent to resolve these issues with agencies for which such information would enhance their ability to collaborate.

Furthermore, a great need exists for data that illustrate the needs of homeless children and youth. Because collecting data on highly mobile children, particularly with regard to transportation, is often difficult, many LEAs have inadequate documentation of the needs and costs of meeting the mandates. Subsequently, advocates and educators face great challenges in making the case for increasing commitment to and funding for school stability. Policymakers and legislators who want hard data on school achievement directly related to school stability or on the amount of funds LEAs are spending on transporting children and youth to their school of origin remain unconvinced by anecdotal evidence and ballpark estimates. LEAs must work with their data and research staff to collect valid data on transporting children to their school of origin. Such data, shared locally and nationally, will facilitate the understanding of the effects of homeless education policies.

“We took charge when setting up many of our policies so that they work to our advantage, meaning this is how we need [the system] to work in order to accommodate our needs and work load.” (San Antonio, TX)

(7) Seek economical and creative solutions. Many alternatives for arranging transportation to the school of origin are quite expensive. Taxis, for example, are usually one of the most expensive ways to transport children. However, LEAs that seek more economical solutions at first, such as utilizing existing buses and bus routes, and select more expensive alternatives only after they determine that the most cost-effective alternatives will not work are able to handle the expenses more effectively. Many LEAs have demonstrated creativity and resourcefulness as they have developed systems of transferring students at various bus route locations or assisted parents with mileage reimbursements for transporting their children. Arranging to use community agency vehicles or obtaining discounted prices on public transportation also help to defray the costs of transportation.

Homeless program liaisons and pupil transportation directors need to assess resources available in the LEA and community with an attitude of doing the most with what is available. The extent to which LEAs can plan ahead will increase the likelihood that economical solutions can be found, rather than trying to identify economical solutions when under pressure to arrange transportation as quickly as possible for a child or youth who is waiting to continue in his or her school of origin.

(8) Keep in mind the safety of the child. Although the necessity to get homeless children and youth to school frequently drives decisions on the method of transport, LEAs are responsible for ensuring that the transportation of homeless children and youth to school is equally as safe as the transportation of all other students as regulated by federal guidelines. LEAs must follow their state and local policies regarding transportation safety and approved vehicles.

The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration's *Guideline #17: Pupil Transportation Safety* establishes minimum recommendations for the transportation of students to and from school and school-related activities. (See Appendix H for *Guideline #17*.) Taxis and public vehicles should meet these safety guidelines, and all drivers should have background checks and be screened for driving records.

(9) Inform policymakers of the need for school stability for highly mobile children. The financial demands to meet the mandate for transportation to the school of origin pose challenges for many school districts. Individuals involved in the education of homeless children and youth need to create greater awareness of the strategies that foster educational achievement and wellbeing of homeless children and youth. The result can be greater funding through federal, state, and

local budgets. (See Appendix I for a description of the work of the National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth and its legislative advocacy work.)

Conclusion

School stability is a key to helping children and youth experiencing homelessness maintain educational continuity. Preventing homeless children and youth who are highly mobile from falling behind in their education will help them to succeed and break the cycle of poverty that condemns many to a future of limited opportunity and economic insufficiency.

To promote school stability, the McKinney-Vento Homeless Education Assistance Act ensures the rights of homeless children and youth to attend their school of origin when feasible and requires school districts to provide or arrange for transportation to the school of origin.

Although this mandate increases the complexity and expense of pupil transportation, the interviews with staff included in this document illustrate that with persistence, creativity, and collaboration, LEAs can establish effective systems to accommodate the transportation needs of homeless children and youth to keep them in their school of origin. With all stakeholders, both within the school system and in the community, taking responsibility for addressing the needs of these children and youth, each agency can support the others to increase school stability.

Homeless education program staff members are usually the initiators of awareness and collaboration among departments and agencies, but once policies and procedures are in place, most LEAs are able to provide homeless children and youth with the school stability and educational support they need. With collaboration and commitment, transportation to the school of origin can help eliminate school instability as a barrier to the education of homeless children and youth.

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