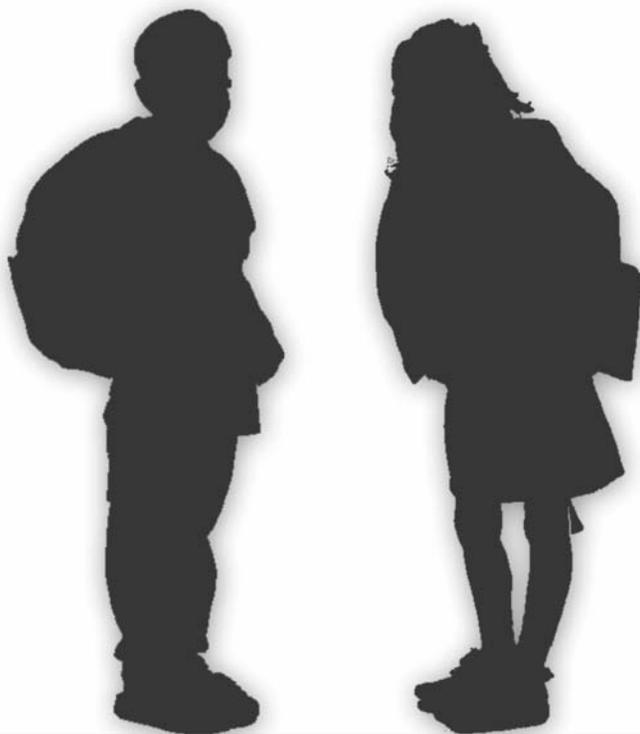


# From the School Office to the Classroom:

## Strategies for Enrolling and Supporting Students Experiencing Homelessness

A Handbook for Local Liaisons, Enrollment Staff,  
and School District Administrators



Connecting Schools and  
Displaced Students Series  
Winter 2006



This document was produced under U.S. Department of  
Education contract ED-04-CO-0056 0001.

For more information on the McKinney-Vento Homeless  
Assistance Program, contact the U.S. Department of Education,  
Student Achievement and School Accountability Programs  
(SASA), Office of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act  
(ESEA).

Phone: 202-260-0826

Website: [www.ed.gov/programs/homeless/index.html](http://www.ed.gov/programs/homeless/index.html)

For additional information on providing assistance for schools  
serving students displaced by the 2005 Gulf Coast hurricanes,  
visit Hurricane Help for Schools at  
<http://hurricanehelpforschools.gov/index.html>.

The National Center for Homeless Education (NCHE) is a  
national resource center of research and information enabling  
communities to address the needs of children and their families  
and of unaccompanied youth in homeless situations.

NCHE is funded by the U.S. Department of Education and is  
housed at SERVE at the University of North Carolina at  
Greensboro. Phone: 800-308-2145

Website: [www.serve.org/nche](http://www.serve.org/nche).

For additional information and resources on providing assistance  
for schools serving students displaced by the 2005 Gulf Coast  
hurricanes or other disasters, visit [www.serve.org/nche](http://www.serve.org/nche) and click  
on Disaster Relief Efforts.

## Table of Contents

Introduction	4
Who is Homeless?	5
Basic Requirements Under McKinney-Vento	6
Strategies From the School Office to the Classroom	9
Enrollment Basics	9
Immunizations	
Unaccompanied Youth	
Displaced Students	
Keeping Data	
<i>Enrollment Basics Checklist</i>	
Academic Placement and Support	18
Appropriate Placement Without Records	
Unaccompanied Youth	
Students with Special Needs	
<i>Academic Placement and Support Checklist</i>	
Supporting Mental Health and Academic Success	27
School and School District Strategies	
Classroom Strategies	
Coping with Transitions	
Displaced Students	
<i>Supporting Mental Health and Academic Success Checklist</i>	
NCHE Product Highlights	35
Resources from the National Center for Homeless Education	36
National Partners in Homeless Education	36

## Introduction

This handbook shares some of the successful strategies used in school districts to enroll students in homeless situations and to welcome them into the school community. It is designed to support local homeless education liaisons\* (hereafter called “local liaisons”), enrollment staff, and school district administrators in providing services to students made homeless by a variety of situations, including disasters such as hurricanes, tornadoes, earthquakes, fires, floods, and terrorist attacks.

Children and youth who lose their homes in such disasters do not also have to lose their connection to school; they are covered by the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act and have the same rights as other students in homeless situations.

The children and youth displaced by the devastating hurricanes of 2005 highlighted the needs and challenges of all children and youth who experience homelessness. Through the homeless education program, schools were equipped with their own first responders, the local liaisons that the McKinney-Vento Act requires of every school district. Local liaisons had systems in place to enroll displaced students immediately. They were prepared to support parents in their struggles to find shelter, employment, and medical and mental health care.

However, the depth and breadth of the tragedies presented enrollment challenges on an unprecedented scale. Local liaisons overcame these challenges with practical strategies designed to streamline paperwork and place students immediately in the most appropriate placements possible. These strategies minimized disruption for the individual student as well as for the faculty and other students in the school.

\*Different school districts use different titles for their Local Homeless Education Liaisons. They may also be called the McKinney-Vento Project Coordinator or the McKinney-Vento Liaison.

## Who is homeless?

The following definition of “homeless” is given in the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act (Title X, Part C of the No Child Left Behind Act—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 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).*



## Basic Requirements Under McKinney-Vento

### **Why is immediate enrollment important?**

Keeping children and youth in homeless situations connected to school provides them with a source of stability and normalcy in otherwise chaotic and frightening circumstances. School stability supports academic achievement and mental and emotional security.

### **What are the basic requirements for immediate enrollment under McKinney-Vento?**

The McKinney-Vento Act requires schools to enroll students experiencing homelessness immediately, even if the student is unable to provide documentation normally required for enrollment. This documentation may include academic, immunization, medical, and other records, or proof of residency, age, or guardianship. Districts also may not delay a student’s enrollment due to lack of school uniform or school supplies and must supply students with these items if the student is unable to do so. The school must make the best immediate academic placement possible based on the information available while waiting for school records, special education documents, medical records, or other needed information. Local liaisons must assist unaccompanied youth with the enrollment process.



The McKinney-Vento Act defines enrollment to mean permitting students to attend classes and participate fully in school activities. This includes all school services and activities such as school meals, special education, academic support, extracurricular activities, and others.

Although the Act does not define immediate, the standard dictionary definition is “without delay.” Therefore, the student must begin attending classes and participating fully in school activities without delay. Generally, that would mean the same or the following day. However, in cases of major disasters where large numbers of students are displaced and in crisis, enrollment in a few days may be considered to be “without delay,” depending on the specific circumstances.

## Basic Requirements Under McKinney-Vento

Following the hurricanes of 2005, many school districts enrolled displaced students within one day of their arrival to the district. However, staff later realized that the extreme mobility of displaced students increased the need to coordinate school enrollment with housing placements. Although in some situations this coordination may have taken a few days, the extraordinary circumstances of those students may have justified such short interruptions in the enrollment process to produce enrollments that supported both educational achievement and emotional adjustment. For example, such coordination would have allowed some displaced students to remain enrolled in a single school in the neighborhood of their housing, helping them develop continuity and connections.

### ***In what school should students experiencing homelessness be enrolled?***

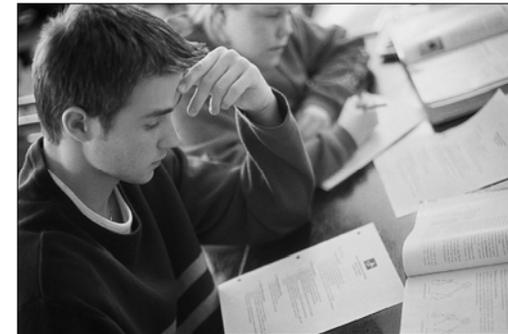
Students in homeless situations have the right to enroll immediately in the school in the attendance area where they are living or to remain in their school of origin. The school of origin is the school they attended when permanently housed or the school in which they were last enrolled. The McKinney-Vento Act states that students must remain in their school of origin to the extent feasible, unless their parents prefer the local school. Feasibility is an individualized, student-centered determination.

Students displaced by disasters have the same legal rights. School districts that have enrolled large numbers of displaced students have developed procedures to support parents in evaluating feasibility and making sound decisions about whether a displaced student should remain in his or her school of origin. An example of such a procedure is available at [www.serve.org/nche/katrina/school\\_choice\\_checklist.pdf](http://www.serve.org/nche/katrina/school_choice_checklist.pdf).

## Basic Requirements Under McKinney-Vento

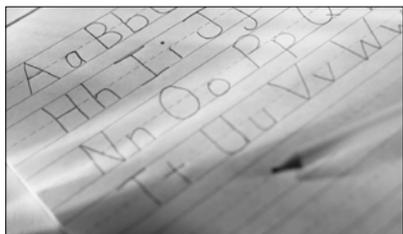
For example, to assist parents in making a decision about which school is best for their child, local liaisons, teachers, and other school staff can:

- Reinforce the importance of school stability and educational continuity for children.
- Provide valuable input to parents on the academic, social, and emotional impact that transferring to a new school could have on a particular child.
- Help the parents find out which programs at the two schools are comparable and appropriate for the child, and make arrangements for the parents and child to visit the school considered for a possible transfer.
- Provide information on the distance to the schools under consideration, both in terms of miles and travel time. A parent needs to know that while a district must provide transportation to and from the school of origin, this transportation generally applies only to attendance during the regular school day. Therefore, transportation concerns might limit a student's ability to participate in after-school activities.
- Provide a written explanation to the parents and explain their right to appeal the decision if the district selects a school other than the one the parents feel is in their child's best interest. In the event of a dispute, these steps are mandatory.



## Strategies From the School Office to the Classroom

In the years since the McKinney-Vento Act first required immediate enrollment for children and youth in homeless situations, states and school districts have developed many strategies to streamline the process and make sure students are enrolled immediately, attending regularly, and participating fully in school. Following are some successful strategies.



## Enrollment Basics

### **How can we simplify the immediate enrollment process for front-line staff?**

- Proactively develop and implement district-wide policies that facilitate immediate enrollment. Work with your State Coordinator for Homeless Education to develop and implement statewide policies and guidance documents, where appropriate.
- Train all school staff involved in enrollment, including secretaries, school counselors, school social workers, truancy officers, and principals, about the requirements for immediate enrollment under McKinney-Vento and the procedures in place in your state and district.
- Develop simple forms to replace typical proof of age, residency and guardianship. Such forms should be carefully designed so that they do not create further barriers or delay enrollment. For examples of forms being used around the country, consult the Local Homeless Education Liaison Toolkit, available from NCHC at [www.serve.org/nche/downloads/toolkit/app\\_e.pdf](http://www.serve.org/nche/downloads/toolkit/app_e.pdf).

*(continued on the next page)*

## Enrollment Basics

*(continued from the previous page)*

- Make sure parents and youth understand the right to remain at the school of origin, the right to transportation, and the harmful effects of school transfers. Work with them to make good decisions about which school is in the student's best interest.
- Prepare students, parents, and school staff for the possibility that a student's program may need some adjustments after the school receives complete records.

### **What can we do about immunizations?**

Students must be enrolled immediately, even if they are unable to provide immunization records.

Keep the following in mind when enrolling students who lack immunization records:

- Since every state requires immunizations for school enrollment, it is most likely that students who have been enrolled previously in school have received all necessary immunizations. Most homeless students have been enrolled in school before and have had the required immunizations.
- When enrolling immigrant students, be aware that many foreign countries, including most Latin American and many Asian countries, immunize children at rates comparable to or higher than those in the U.S. (More information is available from the World Health Organization and UNICEF: [www.who.int/vaccines/GlobalSummary/Immunization/](http://www.who.int/vaccines/GlobalSummary/Immunization/))
- Every state provides for exemptions to immunization requirements for families with religious and/or philosophical objections. These exemptions are considered medically reasonable. Since the vast majority of students are immunized, the community is protected against a major outbreak of disease. (Scientists call this concept "herd immunity.") Should an outbreak of illness occur, the same procedures used to protect unimmunized children can be used to protect students whose immunization records have not yet been obtained.

*(continued on the next page)*

## Enrollment Basics

*(continued from the previous page)*

- Consider establishing a school-based immunization clinic and/or collaborating with schools or health clinics that offer immunizations to streamline the process for those students who do need immunizations.

When the student arrives:

- Call, fax, and/or email previous schools, doctors, and health clinics to get immunization records.
- Collaborate with state and local public health agencies to access immunization databases, where available.
- If records are slow to arrive, try direct communication between school nurses or other health care providers or direct communication between local liaisons. These strategies can sometimes produce records faster than standard procedures.
- If necessary, try contacting the State Coordinator for Homeless Education for help in expediting the process.

### FERPA, HIPAA, and the privacy of immunization records

FERPA, the Family Education Rights and Privacy Act, does allow transferring of records between schools without parental consent when a child is changing schools.

HIPAA, the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act of 1996, regulates the disclosure of health information. According to HIPAA staff, HIPAA DOES allow transferring immunization records between schools and other health providers without parental consent for transferring students. You can streamline the transfer of immunization records by contacting local health care providers to discuss HIPAA; providers can even furnish you with consent forms for parents to sign upon enrolling in school, if such forms will facilitate the process.

## Enrollment Basics

### **How can we facilitate the enrollment of unaccompanied youth?**

- The McKinney-Vento Act requires that the lack of a legal guardian not pose a barrier to school enrollment. But *how* states and school districts eliminate that barrier is up to them.
- The most important step is to develop efficient, workable state and/or local enrollment policies for unaccompanied youth and to make sure enrollment personnel and school administrators are aware of those policies.
- Having policies in place in advance may be even more critical in the case of a large-scale disaster. In such cases, the school may also need to coordinate with relief agencies to help reunite youth with parents or caretakers.

*Unaccompanied youth confront the immense challenges of homelessness without the support of a parent or guardian.*



### **Who can enroll unaccompanied youth in school?**

This depends on the policies adopted in your state or school district. Policies that are in place and working across the country include:

- **Caregiver enrollment:** Many unaccompanied youth have a caring adult in their lives who is not a parent or legal guardian, such as a relative, neighbor, member of their faith community, teacher, case manager, or adult friend. A growing number of states and districts use caregiver forms to allow such adults to enroll

*(continued on the next page)*

## Enrollment Basics

*(continued from the previous page)*

unaccompanied youth in school. In some cases these forms allow the caregiver to consent to school-related medical treatment, field trips and extra-curricular activities, and to participate in academic decisions. They do not apply to the special education process, and they do not grant legal guardianship or change the legal relationship between the caregiver and the youth.

- **Local liaison enrollment:** Some states and school districts empower the local liaison to sign enrollment and other documents for unaccompanied youth. Again, this process does not apply to special education and does not grant legal guardianship or change the legal relationship between the local liaison and the youth.
- **Social worker enrollment:** Unfortunately, many youth who are wards of the state are also unaccompanied youth. Young people may leave foster homes, group homes, or other placements that do not meet their needs and find themselves on their own. In such cases, the social worker still may be an appropriate person to sign school enrollment papers on the youth's behalf. Some older youth may not ever enter the child welfare system, as social workers may choose not to pursue services for them. However, even in these cases, social workers may be willing to assist with school enrollment.
- **Youth self-enrollment:** Many school districts simply permit unaccompanied youth to enroll themselves in school, and in some cases to consent to field trips and extra-curricular activities and make academic decisions for themselves.



*Some states and school districts empower the local liaison to sign enrollment and other documents for unaccompanied youth.*

## Enrollment Basics

Many schools are concerned about potential legal action arising from the enrollment of unaccompanied youth. Legal liability is generally based on negligence, which is a failure to exercise "reasonable care." Schools can help protect themselves from liability by exercising reasonable care toward unaccompanied youth, as toward all their students: by responding appropriately to emergencies, by complying with applicable laws, and by maintaining a safe and supportive school environment.

Moreover, schools must comply with the McKinney-Vento Act and other federal and state laws, regardless of liability concerns.

In fact, if a school violates the Act by refusing to enroll an unaccompanied youth in school and the youth is subsequently injured off school grounds, the school could face liability for having turned the youth away. In cases of particular concern, the local liaison can consult the school district's legal counsel and/or risk management staff.

### **What are some specific considerations and strategies for enrolling large numbers of displaced students?**

While standard enrollment procedures for students in homeless situations will be critical tools in enrolling large numbers of displaced students, some adjustments will likely be necessary. For example, school districts that were heavily impacted by the 2005 Gulf Coast hurricanes reported making some of the following adjustments:

- Starting to plan and prepare as soon as they learned that displaced students might be arriving in the district.
- Assembling a planning-and-response team consisting of the local liaison plus other key staff, such as a district administrator with the authority to establish and make exceptions to district policies; transportation director; school nurse; school counselors; special education staff; child nutrition staff; preschool providers; principals; adult education staff; mental health providers; and representatives from relief agencies.
- Coordinating with relief agencies to identify students; arrange parent meetings and on-site enrollment; and obtain information about services, housing placements, and anticipated mobility.

*(continued on the next page)*

## Enrollment Basics

*(continued from the previous page)*

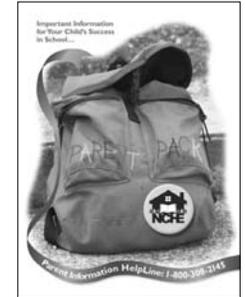
- Bringing school administrators, special education staff, nurses, counselors, teachers, and other staff to enrollment sites to begin orienting students and families to the school and providing appropriate services immediately. For example, in Houston, Individualized Education Program (IEP) meetings were conducted at the Astrodome so that displaced students with special needs arrived at school with a current IEP and services were put in place immediately.
- Providing extensive information about the local community, including maps; mass transit schedules; locations of stores, services, laundromats, health clinics, and government offices; and other resources for meeting basic needs.
- Bringing transportation directors to enrollment sites to facilitate the immediate arrangement of transportation.
- Providing a safe, comfortable space for families to congregate, share stories, and look for lost relatives and friends. For example, in Lafayette, Louisiana, the local liaisons set up communal tables and local restaurants provided meals at the enrollment site, creating a supportive environment for parents and students to congregate.
- Interrupting the enrollment process briefly to coordinate with housing placements, when appropriate, due to immediately pending moves.
- Providing mental health support for both students and parents in school and at shelter sites. Many school districts sought help from retired school counselors and mental health professionals who were themselves displaced by the hurricanes.



## Enrollment Basics

### **What are some strategies for keeping data on students in homeless situations?**

- Coordinate with your district's student data-management systems to ensure that homeless students are included in data systems.
- Maintain a case file on each student with academic records, medical records, notes from meetings, key assignments, status of any special education referrals, evaluations or placements, and correspondence that will assist subsequent schools with enrollment and placement.
- Help parents compile a parent folder (Parent Pack Pocket Folders are available from NCHE, at [www.serve.org/nche/products.php](http://www.serve.org/nche/products.php)), and tell them what information is important to provide to new schools.
- Provide information on displaced students to the State Coordinators for Homeless Education in the students' former states to assist in their data management.



NCHE Parent Pack

Following the 2005 Gulf Coast hurricanes, it was critical for schools to keep accurate, current records on their enrollment of displaced students. These records allowed school districts to track the whereabouts of students, coordinate transportation and services, and receive supplemental funding. Many districts have incorporated data fields into their student data-management systems to track displaced students. School districts in Florida and other heavily impacted areas have gone as far as to add several additional fields, indicating the particular storm or disaster that forced the students from their homes. Schools with less flexible data systems have created separate file cabinets and color-coded folders and papers to track displaced students.

## Enrollment Basics Checklist

- ❑ Proactively develop and implement policies that facilitate immediate enrollment.
- ❑ Train all school enrollment staff, secretaries, school counselors, school social workers, principals, and other staff about the requirements for immediate enrollment under McKinney-Vento and the procedures in place in your state and district.
- ❑ Develop simple forms to replace typical forms used to document proof of age, residency, and guardianship.
- ❑ Help school nurses and administrators understand why enrolling students in homeless situations without immunization records is required and is not a significant public health risk.
- ❑ Consider using caregiver forms, youth self-enrollment, or local liaison/social worker enrollment for unaccompanied youth.
- ❑ Assemble a planning-and-response team to develop and implement appropriate enrollment procedures in the case of a large-scale disaster.
- ❑ Use electronic and paper filing systems to maintain data on highly mobile students, including providing parents with Parent Pack Pocket Folders to organize and maintain important school records.

### Helpful Contacts



National Center for Homeless Education  
Toll-free HelpLine: 800-308-2145  
[www.serve.org/nche](http://www.serve.org/nche)

This checklist was taken from the publication entitled *From the School Office to the Classroom: Strategies for Enrolling and Supporting Students Experiencing Homelessness*, available at [www.serve.org/nche/products.php](http://www.serve.org/nche/products.php).

## Academic Placement and Support

### How can we decide on classes and services without school records?

- Contact the previous school for records. In the case of disasters in which the previous school was destroyed or closed, contact the school district office or State Coordinator for Homeless Education to see what records may be available in electronic or other form.
- While waiting for official records, talk with previous teachers, school counselors, and others for informal assistance with placement decisions. It is always in the school's best interest to get as much information as possible from the prior school, both through informal conversations and official transcripts and records. Homeless students must be enrolled and participating fully in school activities while these assessments are in process.
- Use short, easily-administered educational assessments to place students immediately while awaiting complete academic records. For example, some local liaisons have used the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS) for a quick reading assessment; the Wide Range Achievement Test (WRAT) for quick assessment in reading and math; the Kaufman Test of Educational Achievement (K-TEA) for assessment in reading, math, and spelling; curriculum-based tasks; informal reading inventories and graded reading vocabulary lists; and available unit pretests from local curricula. For more information on quick assessments, download *Prompt and Proper Placement: Enrolling Students Without Records* at [www.serve.org/nche/products.php](http://www.serve.org/nche/products.php).
- Access any standardized testing or other achievement data available from state or local database systems.
- Accept school records directly from families and youth.
- Keep in mind that FERPA, the Family Education Rights and Privacy Act, does allow transferring records and informal conversations between schools without parental consent when a child is changing schools.



(continued on the next page)

## Academic Placement and Support

*(continued from the previous page)*

- Train front-line staff in strategies to gather all available information from students and parents, including written information (any academic records, tests, homework, immunization or other medical records, IEPs or special education referrals, evaluations, meeting notes, or any other school papers the parents or child may have) and verbal information (interviewing parents and children about their previous school, classes, teachers, classmates, and school activities).

### **Using good questions to get good answers**

When interviewing parents and students about their previous school, it is important to avoid jargon and technical terms. Asking “What was your schedule?” or “Was your child in special education working under an Individualized Education Program (IEP)?” may draw blank stares or a simple “no,” while a more descriptive question might elicit important, substantive information. Here are some questions enrollment personnel may want to ask.

#### **To Parents:**

Do you have any papers from the previous school? Notes from teachers, homework assignments, tests, progress reports, or any other papers?

Have you worked with your child on any recent homework assignments? If so, what were the assignments about?

What were your child’s grade’s like?  
What does he/she find easy? Difficult?

Did you ever go to a meeting at school with a lot of teachers, maybe with a doctor or someone from the school district office?

Did you ever sign any papers that talked about goals for your child or special school services?



## Academic Placement and Support

#### **To Students:**

What was your school day like?

Do you remember the names of any of your books or what the covers looked like?

What were you learning in your math/history/science/language class?

What were some of your recent homework assignments? Do you have any old homework assignments, tests, notes from teachers, or any other papers from school?

What was the name of your math/history/science/language class?

How many kids were in your class?

How many teachers were in your class?

Did you ever spend time alone or in a small group with a different teacher?

Did you ever spend time alone or in a small group in a different classroom?

What were your grades like?



 **Can we place students in homeless situations into enrichment programs, extended-day programs, and other supplemental services immediately?**

Yes. Enrollment is defined to include attending classes and participating fully in school activities, and enrichment programs and other supplemental services are school activities. To the extent that these programs are available and can benefit students experiencing homelessness, the students must have access.

## Academic Placement and Support

### **How can we collaborate with other agencies to support the academic success of unaccompanied youth?**

Unaccompanied youth confront the immense challenges of homelessness without the support of a parent or guardian. They may be involved in several systems: social services, if they have been in foster care or group homes; law enforcement, if your state considers running away from home to be an offense; the "Child in Need of Services" system (the specific name varies by state: CHINS, PINS, YINS, etc.), if parents or law enforcement have referred them; public benefits, if they are parenting or have a disability; and other runaway and homeless youth programs, such as emergency shelters, transitional living programs, street outreach programs, family mediation, and drop-in centers. In cases of disasters, various local, state, and national relief agencies may also be involved.

To ensure that unaccompanied youth do not face barriers to enrollment or retention in school, schools must establish relationships with these systems. For example:

- Many states and local communities have established Youth Task Forces to help agencies collaborate and coordinate to maximize their services.
- A local liaison in Pennsylvania started meeting with the social workers in his district, providing McKinney-Vento training and strategizing with them about how to enroll unaccompanied youth who are also wards of the state. They developed a protocol in which the local liaison alerts social services about the youth's situation and whereabouts, but the local liaison completes enrollment papers and determines the appropriate placement for the youth without a social worker's intervention.
- A local liaison in Arizona provided sensitivity training to local police about runaway youth. After learning about the realities of the youths' situations, the police agreed to work with the local liaison to avoid arrest or other punishments for the youths' runaway status. The local liaison contacts the police as suggested by state law. Rather than come to the school immediately, the police give her time to work with the youth and the family to develop an appropriate plan.

## Academic Placement and Support

### **What services should we provide to a student who has not been in a school and wants to enroll mid-semester, when our procedures say the student can't receive credit?**

The McKinney-Vento Act requires schools to enroll the student immediately and to remove barriers to the student's retention in school. The inability to earn any credit is a barrier to retention; there may be little incentive to remain in school if the student has no chance to earn credit. Schools must address this barrier. Some strategies that have proven successful include:

- Awarding partial or pro-rated credit.
- Having the student supplement a regular class with extra assignments, a work or volunteer experience, or additional testing, so the student can earn the full credit.
- Providing supervised independent study programs.
- Providing immediate access to appropriate alternative programs, in which the student can receive credit while transitioning back into the regular school.
- Implementing a credit recovery program. Through a collaboration with the University of Texas, the Texas State Coordinator for Homeless Education's Office has begun a credit recovery demonstration project, offering three basic options: credit by examination; a distance-learning high school diploma program for students who have dropped out; or online courses for credit.
- Contacting state departments of education in sending states to identify online distance learning opportunities they are providing for displaced students.



## Academic Placement and Support

### **How can we expedite special education services?**

Students who have special education needs must be enrolled in school and be provided immediately with the most appropriate services possible. For students who are not changing school districts, their current Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) remain in effect (or, if they are still in the process of being evaluated, the process must continue uninterrupted). Strategies for serving students who are changing school districts vary slightly, depending on whether the students have current IEPs.

**For students entering a new district with current IEPs,** the new Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) requires the enrolling school to provide appropriate services, comparable to those described in the current IEP, immediately. The new district then must hold a meeting with the parents to adopt the previous IEP or create a new one.

*(continued on the next page)*



To streamline special education services for displaced students at the Astrodome, Houston Independent School District conducted IEP meetings onsite as special needs students were enrolled. Students arrived at school the first day with a current Houston IEP, and services were put in place immediately.

## Academic Placement and Support

*(continued from the previous page)*

**If the previous district was in the process of doing evaluations or developing an IEP but had not finished the process,** the new district must continue the process immediately. IDEA now states that standard evaluation time limits do not apply to students who change school districts while evaluations are pending, but *only if* the new district is “making sufficient progress to ensure a prompt completion of evaluations” *and* “the parent and the LEA agree to a specific time when the evaluation will be completed.” Therefore, enrolling districts must ensure that evaluations are completed promptly and set a deadline with the parents, or they must complete the evaluations within the time remaining from the original referral.

*(continued on the next page)*

### The Evaluation Shuffle

While evaluations are in process or before services are implemented, special needs students may be struggling in regular classrooms, unable to make academic progress. To avoid this situation, schools must coordinate evaluations with prior schools and implement creative strategies to expedite evaluations and services. For example:

- Get all the evaluations, questionnaires, and other paperwork completed on the student from the previous school(s).
- Talk to the school counselor, teachers, and evaluation team from the previous school(s) about the student's needs.
- Implement appropriate supportive services immediately: academic support, behavior-management interventions, mentoring, and other services can help without being labeled as special education.
- Collaborate with community medical and mental health providers, Medicaid service providers, social workers, and others to pursue necessary evaluations.
- Consult with your special education team to see if interim IEPs or other interim services can be provided.

## Academic Placement and Support

(continued from the previous page)

**For students who are changing districts and have not been evaluated but whose academic level, behavior, or parents indicate that special education services may be needed, the enrolling school should work with the parent to begin the evaluation process immediately.**

### Accessing Special Education for Unaccompanied Youth

IDEA requires that an appropriate adult sign for special education evaluations and services for a student under 18 years old. This adult may be a parent, foster parent, guardian, or other person legally responsible for the child, or person with whom the student is living and who is acting in the place of a parent. Check with your special education team to see if this person must be related to the student. Since many unaccompanied youth do not have such an adult in their lives, new IDEA now requires school districts to assign surrogate parents for unaccompanied youth. The surrogate parent must be in place within 30 days of determining the need.



Surrogate parents must be trained in special education procedures and cannot be school district employees or anyone who might have a conflict of interest. However, for unaccompanied youth, appropriate staff of emergency shelters, transitional shelters, independent living programs, and street outreach programs can be temporary surrogates while someone who meets the legal criteria is found. These temporary surrogates should be appointed immediately so that the evaluation process can begin.

## Academic Placement and Support Checklist

- ❑ While waiting for official records, talk informally with prior teachers, school counselors, and others for assistance with placement decisions. Students must be enrolled and attending during this time.
- ❑ Use short, easily-administered educational assessments to place students immediately while awaiting complete academic records.
- ❑ Interview parents and students with simple, descriptive questions to learn about the student's prior academic program.
- ❑ Support youth through collaborations with other agencies and creative programs to award credits, such as partial or pro-rated credit systems, supplemental assignments, independent study, and credit recovery.
- ❑ Coordinate closely with parents, previous schools, and community medical and mental health providers to expedite special education evaluations.

### Helpful Contacts



National Center for Homeless Education  
Toll-free HelpLine: 800-308-2145  
[www.serve.org/nche](http://www.serve.org/nche)

This checklist was taken from the publication entitled *From the School Office to the Classroom: Strategies for Enrolling and Supporting Students Experiencing Homelessness*, available at [www.serve.org/nche/products.php](http://www.serve.org/nche/products.php).

## Supporting Mental Health and Academic Success

**Q** *How can school staff help new students and parents feel welcome and become invested in our school?*

### To Support Students

- Start a “New Students” club.
- Replicate beginning-of-the-year rituals and procedures when new students enter the classroom so they receive the same orientation to the school culture as other students. For example, have counselors and/or administrators meet with students when registering. Follow up with a second meeting in the weeks following enrollment to address any questions or concerns.

In St. John the Baptist Parish Public School District, LA, administrators and staff from all local schools set up orientation rooms at the site where displaced students were being enrolled. Once assigned to a school, students and their families went to their orientation room to meet the staff, ask questions, and identify “friendly faces” to look for during their first day at school.



- Organize periodic school-wide activities to encourage the student body to welcome and accept new students.
- Give new students a faculty and peer mentor/buddy.

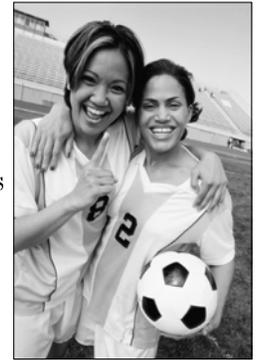
*(continued on the next page)*

## Supporting Mental Health and Academic Success

Peer mentors or buddies not only help new students feel more comfortable in their new school but also give pre-existing students a window into the circumstances that have brought their buddies to their school. Such connections can help avoid conflicts or turf issues between new arrivals and other students.

*(continued from the previous page)*

- Make sure new students have a chance to participate in sports and other extracurricular activities.
- If the student previously attended a school that is considered a “rival” or competitor of your school, meet with the student to address potential feelings of exclusion or aggression upfront.
- Give new students a small welcome gift that shows the school colors and/or team name to invite them to share school spirit and pride.
- Invite the students to share a story, food, or activity from their background or their hometown; use this as a teachable moment for the current students.



After receiving a large number of students from New Orleans in the weeks following Hurricane Katrina, a school district in Arkansas held a Mardi Gras party for the school community. New students were able to show off their culture and hometown, while the whole school learned to appreciate the gifts the new arrivals had to offer.



## Supporting Mental Health and Academic Success

### For Parents

- Organize non-threatening events to encourage communication between parents and the school (for example, potluck meals, ice cream socials, or health nights where parents can consult with medical and mental health professionals).



- Create an orientation video for parents, service providers, and students. Have a comfortable place in the school for viewing the video, and consider providing copies to local shelters and service providers.
- Create a Parents' Place in the school: a room with videos, a telephone, and information on the local community, health care, babysitters, school activities, child rearing, and coping strategies. Provide staff to discuss concerns.

Families in homeless situations may have no knowledge about your local community. Schools may want to make available maps and printed information about local services, including public transportation, grocery stores, pharmacies, clothing stores, discount stores, public benefits, health care, employment offices, shelters, and housing agencies.

Such efforts to support parents can be the key to children and parents feeling invested in the school, as a local liaison in Arizona found: "The mother of one of our Katrina students does not speak English. After having lost everything to Katrina, this mother was most excited because we have the availability to offer her free English classes on the campus of a Kyrene Elementary School, through our ESOL partnership with Tempe Union High School District Adult Education Program!"

## Supporting Mental Health and Academic Success

**Q:** *Can we make exceptions to rules that require students to attend our school for a set period of time before they are eligible for sports or other extra-curricular activities?*

Yes. School sports and extra-curricular activities are an extremely important strategy for helping students feel welcome and invested in school. They are also normalizing and therapeutic for youth who have experienced dislocation and trauma, including students displaced by disasters. Since enrollment is defined as attending school and participating fully in school activities, students in homeless situations must have access to extracurricular activities. Athletic associations must also comply with the McKinney-Vento Act by exempting homeless students from sports participation rules that students cannot meet due to their homelessness and mobility, such as attendance rules.



A local liaison from Texas reported that extracurricular activities were critical in making new students feel at home and invested in school: "One father told me that his son (a senior, age 19) enrolled in school and absolutely loved it. He said he attended the Friday night football game and that was something he didn't even do when he was in New Orleans."

**Q:** *How can classroom teachers help new students feel comfortable and involved?*

### Prepare now...

- Keep extra copies of review materials and assignments for students who arrive without prior notice. Also keep some basic school supplies on hand in case the student is in need.
- Post a class schedule so students will know what is happening next.

*(continued on the next page)*

## Supporting Mental Health and Academic Success

*(continued from the previous page)*

- Prepare a short, simple, written list of classroom rules and procedures.
- Keep small “welcome gifts” on hand (for example, school supplies or school clothes).
- Establish a “home base” (for example, a rug or a person) for a child to reconnect with something familiar if she feels overwhelmed.

### And when the student arrives...

- Take time to talk to and welcome students individually. Play welcome games or similar inclusion activities, and get to know new students with a “get-to-know-you” questionnaire or journal assignment. When students feel they belong, they feel some ownership in their new room.
- Introduce new students to the class and team them with a buddy.
  - Make sure the students have a chance to have a class job/role.
  - Use a Polaroid or digital camera to take an individual picture on the child’s first day and a picture of the child with the class.
  - Start and maintain a portfolio of class work for the students to take when leaving the school.
- Send notes home highlighting students’ good behavior and work, as well as sharing concerns.
- Consider having periodic welcome parties and goodbye parties to help ease the transition for new students as well as those who have been in the school for some time.



## Supporting Mental Health and Academic Success

### **How can we ease the transition for those left behind when students leave our school?**

- Prepare a “Goodbye Book.” Students may be given time to autograph the book and brainstorm with the departing student about special memories.
- Have classmates write letters to their departing peer.
- Maintain a relationship when the students leave by providing stamped, self-addressed envelopes and stationery.

### **What are some specific considerations and strategies when enrolling large numbers of displaced students?**

The arrival of a large number of new students can be threatening to pre-existing students in the district. Local liaisons, district administrators, principals, school counselors, and teachers must be aware of these “turf” issues and seek to pre-empt them and prevent serious conflicts. Classroom and school-wide activities are essential, both immediately and in the longterm, to help pre-existing students feel secure about their place in their school and to sensitize them to the issues facing new students.

School districts that have confronted this challenge recommend some of the following approaches:

- Have honest and open conversations with the student body before the new students arrive, explaining the changes and challenges students can expect, suggesting coping strategies, and reinforcing their role as hosts and peers. These conversations should be facilitated by mental health staff and could take the form of school-wide assemblies, classroom-based discussions, and/or small group meetings with a school counselor.
- Continue with open conversations at the school and classroom level after the new students arrive.
- Use the arts to help students understand the trauma their new peers have experienced. Some suggested examples include

*(continued on the next page)*

## Supporting Mental Health and Academic Success

*(continued from the previous page)*

performing a play or watching and discussing a film about disaster and dislocation, or doing an art project that reflects important events or cultural icons of the affected area.

- Organize ongoing support and conversation groups. Separate groups for new and pre-existing students may be appropriate for certain purposes, but mixed groups are also essential to promote shared insights and mutual understanding.
- Collaborate with relief agencies, who may have specially trained staff and resources to support the adjustment of both pre-existing and displaced students.
- Collaborate with community mental health resources and all departments within the school district that offer mental and/or emotional support services.
- Seek information about potential gang conflicts from relief agencies, school administrators, and law enforcement from the local and affected communities. Use this information to design interventions and security measures to prevent potential violence.
- Offer anger-management and conflict-resolution workshops to school staff and students.
- Provide adult mentors and a “safe place” on campus for displaced students. Encourage students to make use of these support systems in times of stress and crisis.
- To the extent possible, provide mentors of the same ethnic, faith, or cultural background as enrolling students. This kind of cultural sensitivity can help neutralize feelings of insecurity and hostility and provide a more comfortable “listening presence” for students.
- Provide peer mentors for displaced students, not only to help orient the new students but also to promote understanding and friendship between the two groups.
- Organize activities that allow both displaced and pre-existing students to celebrate their home town, home school, and culture, such as performances of music or dance, sharing of local foods, celebrations of local festivals, and other cultural events.

## Supporting Mental Health and Academic Success Checklist

- ❑ Have counselors and/or administrators meet with parents and students when registering. Follow-up with a second meeting in the weeks following enrollment.
- ❑ Give new students a faculty and peer mentor/buddy.
- ❑ Make sure new students have a chance to participate in sports and other extracurricular activities.
- ❑ Create a Parents’ Place in the school – a room with videos, a telephone, and information on the local community, health care, babysitters, school activities, child rearing, and coping strategies.
- ❑ Establish a “home base” (for example, a rug or a person) for a child to reconnect with something familiar if she feels overwhelmed.
- ❑ Start and maintain a portfolio of class work for the students to take when leaving the school.
- ❑ Take action on the school and classroom level to address turf and adjustment issues of both displaced and pre-existing students.

### Helpful Contacts



National Center for Homeless Education  
Toll-free HelpLine: 800-308-2145  
[www.serve.org/nche](http://www.serve.org/nche)

This checklist was taken from the publication entitled *From the School Office to the Classroom: Strategies for Enrolling and Supporting Students Experiencing Homelessness*, available at [www.serve.org/nche/products.php](http://www.serve.org/nche/products.php).

## NCHE Product Highlights

The following NCHE products may be of special interest to you. All NCHE products are available on the NCHE website at [www.serve.org/nche/products.php](http://www.serve.org/nche/products.php).

### Parent Pack Pocket Folder

This sturdy, laminated folder provides parents a place to keep important records and documents related to their children's education. The folder also includes information on the rights of children and youth experiencing homelessness and helpful tips about enrollment and disenrollment. Available in Spanish and English.



Parent Pack  
Pocket Folder

### Educational Rights Posters

These posters explain who qualifies as homeless under the McKinney-Vento Act and lists the educational rights of children and youth experiencing homelessness. Place these posters in your school and throughout the community to generate public awareness. Available in English and Spanish in parent and youth versions.



Educational  
Rights Poster

### Homeless Education Awareness Folder

This sturdy, laminated folder provides an attractive way to inform colleagues and potential donors about the issues central to the education of children and youth experiencing homelessness. Customize the information presented by filling the folder with the resources most pertinent to your audience.



Homeless Education  
Awareness Folder

## Resources from the National Center for Homeless Education

NCHE resources may be found on the NCHE website at [www.serve.org/nche](http://www.serve.org/nche).

Resources include:

- Posters
- Brochures
- Parent Pack Pocket Folders
- Homeless Education Awareness Folders
- Publications
- Briefs
- Web-based Audio Trainings
- Homeless Education Listserv
- Disaster Preparation and Recovery Listserv
- Onsite trainings (by request)

## National Partners in Homeless Education

National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth (NAEHCY)  
[www.naehcy.org](http://www.naehcy.org)

National Center for Homeless Education (NCHE)  
[www.serve.org/nche](http://www.serve.org/nche)

National Law Center on Homelessness & Poverty (NLCHP)  
[www.nlchp.org](http://www.nlchp.org)

NCHE publications are supported through a contract with the U.S. Department of Education's Student Achievement and School Accountability Programs.



National Center for Homeless Education  
P.O. Box 5367  
Greensboro, NC 27435  
Toll-free HelpLine: 800-308-2145  
[www.serve.org/nche](http://www.serve.org/nche)