

# **School as a Safety Net: Connecting Displaced Children With Educational and Support Services**

A Handbook for Relief Agency Staff and Volunteers



**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)

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: <http://nche.ed.gov>

For additional information and resources on providing assistance for schools serving students displaced by the 2005 Gulf Coast hurricanes or other disasters, visit <http://nche.ed.gov> and click on Topics and then Disaster Preparation and Response.

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## The Landscape



*"I have spoken to parents who have called my office telling me that enrolling their students has been a turning point on their road to recovery. Knowing their children are somewhere 'safe' while they struggle with the tough decisions about the future...what could be a better service for a public school system to offer?"*  
*Santa Rosa, FL — Local Homeless Education Liaison*

Hurricanes, tornadoes, floods, mudslides, fires, earthquakes, terrorism, and school lock-downs: A wide variety of disasters can impact children and families and create an urgent need for comprehensive support systems. This handbook is designed to help relief agency staff members and volunteers access comprehensive support in the weeks and months following a disaster.

Mental health experts consider returning to school to be a critical step in the healing process for children and youth whose lives have been disrupted by disasters. Going to school helps these students find the structure, normalcy, and routine that is essential to their health and well-being.

Fortunately, federal law (The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act) protects the educational rights of students experiencing homelessness. It provides grants and legal protections so children and youth in homeless situations can enroll in, attend, and succeed in school and preschool programs. This law generally covers students who are displaced by disasters or emergencies.

## The Landscape

School services complement the services of relief agencies by providing a team of caring, nurturing professionals, who attend to a spectrum of needs:

- Every school district has a local homeless education liaison (hereafter called the “local liaison”) who is a “first responder” in the case of a disaster, specializing in enrolling displaced children in school, evaluating their needs, and placing them in appropriate programs. This person may also be called the McKinney-Vento Project Coordinator or the McKinney-Vento liaison.
- Schools employ nurses, counselors, and other medical and mental health professionals who specialize in caring for children and youth.
- Special education staff members ensure that children with special needs receive appropriate services.
- Displaced children are automatically eligible for free school meals.
- Schools can provide displaced children with clothing, shoes, school uniforms, books, backpacks, and school supplies.
- Schools support parents as well by orienting them to the local community, connecting them with local social services, resources, and parental involvement programs, and caring for students during and after school hours so parents can concentrate on finding housing, jobs, and needed services.

## The Landscape

In the wake of the hurricanes of 2005, countless families found support and relief through enrollment in local school systems.

*"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. His son is excited about learning again. We have had numerous comments from families and caregivers expressing gratitude for getting the children enrolled in school. We have children enrolled in athletics, fine arts (dance, band, etc.)"*

*McKinney, TX - Local Liaison*

*"The mother of one of our Katrina students does not speak English. Her cousin was able to translate into Vietnamese what services and assistance were available to her and her child under the McKinney-Vento Act and through our Family Resource Center. 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 Kyrene Elementary School through our ESOL partnership with Tempe Union High School District Adult Education Program!"*

*Kyrene School District #28, AZ - Local 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; or 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).*



## Connecting Displaced Students With School

It's Easier Than You Think!



Any displaced child or youth who is living in a shelter, motel, temporary or inadequate trailer, is staying temporarily with relatives or friends, or is living in any other homeless situation has educational rights under the McKinney-Vento Act.

### **Does every school district have a staff member who specializes in enrolling displaced children in school?**

Yes. They're called local liaisons, and they are mandated by the McKinney-Vento Act. Every state also has a State Coordinator for Homeless Education who oversees local district homeless education programs and coordinates state-level activities.

*"Since [our displaced families] arrived here in Lawrence we have been able to provide prompt enrollment, free books and lunch, backpacks with school supplies, food, clothing, and the option of mental health services through our mental health providers located directly in our schools. These needs were met due to the compassion and care of our community, but also because our district has the McKinney-Vento Act and the local liaison to organize, prepare, educate, and facilitate the needs of our schools as they support and care for these students."*

*Metropolitan School District of Lawrence Township, IN -  
Local Liaison*

### **How can we get in touch with the local liaison in our district?**

Call your district's central office to request contact information for the local liaison. If they are unable to provide you with this information, call your State Coordinator for Homeless Education or the National Center for Homeless Education at (800) 308-2145. State Coordinator contact information is listed at <https://nche.ed.gov/data/>.



## Connecting Displaced Students With School

**Q: How can displaced students enroll in school when they don't have a fixed address?**

The McKinney-Vento Act states that homeless students can enroll in school immediately, without a fixed address and without any documents proving their address. The law defines homeless as lacking a “fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence.”

**Q: How can displaced students enroll in and begin attending school, when they don't have school records?**

The McKinney-Vento Act also states that homeless students can enroll in school immediately, without any school records. The new school must contact prior schools to obtain those records. If records are not available, the new school can administer basic assessments, interview the student and parents, and contact previous teachers and counselors to determine the appropriate classes and services for the student.

**Q: How can displaced students enroll in school when they don't have immunization or other health records?**

Again, the McKinney-Vento Act states that homeless students can enroll in and begin attending school immediately, without immunization or other medical records. The new school must work with the parent to obtain those records, or, if necessary, to obtain immunizations. Since most school-aged children displaced by disasters were attending school prior to the disaster, it is safe to assume that they have already been immunized in accordance with the requirements of their home state.



## Connecting Displaced Students With School

Relief agencies can help! Support immediate enrollment by: helping schools and parents obtain school and medical records; assisting with any necessary immunizations; providing schools with documentation of any immunizations you provide; and providing schools with information when immunizations are unnecessary (for example, sharing CDC and Health Department bulletins and information about what relief agencies do to prevent outbreaks and promote good health in their shelters).



***Will displaced students have to change schools every time they move?***

Displaced families tend to move frequently. Changing schools with each move would damage students' emotional security and academic success. Generally, it takes students 4 to 6 months to recover from a change in school. For this reason, the McKinney-Vento Act states that homeless students can continue attending the same school even if they move out of that school's attendance area. This school is called their "school of origin," and they can remain there the entire time they are homeless. When students find permanent housing, they can finish the school year in their school of origin. The only limit on this important right is that remaining in the school of origin must be in the student's best interest.

Schools, families, and relief agencies must work together to make the school of origin provision a success. To be able to make good decisions about school placement, schools and families need as much advance information as possible about issues such as openings and closures of shelters and temporary trailers, limits on vouchers for motels and temporary apartments, and the most likely locations of long-term housing.

## Connecting Displaced Students With School

Best interest decisions are child-centered and individualized and should consider factors such as the time remaining in the school year, the length of anticipated stay in a shelter or other temporary location, the age of the child or youth, and the impact of the commute on the child's education. A best interest guide is included in NCHE's *Guiding the Discussion on School Selection* brief at <https://nche.ed.gov/resources/>.

**Q: How will the students get to school if they stay in their school of origin?**



The McKinney-Vento Act requires schools to provide or arrange transportation to and from the school of origin while a child is homeless. This transportation can take many forms, including school buses, public transportation, fuel reimbursement for parents or youth with cars, or other appropriate arrangements.

Providing transportation to large numbers of students displaced by major disasters can pose a logistical and financial challenge for school districts. Most schools are experts in the logistics of transportation, but proactive coordination and clear, timely communication with relief agencies are critical. Agencies should help schools arrange transportation, strategizing together and pooling resources where possible.

It is essential that relief agencies give schools as much advance notice as possible about shelter and trailer closures, expiration of hotel and apartment vouchers, and other changes in temporary housing. Such information is critical for planning transportation and making sure children don't miss school.

## Connecting Displaced Students With School

**Q: Do these rules apply to displaced children who are staying temporarily with family or friends?**

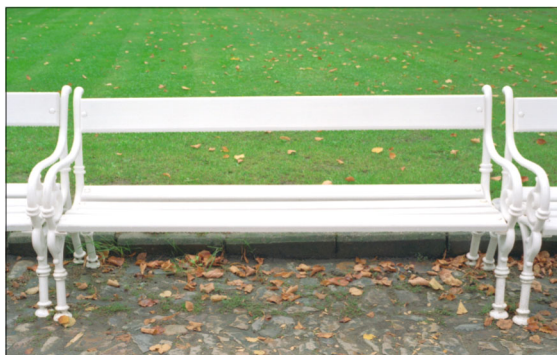
Yes. In addition to children and youth living in shelters, the McKinney-Vento Act also applies specifically to children and youth who are staying temporarily with family or friends due to a lack of housing. Although they are often invisible to other agencies, the schools have years of experience in finding, serving, and supporting these children and families.

**Q: Do these rules apply to displaced children in other living situations?**

Yes. The McKinney-Vento Act also applies specifically to children and youth who are staying in motels, campgrounds, temporary or inadequate trailers, and public spaces like parks or bus stations due to a lack of housing.

**Q: Do these rules apply to young people who have been separated from their parents?**

Yes. Youth living in homeless situations without a parent or guardian are covered by the McKinney-Vento Act, regardless of the reason for the family's separation. Unaccompanied youth have the right to enroll in school immediately, without the signature of a parent or guardian.



## Connecting Displaced Students With School

### **How can unaccompanied youth enroll in school without a parent or guardian?**

Schools have developed different strategies to enroll unaccompanied youth, including allowing them to enroll themselves, having the local liaison enroll them, allowing non-guardian adult caregivers to enroll them, or allowing appropriate staff from other agencies (shelters, child welfare, etc.) to enroll the students. Whatever the method, youth on their own have the right to enroll in school immediately. More information about the rights of unaccompanied youth and suggestions on how to support them are available at <https://nche.ed.gov/unaccompanied-youth/>.

*"We have enrolled two high school children that also arrived on the evacuee plane. Their mother could only find room in an evacuating car for herself. She instructed these children to go to a neighbor's home. Without the McKinney-Vento Act, it would have been impossible for them to register in school."*

*Rutherford, TN - Local Liaison*

### **How can we connect very young children with school?**



The McKinney-Vento Act requires schools to enroll homeless children in public preschool programs, including Head Start. Head Start provides medical and mental health services to children and their families, and many Head Start agencies have special procedures and programs to facilitate the enrollment of homeless families. The local school or mental health agency should have information about available preschool programs. You can also visit <http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/HeadStartOffices> to find local Head Start programs.

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## Connecting Displaced Students With School

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Most communities also have programs for infants and toddlers who are too young for preschool. For example, Part C of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (“Part C”) is a program that serves children age 0 to 3 who have or are at risk for developmental delays, particularly those in homeless situations. Part C provides a broad spectrum of medical and mental health services for the entire family. Relief agencies can help their clients receive these services by inviting the local Part C team into shelters, trailers, and motels to do child development screenings. To find out about Part C resources in a community, contact the local school or the state Part C Coordinator (contact information is available at [www.nectac.org/contact/ptccoord.asp](http://www.nectac.org/contact/ptccoord.asp)).

### **Q Can special needs students also be enrolled in school immediately?**

Yes. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), which is the federal law governing special education services, requires schools to identify, enroll, and serve children with special needs in homeless situations. More information is available at <https://nche.ed.gov/special-education/>.

*“Yet another parent indicated that she ‘needed to get her kids out of the shelter and in school.’ This would allow her to go out to find the necessary resources for the family and their new life. There are as many stories as there are families we have worked with!”*

*San Antonio, TX - Local Liaison*



## *The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act* *Essential Information*

Did you know?...

- ❑ Every school district has a local liaison who specializes in enrolling displaced children in school.
- ❑ The McKinney-Vento Act covers any displaced child or youth who is living in a shelter, motel, temporary or inadequate trailer, doubled-up with friends or relatives, or any other homeless situation.
- ❑ Students must be enrolled in school immediately even without school records, immunization records, or a guardian.
- ❑ Students can remain in the same school despite moving between shelters, hotels, and other accommodations as long as it is in their best interests.
- ❑ Students have the right to receive transportation to and from their school of origin.
- ❑ Students must also have access to appropriate preschool programs and special education services.

School District Contact Information



National Center for Homeless Education  
Toll-free HelpLine: 800-308-2145  
<http://nche.ed.gov>

This checklist was taken from the publication entitled *School as a Safety Net: Connecting Displaced Children with Educational and Support Services*. This publication is available at <https://nche.ed.gov/resources/>.

## How Can Relief Agencies Help?

In recent interviews, staff from relief agencies noted that pre-existing relationships in affected communities were the keys to efficient and effective services during and after disasters. Establishing working relationships, memoranda of understanding, and communication protocols before a disaster strikes are essential response and recovery strategies. Agencies can use these same strategies to ensure that displaced children are connected quickly with school.

### ***Communicate!***

Schools and relief agencies agree that inadequate communication between the agencies and the schools is a significant barrier to getting displaced students into school and keeping them there. Communicating early and often will help ease everyone's burden, as schools, agencies, and displaced families help each other to meet the needs.



#### Communication Tips



- On the state and local level, make schools an integral part of disaster planning prior to emergencies, emergency response team and weekly update meetings during emergencies, and long-term recovery planning after emergencies.
- Before the next hurricane season, have regional agency officers meet with the State Coordinators for Homeless Education in their regions (by phone or in person), and local agency officers with local liaisons. Contact information for State Coordinators is available at <https://nche.ed.gov/data/>.
- Since communication during a disaster can be difficult, establish a system through which local liaisons and your agency can reach each other reliably and quickly.



## How Can Relief Agencies Help?

### Teach!

Relief agencies have a unique opportunity to share their knowledge of and experience with serving families, youth, and schools.

For serving families and youth:

- Train your staff about the McKinney-Vento Act and share related information with the parents and youth you serve.
- Help parents understand why it's important that their children return to school as soon as possible.

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### Teaching Tips



- Does your agency design the containers for the food and water you distribute? If so, how about mentioning school on the wrapper? For example: “Did you know your children can attend school in this community right now, even without school records or a legal address? Ask an aid worker for more information.”
- Posters, flyers, and word of mouth are great ways to share information. Posters and other resources are available at no charge at <https://nche.ed.gov/resources/>.
- Invite local liaisons and school administrators to your agency, so you can get to know each other. Having an established rapport with schools will put you in a better position to help parents and students feel more comfortable there.



NCHE Parent Poster

## How Can Relief Agencies Help?

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For collaborating with schools:

- Share with schools any information you have about gang issues, cultural or language challenges, parent concerns, and other relevant issues; this will help schools better serve children and families.
- Provide schools with logistical support and training to help them manage large influxes of donations and/or volunteers.
- Help schools gather appropriate emergency contact information for displaced families.

### **Learn!**



Get to know your local schools. Find out about all the services they offer. These services may include specific resources available to displaced children; medical and mental health care; food; clothing; support for parents; where schools are located; what the school attendance boundaries are; which schools in the community are over or under capacity; where there are closed schools that

could be reopened if necessary; and which schools are best equipped with mental health personnel, supplies, and administrative staff. This information is invaluable in decisions about where to place trailers and shelters, what hotels to use, and where students should enroll in school.

### **Share!**

Sharing basic information about the families and youth you serve is essential to help schools make sure that displaced students are able to enroll in school and receive all the services for which they are eligible. Schools must identify children before they can serve them. Your agency's assistance in this task is valuable and appreciated.

## How Can Relief Agencies Help?



### Sharing Tip



To share information with schools while still complying with the Privacy Act and federal regulations, many shelters have incorporated a release of information into their standard intake documentation to allow shelter staff to share with local liaisons the names and ages of school-aged children and youth staying in the shelter or receiving other assistance.

### **Support!**

Schools provide critical mental health and medical support to students and families. Help schools be more effective by sharing your expertise in supporting disaster victims, providing sensitivity trainings to school mental health teams, and supporting the school staff as they cope with their own feelings of stress and grief.

### **Coordinate!**



### Support Tip



Families who are staying with family or friends in the wake of a disaster face specific stressors. Valued relationships can become taxed or even destroyed in the stress of squeezing two or three families into a space designed for one, coping with hostile landlords, and trying to make financial ends meet. Relief agencies can provide important mental health support to these families and their hosts to prolong the living arrangement and prevent the influx of even more families into shelters.

**Inform schools immediately regarding shelter and trailer closures, expiration of hotel and apartment vouchers, and other changes in**

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## How Can Relief Agencies Help?

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temporary housing. To enroll students in the right school and keep them there, schools need as much advance information as possible. To the extent feasible, coordinate closures and moves with the schools considering issues of transportation, the school calendar, and important school events like final exams and standardized testing.



### Coordination Tip



Designate one local staff member to be your agency's homeless education liaison to develop relationships with homeless education staff prior to emergencies; maintain contact with the schools during emergencies; and get to know the law, the local schools, local liaisons, enrollment procedures, and school administrators.

## Cooperate!

Work with local liaisons to make school enrollment and attendance as streamlined as possible.



### Cooperation Tip



Allow the school district to conduct enrollment onsite at your agency, or have your staff members complete school enrollment documents as part of your standard intake process and forward them to the local liaison. Schools may also want to access your facilities to provide after-school and extra-curricular activities. For example, after Hurricane Katrina, Houston's public schools conducted enrollment, special education evaluations, and orientation activities for students and parents onsite at the Astrodome.

## How Can Relief Agencies Help?

### ***Plan for the Future!***

Many displaced students and families will not return home, and the local schools will be educating and serving these families for months and years to come. Many of them will experience homelessness again as many relief agency services end and they struggle to get back on their feet. Before closing down your agency's operations, and as part of your recovery efforts, give the schools, families, and youth a chance to benefit from your knowledge and experience as they confront short- and long-term planning issues (9 months, 1 year, 3 years, 5 years out).



Team up with schools for a more effective recovery effort.

## *Connecting Displaced Children with Educational and Support Services Checklist*

- ❑ **Communicate:** Prior to disaster striking, meet with State Coordinators for Homeless Education and/or local liaisons in your service area. Implement a fast and reliable system for communicating with schools during an emergency.
- ❑ **Teach:** Make McKinney-Vento and school enrollment information available to parents through posters and brochures.
- ❑ **Learn:** Find out where all schools are located in the community and what services they offer.
- ❑ **Share:** Establish a procedure for sharing information with schools; for example, develop a form for parents to sign during intake to allow information sharing.
- ❑ **Support:** Reach out to provide needed services to families in precarious, temporary living situations.
- ❑ **Coordinate:** Designate a local staff member to be your agency's homeless education liaison.
- ❑ **Cooperate:** Determine how your agency can facilitate school enrollment.
- ❑ **Plan for the Future:** Work with schools on long-term plans for disaster recovery.

School District Contact Information



National Center for Homeless Education  
Toll-free HelpLine: 800-308-2145  
<http://nche.ed.gov>

This checklist was taken from the publication entitled *School as a Safety Net: Connecting Displaced Children with Educational and Support Services*. This publication is available at <https://nche.ed.gov/resources/>.

## NCHE Product Highlights

The following NCHE products may be of special interest to you. All NCHE products are available on the NCHE website at <https://ncche.ed.gov/resources/>.

### Parent Pack Pocket Folder

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This sturdy, laminated folders 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

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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 you school and throughout the community to generate public awareness. Available in English and Spanish in parent and youth versions.

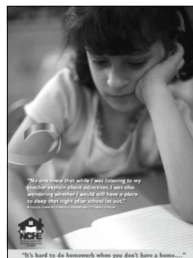


Educational Rights  
Poster

### Homeless Education Awareness Folder

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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 <https://nche.ed.gov/resources/>.

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)

*<http://nche.ed.gov>*

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

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