



National Center for Homeless Education
Supporting the Education of Children and
Youth Experiencing Homelessness
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McKINNEY-VENTO LAW INTO PRACTICE BRIEF SERIES

School Counselor Supports for College Preparation and Readiness for Students Experiencing Homelessness

This NCHE brief

- explores the role of school counselors in providing college preparation and readiness supports to students experiencing homelessness, and
- recommends school partnership strategies to ensure that homeless students receive the individualized supports needed to transition successfully to postsecondary education.

Context

A longstanding research base establishes what is often called the “education premium”. The education premium refers to consistent evidence that people with higher levels of education

- have higher levels of income (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2021),
- are more likely to have access to employer-provided benefits (Ma et al., 2019),
- are more likely to move up the socioeconomic ladder (Ma et al., 2019, p. 5),
- are less likely to be unemployed (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2021), and
- are less likely to be receiving public benefits (Ma et al., 2019, p. 5).

The education premium holds true for students experiencing homelessness, as well. Through its [Voices of Youth Count](#) research initiative, Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago found that youth without a high

McKinney-Vento Definition of Homeless 42 U.S.C. § 11434a(2)

The term “homeless children and youth” —

- A. means individuals who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence...; and
- B. includes —
 - i. children and youths who are sharing the housing of other persons due to loss of housing, economic hardship, or a similar reason; are living in motels, hotels, trailer parks, or camping grounds due to the lack of alternative adequate accommodations; are living in emergency or transitional shelters; or are abandoned in hospitals;
 - 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).

school credential were 346% more likely to experience homelessness than their peers who completed high school (Morton et al., 2017, p. 12). Conversely, by addressing both the housing and education needs of youth experiencing homelessness, communities help young people advance educationally and have access to the living wage employment and other safety nets needed to exit homelessness for good (Kull et al., 2019, p. 8).

While increased educational attainment helps equip young people experiencing homelessness to make a sustainable exit from homelessness, these youth face unique barriers to accessing and succeeding in postsecondary education, which may include weak academic foundations, limited family support, and lack of awareness of available financial resources (Government Accountability Office, 2016, p. 2). Students experiencing homelessness may be first-generation college goers¹ and, as such, need added support to understand the various postsecondary education pathways available to them (see the *Postsecondary Education Pathways* sidebar), and apply to, finance, and succeed in postsecondary education.

Despite the barriers students experiencing homelessness face, research suggests many youth experiencing homelessness have a desire to augment their academic experience and pursue postsecondary education (Havlik, 2021, p. 6) and/or aspire to jobs that require some level of postsecondary education (SchoolHouse Connection, 2020, p. 1). School counselors can play an important role in providing the individualized supports students experiencing homelessness may need to prepare for and transition successfully to postsecondary education. This tip sheet, which builds on a more comprehensive resource released by NCHE in 2017,² explores the role of school counselors in providing college preparation and readiness advisement to students experiencing homelessness and recommends school partnership strategies for supporting that role.

The Role of the School Counselor

School counselors³ are certified/licensed educators who provide a variety of supports designed to improve student success, including assistance with college and

¹ While no single definition exists, the [Higher Education Act](#) defines *first-generation college student* as “(A) An individual both of whose parents did not complete a baccalaureate degree; or (B) In the case of any individual who regularly resided with and received support from only one parent, an individual whose only such parent did not complete a baccalaureate degree” [20 U.S.C. § 1070a–11(h)(3)].

career readiness (American School Counselor Association, n.d.). The [McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act](#), as amended by the Every Student Succeeds Act, requires that State educational agency (SEA) homeless education plans describe how school counselors will provide college preparation and readiness assistance to students experiencing homelessness [42 U.S.C. § 11432(g)(1)(K)]. To implement this requirement, “[t]he local liaison, along with guidance counselors and other LEA staff tasked with college preparation, should ensure that all homeless high school students receive information and individualized counseling regarding college readiness, college selection, the application process, financial aid, and the availability of on-campus supports” (U.S. Department of Education, 2018, p. 51). To this end, school counselors can offer a variety of supports to help students experiencing homelessness and their families gain exposure to postsecondary education pathway options and transition successfully to the postsecondary environment.

School Counselor Supports for Students Experiencing Homelessness

There are many ways school counselors can help students experiencing homelessness access and succeed in postsecondary education.

- School counselors can collaborate with their district’s local homeless education liaison (hereafter *local liaison*) to know which students are experiencing homelessness.
- School counselors can support students with credit recovery options to ensure they have complete and accurate school transcripts, which are needed to apply to postsecondary education (Hurt, 2018).
- School counselors can support the college application process by providing students with waivers for college entrance exams and college application fees, as well as assistance with obtaining letters of recommendation (Hurt, 2018).
- School counselors can help students experiencing homelessness gain exposure to local institutions of higher education (IHEs) by coordinating campus visits and/or inviting IHE representatives to

² See [College and Career Counseling for Students Experiencing Homelessness: Promising Practices for Secondary School Counselors](#).

³ The term “school counselor” is sometimes used interchangeably with the term “guidance counselor”, a term that is being phased out of use in schools. See [The Evolution from “Guidance Counselor” to “School Counselor”](#) for more information.

participate in college fairs at local middle or high schools to share information with students. Notably, a study on psychological barriers to college access found that students who participate in college campus visits demonstrate higher levels of knowledge about college and are more likely to talk to school personnel about college options (Swanson, 2021).

- School counselors can work with students to select an IHE that is a good fit for the student based on their educational goals and interests, and their unique needs, such as housing, childcare, and/or transportation (Havlik, 2021).
- School counselors can help homeless students complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), including assisting unaccompanied homeless youth⁴ with getting a [determination of independent student status](#) from one of the four role groups authorized to make this determination.
- School counselors can inform students of sources of financial assistance beyond federal student aid (including state aid, institutional aid, and private scholarships), help them understand eligibility for these types of assistance, and connect them to reputable scholarship search engines.
- School counselors can provide valuable recommendations on how students experiencing homelessness and their families can get connected with campus-based supports once enrolled in higher education.

By providing individualized supports, school counselors help set up students experiencing homelessness for success in postsecondary education.

Partnership and Support Strategies

School counselors, in partnership with other stakeholders, play an important role in preparing students experiencing homelessness for postsecondary education (Havlik, 2021). The following recommendations for partnerships between school counselors, other educators, and parents will help ensure that young people experiencing homelessness have access to the assistance they need to identify and pursue their postsecondary education goals.

⁴ The McKinney-Vento Act defines *unaccompanied youth* as “a youth not in the physical custody of a parent or guardian” [42 U.S.C. § 11434a(6)].

Postsecondary Education Pathways



Postsecondary education encompasses a variety of courses of study that may lead to degrees and non-degree credentials. Postsecondary degrees include Associate, Bachelor’s, Master’s, and Doctoral. Non-degree credentials include professional certificates, industry certifications, apprenticeship certificates, and occupational licenses. Postsecondary education may be offered in a variety of learning contexts, including four-year colleges or universities, community colleges, career and technical schools, centers for continuing education, and work-based apprenticeship programs. Postsecondary education alternatively may be referred to as “higher education”.

NCHE developed [Education Goals and Supports: A Guided Discussion Tool](#) to help educators and service providers working with young people experiencing homelessness guide their youth clients through a discussion of their interests and skills. The tool uses motivational interviewing to help determine the client’s interest in pursuing further education, provides online resources to help the client explore education and career pathways and identify pathway options in areas of interest, includes information on how to pay for higher education, and recommends next steps towards the client’s goals.

Local Homeless Education Liaisons

Local liaisons, as the key homeless education contact in each school district, play a critical role in helping to identify students experiencing homelessness and get them connected to other school- and community-based supports. Local liaisons and school counselors can work together to

- ensure that students who meet the [definition of homeless](#) are identified;
- ensure that students experiencing homelessness receive appropriate credit for full or partial coursework completed satisfactorily [42 U.S.C. § 11432(g)(1)(F)(ii)], and that their high school transcripts are an accurate reflection of their coursework and credits;



Student Spotlight: Shaniece*

When Shaniece was a sophomore in high school, her family experienced homelessness after being evicted from their home. The family considered staying at a local shelter, but her mother refused after being told that Shaniece's father wouldn't be allowed to stay. Instead the family moved into a motel, where they stayed for ten months. Education was important to Shaniece and her parents. She knew she wanted to go to college but was unsure of where to start and doubted she could afford it. She was fortunate to have access to college readiness programming and a supportive school counselor who worked tirelessly to help her explore postsecondary pathway options and access financial aid and scholarships. The school counselor provided fee waivers for Shaniece to take the SAT college entrance exam and apply to colleges, and assisted with gathering and submitting documentation required for college applications. The counselor also allowed Shaniece to use the phone and computer in her office to research colleges. The counselor set up meetings with college recruiters so Shaniece could explore career options, job outlooks, and salary expectations to take into consideration when deciding a course of study. Shaniece's counselor helped her prepare her college entrance essays by providing tips on what colleges tend to look for in application essays and examples of promising college entrance essays.

With her counselor's support, Shaniece applied and was accepted to a Historically Black University and graduated with her bachelor's degree in May 2021. While in college, Shaniece kept in touch with her school counselor, who continued to provide encouragement and support throughout her academic journey. Shaniece is currently doing a journalism internship covering the legislative session at her state's capitol. In the Fall, she will start working for a local newspaper in New York state.

**This story represents the experience of an actual student who shared her story of how her high school counselor assisted her with college preparation and readiness.*

- help students experiencing homelessness access documentation that may be needed to apply for college, financial aid, and scholarships, such as birth certificates, driver's licenses or other forms of identification, and income verification (Havlik, 2021, p. 17);

- help students experiencing homelessness complete the FAFSA and applications for other aid or scholarships; and
- ensure that unaccompanied homeless youth receive documentation of their independent student status on the FAFSA.

Other School Staff

School counselors may wish to partner with other school staff in support of students experiencing homelessness, as follows:

- All school staff: School staff can work with school counselors to support college days held in secondary schools by sharing information with students and wearing attire representing their alma maters (Havlik, 2021).
- School-based mental health professionals: Many schools employ mental health counselors, sometimes referred to as the "Student Assistance Team." School counselors can partner with mental health professionals to ensure that students experiencing homelessness receive school-based mental health supports and referrals to other needed assistance, according to each student's need.
- College counselors: Some school districts have college and career readiness centers that employ college counselors. School counselors can ensure that students experiencing homelessness are aware of these centers and connected to supports provided by college counselors.
- Special education staff: School counselors can partner with special education staff to ensure that homeless students with special education needs are identified and supported in considering their postsecondary pathway options.

Parents, Guardians, and Other Caregivers

Parents, guardians, and other adult caregivers can play a significant role in supporting the secondary completion and postsecondary goals of the children under their care. School counselors can help ensure that parents, guardians, and other adult caregivers

- understand the importance of postsecondary attainment and its effect on employment, income, and other life outcomes;

- are aware of all financial aid and scholarship options available to their children;
- know what to expect from the postsecondary education environment;
- know how to help their children get connected to campus-based supports once enrolled in higher education; and
- feel equipped to encourage and support the educational goals of their children.

Institutions of Higher Education (IHEs)

IHEs can play an important role in increasing postsecondary education access and success for



Community Spotlight: Reading School District (Pennsylvania)

The Reading School District (RSD) is committed to supporting the success of students experiencing homelessness after high school graduation through the completion of a postsecondary credential. Although concentration of this effort begins in 9th grade with college readiness programs, the foundation is created from the moment students enter the district in elementary school. RSD has prioritized the social-emotional and basic needs of students experiencing homelessness by increasing the number of social workers in schools and developing an intentional partnership between school counselors and school social work teams. As part of this partnership, teams of school counselors and school social workers provide first-generation and homeless students with assistance related to completing the FAFSA and setting up college visits.

To ensure that the partnership was meeting student needs, RSD hosted a community forum including other local schools, community partners, and local institutions of higher education (IHEs) to explore and address the barriers that local first-generation and homeless students face in accessing higher education. As a result of this forum, RSD developed a scholarship program and created a college outreach coordinator position with the goal of establishing a warm handoff to SPOCs for homeless students at local IHEs. RSD is committed to continuing to grow and adapt the supports it provides students experiencing homelessness to bridge the gap between high school and college.

students experiencing homelessness. School counselors can partner with IHEs to

- connect students experiencing homelessness with campus-based supports that may provide needed assistance, including Single Points of Contact (SPOCs) for homeless and/or foster youth (National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth, 2018), basic needs programming, student health and mental health, and academic and career advising;
- build partnerships with the office of financial aid to help students complete the FAFSA and other required paperwork;
- host college fairs at local middle or high schools, where IHE representatives share information with students about their institution, including programs of study, cost, and the application process; and
- schedule and host college campus visits for students experiencing homelessness, including highlighting institutional features and supports that may help address these students' unique needs.

Federal GEAR UP and TRIO Programs

School counselors can partner with federal GEAR UP and TRIO programs to connect students experiencing homelessness and their families to valuable support services.

- [GEAR UP](#) provides six- or seven-year grants to states and partnerships to provide services at high-poverty middle and high schools designed to increase the number of low-income students who are prepared to enter and succeed in postsecondary education. GEAR UP grantees serve an entire cohort of students beginning no later than the seventh grade and follow the cohort through high school. GEAR UP funds also are used to provide college scholarships to low-income students. Locate a [GEAR UP program in your area](#).
- [TRIO programs](#) are outreach and student services programs designed to identify and provide services for learners from disadvantaged backgrounds. TRIO includes eight programs targeted to serve and assist low-income learners, first-generation college students, and individuals with disabilities to progress through the academic pipeline from middle school to postbaccalaureate programs. Locate a [TRIO program in your area](#).

National Associations

School counselors, local liaisons, and other education and community partners may wish to connect with or leverage the resources provided by the following national organizations to support college preparation and readiness for students experiencing homelessness.

- [American School Counselor Association \(ASCA\)](#): ASCA supports school counselors' efforts to help students focus on academic, career, and social-emotional development so they achieve success in school and are prepared to lead fulfilling lives as responsible members of society. ASCA provides professional development, publications and other resources, and research and advocacy to school counselors around the globe.
- [National Association for College Admission Counseling \(NACAC\)](#): NACAC is an organization of more than 23,000 professionals from around the world dedicated to serving students as they make choices about pursuing postsecondary education. NACAC provides college and admission professionals with advice and tools to improve the college transition process for students. Locate a [NACAC affiliate in your area](#). Locate a [college access and success program in your area](#). Learn about upcoming [NACAC virtual college fairs](#).
- [National College Attainment Network \(NCAN\)](#): NCAN works to build, strengthen, and empower communities and stakeholders to close equity gaps in postsecondary attainment for all students. Locate an [NCAN local affiliate in your area](#).
- [National Council for Community and Education Partnerships \(NCCEP\)](#): NCCEP builds the capacity of communities to ensure that underserved students have the opportunity, skills, and knowledge to pursue the education and training that will enable them to achieve their career and life goals. NCCEP works through partnerships with K-12, higher education, government, community organizations, and business to support underserved students in college readiness. Learn about NCCEP's [College and Career Clubs](#), which help educators increase students' odds of college enrollment using a college readiness curriculum.

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Every state is required to have a State Coordinator for Homeless Education, and every school district is required to have a local homeless education liaison. These individuals will assist you with the implementation of the McKinney-Vento Act. To find out who your State Coordinator is, visit the NCHE website at <https://nche.ed.gov/data/>.



For more information on issues related to the education of homeless children and youth, contact the NCHE helpline at 800-308-2145 (toll-free) or homeless@serve.org.

Local Contact Information:

A large, empty, rounded rectangular box intended for providing local contact information.