

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
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The National Center for Homeless Education (NCHE) operates a national resource center with 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 the SERVE Center at the University of North Carolina in Greensboro. Phone: 800-308-2145 Website: <https://nche.ed.gov>

For additional information and resources on providing assistance for schools serving students affected by disasters, [visit https://nche.ed.gov/disaster-preparation-and-response/](https://nche.ed.gov/disaster-preparation-and-response/)

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Introduction

This handbook provides useful information 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 natural disasters such as hurricanes, tornadoes, earthquakes, mudslides, fires, and floods. It will discuss some of the successful strategies used in school districts to enroll students in homeless situations and to welcome them into the school community.

Children and youth may lose their homes in such disasters but they do not 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 predicaments of children and youth who have lost their housing due to devastating disasters highlight the needs and challenges of all young people experiencing homelessness. The McKinney-Vento Act requires schools to develop a homeless education program that is coordinated by a school district contact person, who may be called the local liaison. Local liaisons should have district-wide systems in place to ensure students are enrolled immediately and parents are referred to supports for shelter, employment, clothing, food, and medical and mental health care.

Local liaisons can assist students and families in overcoming the challenges of even large-scale disasters with practical strategies designed to streamline paperwork and put students immediately in the most appropriate school placements possible. These strategies can minimize disruption for these students, staff, and other students in the school.

Remember that a loss of housing is a traumatic experience that may impact both students and parents. Having a calm, respectful attitude is critical to establishing the good rapport necessary to best serve students and families.

*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.

The Definition of Homeless

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 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;*
- 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).*



Immediate Enrollment

What is immediate enrollment?

The McKinney-Vento Act definition of enrollment includes attending classes and participating fully in school activities. This includes all school services and activities such as school meals, special education, academic support, extracurricular activities, and others.

The McKinney-Vento Act does not define immediate, however, 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 have been forced to relocate due to the crisis, enrollment in a few days may be considered to be “without delay,” depending on the specific circumstances.

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 students are 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 clothing to meet the dress code and must supply students with these items if the student is unable to obtain them.

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 homeless youth (those lacking a fixed, regular, and adequate residence and not living with a parent or guardian) with the enrollment process. 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 is foundational to academic success and mental and emotional security.

School Selection

Following large-scale disasters, the extreme mobility of students may increase the need to coordinate school enrollment with housing placements. Although in some situations this coordination may take a few days, the extraordinary circumstances of those students may justify such short interruptions in the enrollment process to produce enrollments that support both educational achievement and emotional adjustment. For example, such coordination could allow some students to enroll and remain 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 remain in their school of origin or to enroll immediately in the school in the attendance area where they are living. The school of origin is the school they attended when permanently housed or the school in which they were last enrolled, including a public preschool and the designated receiving school at the next grade level for all feeder schools. The McKinney-Vento Act states that students must, based on their best interest, remain in their school of origin unless their parents (or the youth, if unaccompanied) prefer the local school.

Students made homeless by disasters have the same legal rights as other students experiencing homelessness. School districts that have enrolled large numbers of displaced students may develop procedures to support parents in making sound decisions about whether their children should remain in their school of origin. For more information on assisting parents in determining which school is in their child's best interest, please see the NCHIE brief [Guiding the Discussion on School Selection at \[https://nche.ed.gov/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/sch_sel_checklist.pdf\]\(https://nche.ed.gov/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/sch_sel_checklist.pdf\)](https://nche.ed.gov/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/sch_sel_checklist.pdf).

School Selection

For example, to assist parents in making a decision about which school is best for their child, local liaisons, enrollment staff, and school district administrators 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 compare programs and services at the two schools, and make arrangements for the parents and child to visit the school considered for a possible transfer.
- Provide information on the commute to the schools under consideration, both in terms of miles and travel time, so the parent can compare how this will impact the child.
- 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, the parent, guardian, or unaccompanied homeless youth must be referred to the liaison to carry out the dispute.



From the School Office to the Classroom

States and school districts have developed many strategies to streamline their processes and make sure students are enrolled immediately, attending regularly, and participating fully in school to achieve school success. The following are some helpful strategies.

Use a Simple Process



How can the immediate enrollment process be simplified by school districts?

- Develop and utilize district-wide policies that facilitate immediate enrollment. Work with your state coordinator for homeless education (find contact information for your state at <https://nche.ed.gov/data/>) 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 they do not create further barriers or delay enrollment. For examples of forms being used around the country, consult NCHÉ's Local Homeless Education Liaison Toolkit at <https://nche.ed.gov/homeless-liaison-toolkit/>.
- 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.

Enrollment Strategies



What should enrollment staff do when students are missing 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:

- Every state requires immunizations for school enrollment, so students who were previously enrolled in school likely have received all necessary immunizations. Since most students experiencing homelessness have been enrolled in school before, they probably 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 at <https://vk.ovg.ox.ac.uk/vk/vaccination-schedules-other-countries>.
- 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.
- Consider establishing a school-based immunization clinic and/or collaborating with schools or health clinics that offer immunizations to streamline the process for students who need immunizations.

Enrollment Strategies

When the student arrives:

- Contact 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 between local liaisons. These strategies can sometimes produce records faster than standard procedures.
- Coordinate with the local liaison to help expedite the process.

FERPA, HIPAA, and the privacy of immunization records

FERPA, the Family Education Rights and Privacy Act, [20 U.S.C. § 1232g(99.31)(a)(1)(1)(A)] allows transferring records between schools without parental consent when a child is changing schools.

HIPAA, the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act of 1996 (Pub. L. No. 104-191), regulates the disclosure of health information. 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.

School District Strategies

School staff may be concerned about potential legal action related to enrolling unaccompanied youth. Legal liability is generally based on negligence, which is a failure to exercise “reasonable care”, the same prudence others would have exercised under the same circumstances. Schools can help protect themselves from liability by exercising reasonable care with unaccompanied youth, as with all students by responding appropriately to emergencies, complying with applicable laws, and maintaining a safe and supportive school environment.

Schools must comply with all federal and state laws, regardless of liability concerns. If a school violates the McKinney-Vento Act by refusing to enroll an unaccompanied youth and the youth is subsequently injured off school grounds, the school could be held liable 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 have been heavily impacted by large-scale disasters report 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

School District Strategies

parent meetings and on-site enrollment; and obtain information about services, housing placements, and anticipated mobility.

- Coordinating with relief agencies to identify students; arrange parent meetings and on-site enrollment; and obtain information about services, housing placements, and anticipated mobility.
- 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, some LEAs conducted Individualized Education Program (IEP) meetings in shelters so 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; store locations, 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, some local liaisons set up communal tables and secured local restaurants to provide 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 have sought help from retired school counselors and mental health professionals who were themselves displaced by disasters.



Strategies with Unaccompanied Youth



How can the local liaison facilitate the enrollment of unaccompanied homeless 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 homeless youth in school?

This depends on your state and school district policies. Successful protocols used by districts 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 (see samples at <https://nche.ed.gov/unaccompanied-youth/>) to allow such adults to enroll 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

Strategies with Unaccompanied Youth

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.
- **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.

When enrolling unaccompanied youth, schools can:

- allow caregivers to enroll, if they are available and willing,
- empower local liaisons to enroll, or
- permit youth to enroll themselves.

Local Liaison Data Strategies



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

- Coordinate with your district's data steward to ensure homeless students are included in data systems. Confirm that staff with an educational need to know about the student's status are notified, such as school nutrition and transportation staff.
- Collaborate with your IT staff to identify records that may be safely and securely stored with a cloud-based service. Notify parents about information secured like this and the process for requesting that information if their children must transfer. Examples of information to keep include case files with student academic records, medical records, meeting notes, key assignments, status of special education services and evaluations, and other correspondence that will assist a new school with appropriately placing the student in classes.
- Work with your state coordinator to ensure disaster related information is accurately reported. Some states require liaisons to identify which students became homeless due to a disaster.
- Collaborate with district administrators and the state coordinator to develop a process for re-creating information when it is not otherwise available.
- Provide information on displaced students to the local liaison in the student's former district to assist in their data management.
- Help parents compile a Parent Pack Pocket Folder (available from NCHE at <https://nche.ed.gov/resources/>) and tell them what information is important to keep and what to provide to new schools.



Local Liaison Checklist

- Proactively develop and implement policies and procedures 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 related procedures in place in your state and district.
- Develop simple forms to replace those typically 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 enrollment for unaccompanied homeless 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 Help Line: 800-308-2145
<https://nche.ed.gov>

Importance of Academic Placement and Support



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

- Contact the previous school for records. In situations where 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, special education staff, and others for informal assistance with placement decisions. It is always best 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 during this process.
- Use short, easily-administered educational assessments to place students immediately while awaiting complete academic records. Most assessments need to be aligned with the curriculum, so consider developing these in advance by coordinating with the director of curriculum, teachers, and others.
- Access any standardized testing or other achievement data available from state or local data 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.
- Provide front-line staff good strategies to gather all available information from students and parents, including written information (academic records, tests, homework, immunization or other medical records, IEPs or special education referrals, evaluations, meeting notes, or any other school papers) and verbal information (ask parents and children about their previous schools, classes, teachers, classmates, and school activities).



Importance of Academic Placement and Support

Using good questions to get good answers

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

Questions for Parents

Do you have any paperwork from the previous school such as 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 grades like?

What was easy or difficult about school?

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?

Did your child meet individually or in a small group with a different teacher?



Importance of Academic Placement and Support

Questions for Students

What was your school day like in your old school?

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 living 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; 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.

Importance of 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 dealing with several systems. Depending on how your state handles runaways, youth may be involved with social services or law enforcement. If youth are parenting or have a disability, they may be receiving public benefits. They could also be receiving services from 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 also may be involved.

To ensure that unaccompanied youth do not face barriers to enrollment or retention in school, school district staff must work together and establish relationships with other systems. For example:

- Local liaisons and foster care points of contact should coordinate to serve students who age out of foster care and become homeless.
- Many states and communities have established youth task forces to help agencies maximize coordination and improve services.
- One local liaison 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 punishment 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.
- Many liaisons partner with local youth serving agencies to provide trainings on trauma to school and agency staff.
- Liaisons with a Youth Homelessness Demonstration Program (YHDP) in their area work with a wide variety of stakeholders to create a coordinated community plan to address youth homelessness.

Importance of 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 students immediately, remove barriers to school retention, and ensure they receive credit for full or partial coursework satisfactorily completed while attending a prior school. Successful strategies include:

- Utilizing NCHE's *Maximizing Credit Accrual and Recovery for Homeless Students* brief at <http://nche.ed.gov/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/Maximizing-Credit-Accrual.pdf>.
- Awarding partial or pro-rated credit. A manual from the California School Boards Association and the California Department of Social Services assists school districts to ensure that foster youth are able to earn credits for school work despite challenges associated with high mobility. These strategies can be applied to students experiencing homelessness as well. The Guide is available at http://kids-alliance.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/PCM_WEB_April2014.pdf.
- Supplementing a regular class with extra assignments, a work or volunteer experience, or additional testing to earn the full credit.
- Replacing seat time requirements with tests to determine a student's mastery of the subject.
- Offering 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. A US Department of Education Issue Brief on Credit Recovery Programs is available at <https://www2.ed.gov/rschstat/eval/high-school/credit-recovery.pdf>.
- Contacting local liaisons and/or state coordinator in sending districts/states to identify online distance learning opportunities they provide for displaced students.

Importance of Academic Placement and Support

How can we expedite special education services?

Students who have special education needs must be enrolled in school and 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 Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) requires the enrolling school to provide appropriate services immediately that are comparable to those described in the current IEP. The new district then must hold a meeting with the parents to adopt the previous IEP or create a new one.

See NCHE's briefs on serving students with special education needs at <https://nche.ed.gov/special-education/>.



To streamline special education services for displaced students, some districts have conducted IEP meetings onsite as special needs students were enrolled. This allowed students to arrive at school the first day with a current IEP, so services were put in place immediately.

Importance of Academic Placement and Support

If the previous district was in the process of doing an evaluation or developing an IEP but had not finished the process, the new district must continue the process immediately. IDEA 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 the evaluation” and “the parent and the LEA agree to a specific time when the evaluation will be completed” [§1414(a)(C)(ii)(I)]. Therefore, enrolling districts must complete evaluations within the time remaining from the original referral or ensure that evaluations are completed promptly and set a new deadline with the parents.

Evaluations are Important

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, such as:

Getting all the evaluations, questionnaires, and other paperwork completed on the student from the previous school(s).

Talking to the school counselor, teachers, and evaluation team from the previous school(s) about the student’s needs.

Implementing appropriate supportive services immediately; academic support, behavior-management interventions, mentoring, and other services can help without being labeled as special education.

Collaborating with community medical and mental health providers, Medicaid service providers, social workers, and others to pursue necessary evaluations.

Consulting with the special education team to see if interim IEPs or other interim services can be provided.

Importance of Academic Placement and Support

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. Since many unaccompanied youth do not have such an adult in their lives, IDEA 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, temporary surrogates can be appointed to serve until the surrogate is appointed. These temporary surrogates should be appointed immediately so the evaluation process can begin and can be appropriate staff of schools, school districts, emergency shelters, transitional shelters, independent living programs, and street outreach programs.

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 immediately and attending school 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 school district programs and community-based organizations to award credits by using 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 Help Line: 800-308-2145

<https://nche.ed.gov>

Supporting Mental Health and Academic Success



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 some school districts, staff and administrators from all schools set up orientation rooms at the site where homeless students displaced by disasters 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 provide opportunities for the student body to welcome and accept new students.
- Give new students a faculty and peer mentor/buddy.

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 previously enrolled students a window into the circumstances that have brought their new peers to their school. Such connections can help avoid conflicts or turf issues between new arrivals and other students.

- Make sure new students know about and 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 proactively address potential feelings of exclusion or aggression.
- 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 new 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 following a Louisiana hurricane, one Arkansas district held a Mardi Gras party for the school community. New students were able to show off their culture and home town, while the whole school learned to appreciate the traditions and experiences of the new arrivals.

Supporting Mental Health and Academic Success

Support 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 phone, and information about the local community, health care, mental health and trauma resources, child care, school activities, child rearing, and coping strategies. Have staff available to discuss concerns.

Families in homeless situations may have no knowledge about your local community, so schools may want to offer maps and printed information about local services, including public transportation, grocery stores, pharmacies, clothing stores, discount stores, public benefits, health care, mental health resources, employment offices, shelters, housing agencies, and food pantries.

Such efforts to support parents can be the key to children and parents feeling invested in the school. After a family moved there following a disaster, one local liaison discovered that the student's mother did not speak English. The family had lost everything in the storm, and the mother was overjoyed when offered free English classes on her child's campus through a partnership between the district's ESL and Adult Education programs.

Supporting Mental Health and Academic Success



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, homelessness, 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 also must 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 reported that extracurricular activities were critical in making new students feel at home and invested in school.



One father reported that his son (a senior) enrolled in school and absolutely loved it. He attended the Friday night football games and that was something he didn't even do when he was in his previous school.



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 to expect and when.

Supporting Mental Health and Academic Success

- 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 “safe place” for students to reconnect with something familiar if they feel 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 are more likely to take some ownership in their new classroom(s) and school.
- Introduce new students to the class and team them with a buddy.
- Offer the students a class job or role.
- Take and print 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 or draw pictures for their departing peer.
- Maintain a relationship when the students leave by providing email addresses or 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 students already enrolled. Local liaisons and district/school staff must be aware of these “turf” issues and know when to intervene to prevent serious conflicts. Classroom and school-wide activities are essential, both immediately and in the long term, to help currently enrolled 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 be done in 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.
- Offer anger-management, conflict-resolution, and trauma workshops to school staff and students.

Supporting Mental Health and Academic Success

- Use the arts to help students understand the trauma their new peers have experienced. Suggested examples include performing a play or creating a video 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 incoming and current 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 previously enrolled and displaced students.
- Collaborate with community mental health providers and all departments within the school district that offer mental, emotional, and/or social-emotional support services.
- Seek information about potential gang or other 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.
- Provide adult mentors and a “safe place” on campus for students. Encourage them 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.
- Create peer mentor programs, 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 current 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 phone, and information on the local community, health care, mental health and trauma resources, babysitters, school activities, child rearing, and coping strategies.
- Establish a “safe place” for students to reconnect with something familiar if they feel overwhelmed.
- Start and maintain a portfolio of classwork 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 new and previously enrolled students.

Helpful Contacts



National Center for Homeless Education
Toll-free Help Line: 800-308-2145
<https://nche.ed.gov>

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

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.



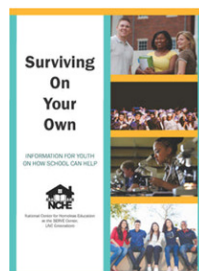
Educational Rights Posters

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



Surviving on Your Own Youth Booklet

This pocket-sized booklet for unaccompanied youth explains how schools can help youth who are living on their own without a parent or guardian. It is made of a durable, laminated paper to resist wear and tear and fits easily inside a back pocket.



Resources from the National Center for Homeless Education

NCHE resources may be found on the NCHE website at <https://nche.ed.gov/>.

Resources include:

- Posters
- Brochures
- Parent Pack Pocket Folders
- Briefs
- Publications
- Web-based Trainings
- Homeless Education Listserv
- Disaster Preparation Handbooks

References

Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act of 1974, 20 U.S.C. § 1232g (1974).

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 20 U.S.C. § 1400 (2004).

United States. (2004). *The Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA)*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Dept. of Labor, Employee Benefits Security Administration.



National Center for Homeless Education
5900 Summit Avenue, #201
Browns Summit, NC 27214
Helpline: 800-308-2145 or homeless@serve.org
<https://nche.ed.gov/>