

HOW CHARTER SCHOOLS CAN SUPPORT STUDENTS EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS

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PURPOSE OF THIS TOOLKIT

Education is a critical tool to address the needs of students experiencing homelessness. For these students, school can be a vital source of stability. The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act is a federal law that provides rights and services for students experiencing homelessness. It applies to all local educational agencies (LEAs) and public schools, including public charter schools. This toolkit is intended as a charter school-focused resource that explains the basic legal requirements of the McKinney Vento Act, while highlighting a few examples of best practices from the charter school community.

INTRODUCTION TO STUDENT HOMELESSNESS

How does the McKinney-Vento Act define homelessness?

Students who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence meet the McKinney-Vento Act's definition of homeless. Specifically, homeless living situations include the following:

- ▶ Sharing the housing of others due to loss of housing, economic hardship, or a similar reason.
- ▶ Living in motels, hotels, trailer parks, or camping grounds due to the lack of alternative adequate accommodations.
- ▶ Staying in emergency or transitional shelters.
- ▶ Sleeping in cars, parks, public spaces, abandoned buildings, substandard housing, bus or train stations, or similar settings.¹

How many students experience homelessness?

Preliminary data from the [U.S. Department of Education](#) show that school districts and charter schools identified over 1.5 million students experiencing homelessness, from preK through grade 12, in the 2017-18 school year. Only 14 percent lived in shelters; 76 percent shared the housing of others due to loss of housing, economic hardship, or a similar reason. LEA charter schools alone identified 50,192 homeless students. The Department of Education also estimates that more than 1.3 million children under age six experienced homelessness in the 2016-17 school year.² In addition to school data, a recent national study found that 700,000 adolescents ages 13-17 experience homelessness without a parent or guardian each year—one in 30 adolescents—and an additional 3.5 million young adults aged 18-25 experience unaccompanied homelessness.³ The prevalence of youth homelessness is the same in rural and urban areas.⁴

What causes students to become homeless?

Two trends that have contributed to the rise in family and youth homelessness over the past several decades are persistent poverty and a shortage of affordable housing.⁵ However, homelessness is more than just a housing issue. Domestic violence, unemployment, low education levels, physical and mental health problems, addiction disorders, and natural disasters also contribute to family and youth homelessness. Unaccompanied youth homelessness has additional risk factors, including lacking a high school diploma, being pregnant or parenting, identifying as LGBT, or being a member of a racial or ethnic minority.⁶ Most unaccompanied homeless youth trace the beginning of their homelessness to early family instability and disruption.⁷

What challenges do students experiencing homelessness face?

Homelessness creates profound physical and emotional instability in children and youth because they move frequently and often do not know where they will sleep when their day ends. Basic needs such as food, clothing, hygiene, medical attention, and transportation often go unmet. Students can struggle to stay awake in school, focus on their studies, and self-regulate. Over the long term, homelessness has an impact on academic achievement over and above poverty, leading to an 87 percent increased likelihood of dropping out of school (the highest of all risk factors studied).⁸ Students experiencing homelessness are more likely to be suspended or expelled,⁹ and are less likely to graduate from high school,¹⁰ than housed, poor students.

What are potential signs of homelessness?

- ▶ Enrollment at multiple schools, lack of records, gaps in learning, poor/inconsistent attendance, talking about frequent moves.
- ▶ Poor hygiene, unmet medical/dental needs, wearing the same clothes repeatedly, fatigue, hoarding food.
- ▶ Social and behavioral challenges, such as extreme shyness, withdrawal, or aggression; clinginess; difficulty with peer and/or adult relationships; poor attention span; anxiety late in the school day.
- ▶ Lack of participation in field trips and/or afterschool activities, lack of basic school supplies, inability to complete special projects.

What are some best practices schools can use to identify students experiencing homelessness in our school?

- ▶ If your charter school is considered to be an independent LEA under your state’s charter school law, you must designate a McKinney-Vento homeless liaison regardless of whether your school receives McKinney-Vento funding.¹¹ The liaison serves as one of the primary contacts between homeless families and school staff, district personnel, shelter workers, and other service providers. It is therefore important to ensure that the liaison has adequate time, capacity, and training to identify all students experiencing homelessness and provide them with needed supports. If your school is not its own LEA, find out who the LEA liaison is and collaborate with them on identification efforts.
- ▶ Avoid the word “homeless” when talking to students, caregivers, parents, and school staff. Use descriptive language and ask questions with discretion.
 - For example, you might ask, “Are you staying somewhere temporarily because you don’t have your own home right now?”
- ▶ Provide annual training to school staff on the definition of homeless, signs of potential homelessness, and whom to contact if they believe a student may be experiencing homelessness.
- ▶ Ask all families and unaccompanied youth to complete a housing questionnaire that includes descriptive questions about the student’s current living situation. Follow up on situations that align with the McKinney-Vento Act’s definition of homelessness.
- ▶ Work with homeless service providers, social service agencies, drop-in centers, faith communities, food banks, campgrounds, low-cost motels, and other locations where families and youth experiencing homelessness may stay or receive services.
- ▶ Post information about the rights of students in unstable housing on the school’s website, in conspicuous locations around school, and in areas in the community where students experiencing homelessness will see it.
- ▶ When talking with families experiencing homelessness, ask about babies or toddlers in the family. Connect young children to [early intervention, Head Start, and preschool services](#).

Confluence Academy in St. Louis, Missouri has identified seven percent of their student body as experiencing homelessness. Through targeted recruitment and embedded identification practices, they have become a leader in McKinney-Vento implementation, going beyond what is required by law:

- + Every campus has a designated liaison.
- + Specific information about services for students experiencing homelessness is presented on the website, in the student handbook, and at enrollment and recruitment fairs.
- + Every applicant completes a housing questionnaire designed to help identify possible homelessness.
- + School staff members are trained to recognize potential signs of homelessness, including sleeping in class, asking for extra food, wearing the same clothes, a withdrawn or upset demeanor, frequent changes in transportation arrangements, and poor attendance. Staff report those observations to the school building liaison, who can assess for McKinney-Vento eligibility.

“I’M A MEMBER OF OUR CONTINUUM OF CARE. WE HAVE A YOUTH COMMITTEE, AND WE ARE INTEGRATING EDUCATION INTO OUR HOMELESSNESS DATA AND THE SERVICES OUR COMMUNITY PROVIDES.”

—Dr. Rochelle Bates
Families in Transition & Parent
Involvement Coordinator

ENROLLING STUDENTS EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS

The McKinney-Vento Act, a federal law that provides rights and services for students experiencing homelessness, requires that local educational agencies (LEAs) enroll students experiencing homelessness in school even without the documents typically required for enrollment. It applies to all LEAs and public schools, including public charter schools.

What are the McKinney-Vento Act's provisions for enrolling students experiencing homelessness?

Students experiencing homelessness are entitled to immediate enrollment in school, even if they:

- ▶ Are unable to produce records normally required for enrollment, such as previous academic records, records of immunization and other required health records, proof of residency, or other documentation; or
- ▶ Have missed application or enrollment deadlines during any period of homelessness.¹²

Enrollment includes attending classes and participating fully in school activities.¹³ States also must have procedures to ensure that students experiencing homelessness who meet the relevant eligibility criteria do not face barriers to accessing charter schools.¹⁴ Students experiencing homelessness also have the right to remain in their school of origin (the school they attended when they were permanently housed or the school in which they were last enrolled) for the duration of their homelessness and until the end of the academic year in which they move into permanent housing.¹⁵

In addition, under federal Charter Schools Program (CSP) grants, states must work with charter schools to eliminate barriers to enrollment for unaccompanied homeless youth.¹⁶ Charter schools that receive CSP start-up grants have special obligations to eliminate any barriers to enrollment for homeless students.

Monte del Sol Charter School in Santa Fe, New Mexico, enrolls students experiencing homelessness immediately. Dr. Cate Moses, who directs the school's Casa Program for Homeless Families and Families at Risk of Homelessness, described their process:

“OUR REGISTRAR UNDERSTANDS MCKINNEY-VENTO, SO SHE KNOWS THOSE STUDENTS DON'T NEED TO PROVIDE THE DOCUMENTS OTHER STUDENTS DO. SHE REFERS THEM TO ME RIGHT AWAY. WE GET THEM CLOTHING AND SCHOOL SUPPLIES, OUTFIT THEM FOR ATHLETICS AND FOR PROM, AND WAIVE ALL FEES. WE HELP THEM PARTICIPATE IN WHATEVER ACTIVITIES THEY WANT TO DO. I ALSO HAVE PARTNERED WITH A LOCAL CATHOLIC CLINIC TO PROVIDE THEM WITH ANY NEEDED IMMUNIZATIONS RIGHT AWAY, EITHER UNDER MEDICAID OR AT NO CHARGE.”

How does immediate enrollment apply to charter school application processes or lotteries?

Federal guidance states that districts should “anticipate and accommodate” the needs of students experiencing homelessness when they apply to charter schools and/or participate in lotteries, even if they have missed deadlines while homeless. Due to the mobility inherent in homelessness, students often enter a charter school’s geographic area after an application period has closed. Without the ability to apply after the deadline, they may be locked out of the opportunity to attend charter schools. The U.S. Department of Education has emphasized that LEAs “should anticipate and accommodate the needs of McKinney-Vento-eligible students to enter charter schools... despite missing application and enrollment deadlines due to a period of homelessness.”¹⁷ Also, charter schools may weight their lotteries in favor of homeless students.¹⁸

How does immediate enrollment apply if a charter school is full when a student experiencing homelessness attempts to apply or enroll?

The McKinney-Vento Act does not require charter schools to enroll a new student if the student’s class is full. The U.S. Department of Education has stated that LEAs “should consider giving homeless children and youths priority if there is a wait list for [charter] schools, programs, and activities.”¹⁹ Providing this priority, or holding spaces open for students experiencing homelessness who move into the area after the application or lottery period has closed, often are the only procedures that eliminate barriers to charter schools for this disadvantaged population.

How do we enroll unaccompanied homeless youth—students who are experiencing homelessness separately from a parent or guardian?

Unaccompanied homeless youth are entitled to immediate enrollment without a parent or guardian.²⁰ Some states have laws that allow youth to enroll themselves in school. Many schools follow this policy, while others have the McKinney-Vento homeless liaison enroll unaccompanied youth.²¹ (If your charter school is considered to be an independent LEA under your state’s charter school law, you must designate a McKinney-Vento homeless liaison.²² If not, you should connect with your LEA’s liaison.) The McKinney-Vento Act does not prescribe any particular procedure to enroll unaccompanied youth, as long as homeless youth are able to enroll in school immediately.

What kind of outreach should we do to students experiencing homelessness?

Given the myriad challenges of homelessness, many students will not be able to attend charter schools without targeted outreach and support. In addition, states receiving charter school grants must work with charter schools on recruitment and enrollment practices to promote inclusion of all students, including by eliminating any barriers to enrollment for foster youth and unaccompanied homeless youth.²³

Some strategies to recruit and enroll students experiencing homelessness include the following:

- ▶ Collaborate with homeless service providers, drop-in centers, campgrounds, low-cost motels, teen parent providers and LGBTQ youth organizations to disseminate information about the school, application procedures, and special supports provided to students experiencing homelessness.
- ▶ Weight your lottery in favor of educationally disadvantaged or homeless students, consistent with your state law.
- ▶ Prioritize students experiencing homelessness on wait lists, consistent with state and local requirements.
- ▶ Hold spaces open for students experiencing homelessness who move into the area after the application or lottery period has closed.
- ▶ Target students experiencing homelessness when spaces open up during the school year.

SUPPORTING SUCCESS FOR STUDENTS EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS

The McKinney-Vento Act, a federal law that provides rights and services for students experiencing homelessness, ensures the provision of school stability, transportation, and other supports to help students attend and succeed in school. It applies to all local educational agencies (LEAs) and public schools, including public charter schools.

How does the McKinney-Vento Act provide school stability for students experiencing homelessness?

Students experiencing homelessness have the right to remain in their school of origin (the school attended when permanently housed or the school in which last enrolled) for the duration of their homelessness and until the end of the academic year in which they move into permanent housing.²⁴ This right applies regardless of where the student moves, so long as it is in the student's best interest to remain in the school of origin. Students experiencing homelessness also are entitled to immediate enrollment in school, even if they are unable to produce records normally required for enrollment, or have missed application or enrollment deadlines during any period of homelessness.²⁵ An [interview checklist](#) can be a helpful tool when working with a parent or student to determine if the school of origin is in the student's best interest. The McKinney-Vento Act establishes a presumption that remaining in the school of origin is best for students,²⁶ and contains dispute resolution provisions for situations where the school and the parent or student disagree on the student's best interest.²⁷

Are charter schools required to provide transportation to the school of origin?

When students remain in their school of origin, the LEA of origin and the LEA where the student currently resides share the responsibility for providing transportation to the school of origin.²⁸ While charter schools considered to be independent LEAs under state charter school laws may choose to provide school of origin transportation on their own, they also can collaborate on transportation arrangements and costs with the public school district in which the student resides. It can be helpful for charter school LEAs and other nearby LEAs to enter into Memoranda of Understanding or other agreements to establish how transportation will be arranged and funded.²⁹ Students have the right to receive transportation to the school of origin at no charge for as long as they attend their school of origin, even if that school does not provide transportation for any other student.³⁰

How can we help McKinney-Vento students participate in extracurricular activities?

Research shows the importance of participation in activity programs in increasing high school graduation and later success in life, particularly for disadvantaged students.³¹ Yet, homelessness creates significant barriers to participation in athletics and other extracurricular activities. Under the McKinney-Vento Act, LEAs are responsible for ensuring that students experiencing homelessness do not face barriers to participating in extracurricular activities immediately upon enrollment.^{32, 33}

Strategies to eliminate barriers to extra-curricular activities include:

- ▶ Provide transportation to and from activities. The U.S. Department of Education has established that “to the extent that lack of access to transportation is a barrier to extracurricular activities for a particular student, an LEA would be required to provide this student with transportation to or from extracurricular activities.”³⁴
- ▶ Provide students experiencing homelessness with necessary equipment and uniforms for activities. Local businesses, faith communities, civic organizations, and parent groups may be willing to sponsor students’ participation.
- ▶ Pair new students with a peer mentor to explain available activities and help integrate the student into the school culture and spirit.
- ▶ This brief on [Full Participation in Extra-Curricular Activities for Students Experiencing Homelessness](#) includes more information and strategies.

What other supports are students experiencing homelessness likely to need?

A variety of supports can help students experiencing homelessness succeed:

- ▶ If your charter school is considered to be an LEA under your state’s charter school law, you must designate a McKinney-Vento homeless liaison.³⁵ Ensure that the liaison has adequate time, capacity, and training to support all students experiencing homelessness.
- ▶ Provide students experiencing homelessness with a mentor for quick daily check-ins and more in-depth conversations as needed. A mentor can help students stay connected to the school and address problems as they arise.

GreenDot in Los Angeles uses public transportation and [HopSkipDrive](#) (an on-demand transportation service for families and schools) to provide transportation.

“WE HAVE A STUDENT RIGHT NOW, ENTERING HER SENIOR YEAR. SHE’S BEEN DOING GREAT AT OUR SCHOOL AND WANTS TO STAY WITH US, BUT SHE MOVED INTO A HOMELESS SITUATION 45 MINUTES AWAY. WE SET UP HOPSKIPDRIVE TO BRING HER TO SCHOOL EVERY DAY.”

—Melissa Pena
GreenDot Public Schools-California
McKinney-Vento Liaison

- ▶ Monitor attendance and provide interventions when students have excessive absences. Students experiencing homelessness are disproportionately likely to be chronically absent³⁶ and to need supports like transportation, clothing, alarm clocks, and mentorship to attend regularly.
- ▶ Provide access to school counselors. From monitoring attendance, to helping piece together credits and ensure on-time graduation, to providing a safe space to talk, school counselors are critical for students experiencing homelessness. This [“Quick Guide for Counseling Staff Working with Students Experiencing Homelessness”](#) can support staff in helping students.
- ▶ Adopt positive school discipline practices schoolwide. Students experiencing homelessness are more likely to be suspended and expelled than their housed peers. Yet, school may be the only safe and warm place for them to be during the day, their only source of food, and their chance to gain the education they need to end their homelessness. This brief on [Positive School Discipline Practices for Students Experiencing Homelessness](#) has strategies.
- ▶ Connect families and students to services such as food and clothing banks, employment programs, shelter, housing, health and mental health care, and social services. The McKinney-Vento Act requires homeless liaisons to provide such referrals.³⁷
- ▶ Provide academic support when and where students experiencing homelessness can access it—especially during the school day, to eliminate barriers like transportation and lack of internet, electricity, or a quiet place to study.
- ▶ Make accommodations for students who cannot complete assignments due to lack of internet or materials.

ENDNOTES

- 1 42 USC §11434a(2).
- 2 U.S. Department of Education (2019). [Early Childhood Homelessness State Profiles 2019](#).
- 3 Chapin Hall's Voices of Youth Count (2017). Missed Opportunities: Youth Homelessness in America, [National Estimates](#).
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 National Low Income Housing Coalition (2019). [Out of Reach](#).
- 6 Chapin Hall's Voices of Youth Count (2017). Missed Opportunities: Youth Homelessness in America, [National Estimates](#).
- 7 Chapin Hall's Voices of Youth Count (2019). [Missed Opportunities in Youth Pathways through Homelessness in America](#).
- 8 America's Promise Alliance (2014). [Don't Call Them Dropouts](#).
- 9 SchoolHouse Connection (2018). [Positive School Discipline Practices for Students Experiencing Homelessness](#).
- 10 Education Leads Home (2019). [Snapshot on Student Homelessness](#).
- 11 42 USC §11432(g)(1)(J)(ii).
- 12 42 USC §11432(g)(3)(C).
- 13 42 USC §11434a(1).
- 14 42 USC §11432(g)(1)(F)(iii).
- 15 42 USC §11432(g)(3)(A).
- 16 83 Fed. Reg. 248 (12/28/18), p. 67242.
- 17 U.S. Department of Education (2018). [Education for Homeless Children and Youths Program Non-Regulatory Guidance](#), I-6.
- 18 80 Fed. Reg. 114 (6/15/15), p. 34214. This is also from the comments and responses section of the NFP.
- 19 U.S. Department of Education (2018). [Education for Homeless Children and Youths Program Non-Regulatory Guidance](#), I-6.
- 20 42 USC §11432(g)(1)(H)(iv).
- 21 42 USC §11432(g)(3)(B)(iv).
- 22 42 USC §11432(g)(1)(J)(ii).
- 23 20 USC §7221b(f)(1)(viii)(I).
- 24 42 USC §11432(g)(3)(A).
- 25 42 USC §11432(g)(3)(C).
- 26 42 USC §11432(g)(3)(B).
- 27 42 USC §11432(g)(3)(E).
- 28 42 USC §11432(g)(1)(J)(iii).
- 29 U.S. Department of Education (2018). Education for Homeless Children and Youths Program Non-Regulatory Guidance, J-2.
- 30 U.S. Department of Education (2018). Education for Homeless Children and Youths Program Non-Regulatory Guidance, J-6.
- 31 National Federation of State High School Associations (2008). [The Case for High School Activities](#).
- 32 42 USC §11432(g)(3)(C); 42 USC §11434A(1).
- 33 42 USC §11432(g)(1)(F)(iii).
- 34 U.S. Department of Education (2018). [Education for Homeless Children and Youths Program Non-Regulatory Guidance](#), J-11.
- 35 42 USC §11432(g)(1)(J)(ii).
- 36 For example, a study of charter school and public school district data in Michigan found that 40% of homeless students were chronically absent in the 2016-17 school year, a rate two-and-a-half times the statewide average. Poverty Solutions at the Univ. of Michigan (2018). [Missing School, Missing A Home](#).
- 37 42 USC §11432(g)(6)(A)(iv).





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