

April 2020

# ONcall

ready-to-use NEWS

## Helping your homeless students

Homelessness is a growing problem around the country. The high number of homeless people in some communities has reached crisis proportions, and city leaders are struggling to respond to the needs of both unhoused people and the community at-large.

School districts are required to serve homeless students, but it is a challenge to meet the complex needs of this transient student population, which is estimated at more than 1.3 million. Districts must provide services under the federal McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, and schools want to help these vulnerable students succeed and find stability in the structure of school.

### The McKinney-Vento Act

Federal law — the McKinney Vento Act — defines homeless students as students living in emergency shelters or transitional living programs, those staying temporarily with friends or relatives due to inadequate housing, and those staying in motels, campgrounds, cars or other temporary housing. It aims to reduce barriers to school attendance and success by requiring access to transportation and the waiving of residency and documentation requirements. (<https://nche.ed.gov/mckinney-vento-definition>)

McKinney-Vento provides requirements, guidance and resources for states and local school districts. Advocacy organizations also distribute information to families about their rights under this law. See a fact sheet from the Family and Youth Services Bureau: “Practical Application of the McKinney-Vento Act”: <http://bit.ly/2xcMzHL>.

### Reaching your homeless students

“The number of students in kindergarten through the twelfth grade who are homeless has increased by 70% over the last decade, according to new federal data that also suggests it shows no signs of slowing...Some school districts have as many as 10% or more of their students living in shelters, homes of relatives or friends, cars or on the streets.” <http://bit.ly/2Ihc2l8>

Education is the path out of poverty and homelessness, but students experiencing homelessness are far less likely to graduate than other students. To help these students, districts must first identify them and then find them. The following staff and resources will help with homeless student assistance:

**Homeless liaison:** Schools have homeless liaisons to help families enroll their children in new schools or arrange continued attendance at their old school — a right under McKinney-Vento.

For subscription information, contact WSSDA at (800) 562-8927 or (360) 493-9231.

For content questions, contact: Marcia Latta Communications Consultant (503) 580-2612.

Reproduction rights for materials distributed as part of *On Call* are granted only to subscribing districts and are restricted to distribution as part of their local public relations programs.



(Over)

This staff member monitors district services and legal requirements for assisting homeless and other children. This includes sharing information about mandated programs, such as transportation from a shelter or other location to their home school, as well as other contacts and programs that make it easier for families to work with the school.

This staff member also works with schools to establish partnerships with local social service, health, religious, service clubs and other organizations to provide basic services that help children cope with difficult circumstances. These organizations furnish school supplies, shoes, clothes and other physical necessities. Some of them gather warm coats, gloves and mittens. Others provide caring, committed tutors and adult friends. Still others open their doors to before and after-school programs.

**District communications:** Districts should communicate information about homeless resources. Devote a section of the website to a homeless education page with links to parent resources and family assistance links. Include information for unaccompanied youth who are homeless and lacking support. Include translations in Spanish and other major languages in your district.

Produce a printed brochure with this information for families who do not have access to computers or need information they can carry with them.

A good example of this information is on the Orange County Public Schools website: <http://bit.ly/39tVClq>.

**Community partners:** Districts can work with organizations that specifically serve the homeless, and they can increase their reach by seeking support for families from churches, community centers and even supportive community volunteers.

Social service and advocacy organizations that serve the homeless are essential partners in serving homeless students and families. Families who are experiencing homelessness require compassion and empathy. Homeless advocates can help train staff to communicate effectively and with sensitivity and connect them to resources and services. Understanding effective communication strategies can ensure positive, nonjudgmental communication that homeless audiences won't perceive as offensive or threatening.

Making individuals and groups in the community aware of student needs can open the door to partnerships that provide valuable services for students and engage community members in meaningful work with schools. Members of a nearby church or community center that provides homework help, food, and/or a safe place for kids to go before or after school gain a deep understanding of the problems faced by schools as they work to overcome obstacles to student learning.

Programs and services for homeless students and families are designed to meet the needs of students, but the ripple effect results in increased respect for schools and their dedication to helping students. Community members involved in these programs use the most powerful public relations tool in existence — word-of-mouth, third-party testimonials — to tell other community members about the deep caring for kids and dedication of school staff. Volunteers in this kind of effort often recruit others to help, thus increasing the number of supportive voices in the community.

**National advocacy groups:** Homelessness is a significant nationwide problem, and there are national advocacy organizations and agencies that focus on services to homeless families and students.

**Education Leads Home** “is a national campaign focused on improving educational outcomes for children and youth who experience homelessness. The campaign seeks to raise awareness of key challenges and increase implementation of proven practices and policies that improve educational outcomes, from early childhood through postsecondary, for one of the country’s most vulnerable student populations.” [www.educationleadshome.org](http://www.educationleadshome.org)

**National Center for Homeless Education** operates the U.S. Department of Education’s technical assistance and information center for the federal Education for Homeless Children and Youth. This site is a valuable resource for staff who work with homeless families. It has McKinney-Vento information, contact information for state coordinators, data, news, reports, training and a phone or email helpline.

### **Helping homeless students succeed**

When students succeed in school, they experience confidence, a sense of stability, opportunities for self-sufficiency and a chance to break the cycle of homelessness and poverty. Homeless students are 87% more likely to drop out of school than other students and 4.5 times more likely to experience homelessness as adults. Districts must make efforts to serve these students. It’s the right thing to do for the students, the community and the district’s success.

### **Communicating sensitively**

Homeless programs are one of the many non-instructional programs that schools offer to help students learn. Successful programs are district pride points and should be shared with the community. Communicating the vast number of ways districts meet student needs builds trust and support for the district’s taxpayer-funded programs. Districts should post information about the programs and include the highlights in the annual report. This topic could also be included in news highlights and staff recognition. But be sensitive to the students and families. It is a source of shame or embarrassment for many people. People may be dealing with mental health issues, addiction or domestic violence. Reach out to the experts to understand effective communication strategies for talking to homeless populations and to the public about serving the homeless population in your community. The right approach can help connect the right services with the right people to start reducing homeless.

---

*Contributed by Marcia Latta, communications consultant*