

Supporting Homeless Students

a tutorial from

The Office for the Education of
Homeless Children and Youth



Supporting Homeless Students

An average of 400 cases come into the The Office for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth a year ...
... and each case is different.

This tutorial looks at the best practices schools have implemented to meet the unique needs of each student that is going to school homeless.

Supporting Homeless Students

This tutorial covers best practices for:

- Enrollment and Identification
- Transportation
- Dispute Resolution
- Student Participation and Access to services
- Service Coordination
- Fleeing Violence
- Engaging Parents
- Homeless Preschoolers
- Unaccompanied Youth
- Technical Assistance/Support regarding homeless children and youth



Enrollment and Identification

Training and professional development for faculty and staff is key to identification, enrollment, and support of homeless students.

Districts that have worked with enrollment staff and administrators on the definition of homelessness and how to recognize it often find they are better able to identify a homeless child when he or she first arrives in the district

Situations that might indicate homelessness when a family comes in to enroll include:

- Lack of the usual documentation for enrollment;
- Use of the address of a local shelter or motel;
- Indication the family is living with relatives or friends;
- Mention of a restraining order or heightened safety concerns; or
- Youth without a parent or legal guardian.

Enrollment and Identification

Because of the stigma of homelessness, families are often reluctant to self-identify, though some do, and others will if given a safe opportunity. A conversation with the parent or unaccompanied youth away from the Main Office, in a more private setting, often provides that added sense of safety to disclose homelessness.

It is almost impossible for a liaison to be in every school building whenever a family comes in to enroll. A helpful strategy many liaisons have used is to recruit a “building liaison” or contact person in each school. By doing a little more training with that staff person a homeless liaison is able “extend” his or her reach. This has also worked well for identifying children already in the district that are losing their housing.

Enrollment and Identification

Students who are already enrolled in the district can be harder to identify.

The kinds of things knowledgeable faculty and staff look for include:

- An increase in attendance issues
- Increased health concerns
- Trouble getting homework completed
- Drop in grades
- Classroom behavior
- School mail returned to sender
- Change of address to a shelter, hotel, relative/friend's house
- Calls home to disconnected phone lines

In most cases a conversation with a parent will clarify the family's homeless status.

Homelessness or Residency Fraud?

Every year schools come across a few cases where they question whether a family is actually homeless or committing residency fraud. While we understand this is a serious concern for everyone, we urge districts to investigate situations before rushing to judgment.

Districts may do residency checks, just like they do for housed families, to determine that the student is actually sheltered in the district.

In double-up situations, contacting landlords is discouraged but host families should be able to verify that the children are living with them.

Families that are receiving services from the state or a social service agency should be able to verify that.

We have had cases that in the rush to declare residency fraud, schools have created homelessness and disrupted children's education. Please proceed with caution and professionalism.

Transportation

Homeless children that wish to remain enrolled in their school of origin, whether across town or across districts, must be provided with appropriate transportation to and from school promptly.

- Logistically, transportation may take 72 hours to establish a new route. It can be helpful to check existing routes before setting up a new one.
- Homeless transportation is a shared responsibility and cost between the district where the student is sheltered and the district where the student is attending school. However, districts **MUST** communicate with each other when setting up transportation. Incurring transportation costs without informing the other district creates problems down the road. Some liaisons have created sign off forms that they fax back and forth to document the communication.
- Sometimes homeless parents have their own transportation and are able to get their children to and from school for a short time. Families should be reimbursed at the local mileage rate. Some families see this as their family time but most homeless families (particularly those in shelter) have so many demands to meet that providing transportation on an ongoing basis is very difficult – not to mention the out of pocket expenses.



Transportation

- A few districts have tried to use taxis. These are very expensive and generally operate without a 7D vehicle and driver or even a CORI-ed driver. Please be aware that state law limits the use of such vehicles to transport students to only five (5) days.
- Transportation for homeless students must be comparable to transportation provided for housed students. In some districts this includes public transportation which may provide more flexibility for after school activities.
- Homeless students enrolled in local schools that are within the district's walking distance and where housed children in the same area are walking can walk also.
- Children who end up sheltered across school or neighborhood zones are entitled to return to the school they were last attending and to transportation if needed. The district may be able to take advantage of already existing school bus routes.

ESE Advisory 2002-3 School Selection and Transportation Requirements for Homeless Students

Dispute Resolution Process

The Dispute Resolution Process provides a means to settle disagreements between the district and the parent/legal guardian or the unaccompanied youth regarding enrollment and transportation.

We recommend a three step process in addressing disagreements on enrollment and transportation.

1. First the homeless liaison should try to facilitate an agreement between the district and the homeless family.
2. If that fails, contact the Office for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth and a staff member will try to facilitate an agreement or provide guidance.
3. If that fails, the Dispute Resolution Process should be initiated.

ESE Advisory 2003-7 McKinney-Vento Homeless Education Dispute Resolution Process
Advisory 2003-7A School District Notification of Enrollment Decision
Advisory 2003-7B Appeal of School District Notification of enrollment Denial

School Participation and Access to Services

Homeless students are entitled to participate in all school courses, events, and activities.

- This includes preschool, gifted and talented programs, all school clubs and sports teams, vocational/technical programs, special education, dances, field trips, class events, and all other opportunities that housed children access. This is referred to as equal access to comparable services.
- Homeless students are entitled to Free Lunch and Breakfast if its being served. Participation in Breakfast not only provides a healthy start to the day but also allows a little flexibility in arrival time.

School Participation and Access to Services

- Homeless students are categorically eligible for the Title I services offered in the district, even if they are not enrolled in a Title I school. To meet this need some districts have the Title I specialist travel to non-Title I schools. In other districts a Title I certified teacher or tutor is employed.
- Title I has a set-aside for homeless students. This can be helpful in providing academic support for students struggling with educational gaps. The homeless liaison should collaborate with the Title I director on this.

ESE Advisory 2003-5 Title I and Homeless Students

Service Coordination

Homeless students arrive with much to add and many needs. Schools can address several of their needs but not all.

Resources schools have to offer include:

- Academics
- First Aid at the nurse's office
- Social/emotional support by the school social worker/guidance
- College and career planning
- Breakfast and lunch
- Daytime shelter
- After school programming
- Referral to outside resources
- Showers and washing machines
- Opportunity for positive social interaction
- Lockers
- Library and internet connection

Service Coordination

By coordinating efforts, schools and communities can bridge the gap in needs that school alone cannot meet.

Resources that community providers have to offer may include:

- Mental health, medical and dental care
- Food pantries and clothing banks
- Public transportation
- Emergency assistance
- Shelter or housing
- Summer and after school programming
- Job training programs and job search services

Creating a resource listing that can be used across the district can be very helpful. Some districts have made community resource guides available to all families and found it greatly appreciated.

Fleeing Violence

Domestic violence and abuse often result in homelessness.

In these cases confidentiality is a major safety issue. And when identified schools should be having discussions around restraining orders, safety plans and appropriate procedures for enrollment, record transfer and transportation.

Because of the strict confidentiality of domestic violence shelters communicating with a parent may require additional effort on the part of the school.

The state does have an confidential address service if needed.

Each year there are a few cases of families fleeing community violence or war torn homes. As with families fleeing domestic violence, schools should have conversations with each family or unaccompanied youth around safety and confidentiality issues.

Engaging Parents

McKinney-Vento urges schools to

- Inform homeless parents of their children's educational rights;
- Provide opportunities for homeless parents to be involved in their children's education; and
- Inform homeless parents of educational and training opportunities available to them.

Our experience with homeless parents is that they are very concerned about keeping their children in school. For many, the first question upon arrival at a shelter is "Where will my children go to school?". Providing a written copy of their children's educational rights and the homeless liaison's contact information can ease some of these concerns.

Homelessness is a source of trauma for students *and* their parents; something we need to keep in mind when we are working with them.

Collaborating with the district's Title I director to ensure that homeless parents are able to take advantage of parent programming is a best practice.

Homeless Preschoolers

McKinney-Vento covers preschoolers on an equal access basis. This means that a homeless preschooler in the district has the same opportunity to attend and participate in preschool programming as any housed preschooler in the district.

In most cases, homeless preschoolers have not attended public school in the past. As a result they do not have a school of origin and must enroll locally. Since preschool is not mandated in Massachusetts, programming and available seats can vary widely from district to district.

Homeless liaisons are urged to collaborate with the local Head Start director to ensure access to other educational opportunities for this age group. Knowing what is available at other agencies such as your local Y can uncover other activities that promote school readiness.

ESE Advisory 2003-6 Serving Homeless Preschool Children

Unaccompanied youth

An unaccompanied youth is a young person who is out of the physical custody of a parent/legal guardian. Youth in this situation maybe runaways, throwaways, orphaned, abandoned or left behind when a parent is incarcerated or deported.

Our experience is that most unaccompanied youth are couch-surfing; rotating among friend's couches, sometimes even attempting to return home briefly.

Unaccompanied youth are often hidden and many times intentionally so. They have many concerns ranging from protecting themselves, their siblings, their parents, and the adults that are housing them. They fear being arrested for being out of their home and/or for the “survival skills” they may have resorted to.

None the less, many try to remain in school and see it as their one safe harbor. Connecting with an adult at school that serves as a mentor or advocate can make all the difference.

ESE Advisory 2004-8 Unaccompanied Youth

Supporting Homeless Students

The needs and situations of each homeless family, child and youth are unique. Over the years, schools in Massachusetts have worked hard to support these students and every June there are reports of students graduating and moving on to college and careers despite having gone to school homeless. This is due the hard work of our homeless education liaisons!

We hope this tutorial has been helpful in highlighting some of the best practices for supporting homeless students.

Between *Going to School Homeless* and *Supporting Homeless Students* you have covered a lot of information. Consider taking a look at *Homeless Education in Review* as a quick way to be sure you have the key points!

As always your questions and concerns are welcome at the ESE Office for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth.

Office for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth

The webpage includes:

- Updates on Homeless Education
- Tutorials on Homeless Education
- ESE Homeless Education Advisories
- Links to resources

ESE staff provide

- Training and technical assistance on implementation of the law,
- Guidance on specific cases,
- Facilitation of the Dispute Resolution Process, and
- Compliance monitoring.

We also work with other state agencies and community service providers to meet the needs of homeless children and youth.

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