

Unlocking Potential!

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What Families and Shelters Need to Know About Homelessness and Special Education

Children and youth experiencing homelessness are at increased risk for educational challenges. They may experience developmental or academic delays due to stressful living conditions, changes in diet, and absences from school due to frequent moves. Not all students who are homeless have academic weaknesses or special education needs. While these children may do quite well in school, exhibit wonderful resilience, and even be gifted,¹ educational concerns have been found to occur more frequently among students who are homeless than their housed peers. For instance, one study² noted that when compared to housed students, children and youth experiencing homelessness:

- are absent more frequently,
- are identified as having developmental delays four times as frequently,
- are identified as having learning disabilities twice as frequently, and
- are retained in a grade twice as often.

Special education is a complex process. When homelessness occurs, additional challenges can arise. Families and service providers who know what to expect and where to turn for support will find meeting family and student needs more manageable.

The purpose of this information brief is to provide families experiencing homelessness and service providers who work with these families an overview of the special education process. This brief contains:

- a table outlining the steps in the special education eligibility process and what families and service providers can do to make the process easier, and
- resources to assist families or youth when special education services are being pursued, along with definitions of words commonly used by educators and local homeless education liaisons.³

McKinney-Vento Homeless Education Assistance Act

The McKinney-Vento Act ensures that children and youth experiencing homelessness have the right to a free, appropriate public education. Because of potential educational challenges that children and youth without homes may face, this federal legislation provides specialized support. The McKinney-Vento Act includes three key goals to ensure that every student experiencing homelessness receives a free, appropriate public education.



¹ Taylor, T. D., & Brown, M. C. (1996). *Young children and their families who are homeless: A university affiliated program's response*. Washington, DC: The Georgetown University Child Development Center and Center for Child Health and Mental Health Policy. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED406500)

² Better Homes Fund. (1999). *America's homeless children: New outcasts*. Newton Centre, Author.

³ Words in *italics* in the text and additional terms that may arise when working with special education personnel are defined in the glossary.



- **Access.** Students may choose to remain in their *school of origin* (the last school attended before becoming homeless) or enroll at the school in the residency area where they are currently lodging. If frequent moves have delayed identification of appropriate services, requests can be made to speed up the eligibility process and increase the likelihood that children and youth will have the support they need to be successful in school.
- **Attendance.** The challenges of homelessness may interfere with regular school attendance. Children and youth experiencing homelessness should be able to attend and participate in school. More frequent illnesses, residential moves, and other family crises may hinder students' ability to get to school regularly. Thus, a variety of school and community agencies may need to collaborate to effectively ensure that students facing homelessness are in class on a regular basis.
- **Success.** Not only must schools work to ensure that children and youth experiencing homelessness have access to school and are attending regularly, but also the students are expected to meet with academic success. Students should be supported based on their individual needs. Services may include, but are not limited to, tutoring, transportation, school supplies, special education, gifted education, Title I, and nutrition programs. One measure of success is participation and performance on local and state assessments. Therefore, students experiencing homelessness should be included in all such testing, such as the *Virginia Standards of Learning Tests* unless an IEP team, including parents, decides that alternative assessments should be taken.

How can school divisions increase the likelihood that they are reaching children and youth who are homeless and providing the needed support? The McKinney-Vento Act requires all school divisions to designate a *local homeless education liaison*. The liaison is a person who can help when difficulties arise with school enrollment or access to services. The Project HOPE – Vir-

ginia website provides contact information for all local liaisons and describes the responsibilities for liaisons found in the McKinney-Vento Act. In addition to local homeless education liaisons, shelter staff and other homeless service providers can link families in homeless situations and schools when a disability is suspected or special education services must begin in a new setting. Shelter workers should be aware of developmental milestones and who to contact in the school division when special education questions arise.

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)

There are six key principles that form the foundation for the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act:⁴

- ***Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE).*** Schools must provide the special services a student with disabilities needs to meet with success in school and can not charge students or their families for these services.
- ***Least Restrictive Environment (LRE).*** Students with disabilities should receive their instruction in the educational setting that encourages the maximum amount of time to participate in classes with peers without disabilities. This decision should be made jointly by school personnel and the family and should be designed to support access to the general education curriculum.
- ***Zero reject.*** All children and youth with disabilities, regardless of the severity of the disability, have the right to receive educational services (FAPE).
- ***Nondiscriminatory evaluation.*** When evaluating students to determine if a disability exists and if special education services are needed, school personnel must be careful to use evaluation tools that are in the student's native language and minimize bias based on differences in culture. This is critical to avoid over-identification and mislabeling of certain subgroups for special education.

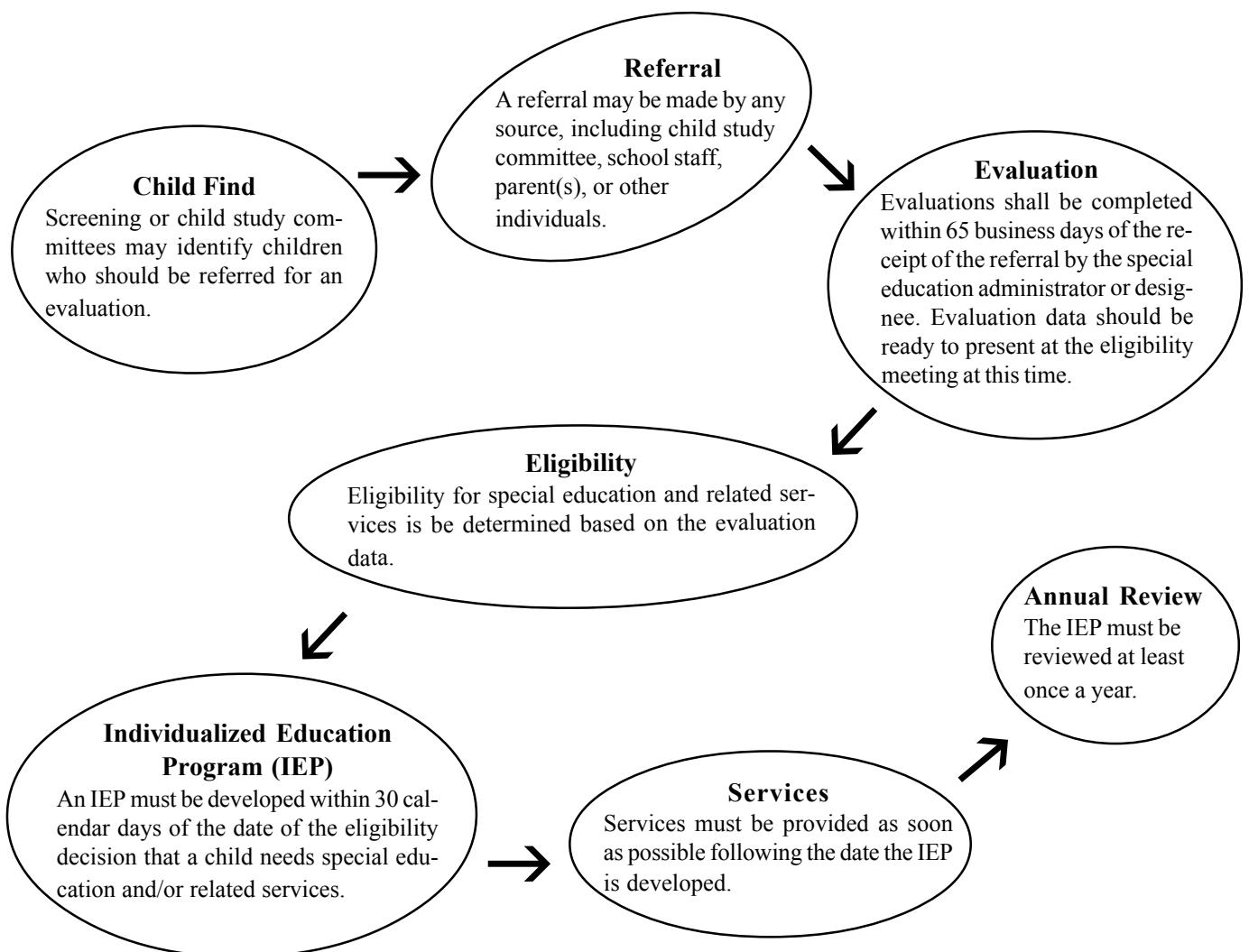
⁴ Turnbull, R., Turnbull, A, Shank, M, Smith, S. J. (2004). *Exceptional lives: Special education in today's schools*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson/Merrill Prentice-Hall. pp. 19-32.



- **Procedural due process.** IDEA contains a variety of safeguards and processes that must be followed when families and schools make decisions about the education of students with disabilities. Families should receive information about their rights throughout the special education process. Resources noted later in this brief can assist families and educators in resolving differences and advocating for children.
- **Parent-student participation.** Families have a wealth of knowledge about their children, and older students need to learn self-advocacy skills to shape a future that addresses their hopes and dreams. IDEA requires that families and students with disabilities work with educators in developing appropriate education programs.

The table on the following pages contains additional detail and suggestions for families and support staff that may make the process easier to understand and provide the family and child with assistance.

This flowchart outlines the basic steps for receiving special education services when a disability is suspected and a student is referred for special education.



Adapted from: Virginia Department of Education. (2001). *A Parent's Guide to Special Education*. Richmond, VA. Author

Special Education Component & Virginia Timelines	Brief Description	Tips for Families and Service Providers Working With Families
Pre-referral General Education Responsibility <i>Any time</i>	The observations, meetings, and teaching strategies used when a student has difficulties in the classroom.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Request a meeting with your child’s teacher and give insight regarding the way your child learns. • Let the school know if your child has experienced learning difficulties in the past and what interventions were attempted. • Ask for copies of your child’s records and work samples. Keep them in a place that is easy to access. • Ask your local homeless education liaison or shelter child services coordinator who to contact if you have concerns about your child.
Referral General Education Responsibility <i>Any time</i>	A referral for a Child Study Team (CST) can be written or verbal. It occurs when there are sufficient concerns about a child’s development or performance. A referral meeting can be initiated by the family, school, or an agency working with the family.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discuss your concerns about your child’s academic performance with the teacher. • Ask your local homeless education liaison for the school or child services coordinator at the shelter who you need to contact if you have concerns about your child’s education. • If your child has not begun school, contact the school division to request a preschool referral if you notice your child is not doing the same things as other children his/her age.
Child Study Team (CST) Special Education Process Begins <i>Meeting must be held within 10 business days of receiving the referral</i>	The CST reviews information about a referred child to identify strategies that may improve performance. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If a disability is suspected, the CST may refer your child for an evaluation for special education and related services. This starts the Special Education process • The CST should include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – the person who referred the child (except where confidentiality would be compromised); – the principal or designee; – at least one teacher; and – at least one specialist. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make notes about how your child approaches homework and the type of help they request. You are the expert on your child and their behavior outside of the school setting. • Review any paperwork you may have received from previous teachers or schools to see if it would be helpful to share with the team. • Share with the team any accidents or medical conditions in your child’s history. • Ask about resources that can help your child build academic skills. • Ask for a copy of the meeting minutes.
Evaluation <i>The CST must refer for evaluation within 5 business days after deciding to evaluate</i>	The school assesses your child to determine if a disability exists and to what extent special education or related services may be needed. The evaluation cannot proceed without written parent permission. The evaluation may include the following assessments: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Psychological • Educational • Medical • Social • Speech and Language • Assessment of muscle movement • Assessment of self-help skills 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ask questions about unclear information. • Request a copy of your procedural safeguards which informs you of your rights as a parent or guardian. • Provide any previous evaluation information you have. • Use the health department for medical records if you do not have a family doctor. • If you plan to move before the evaluation is complete, ask if the process can be completed more quickly or that the information already collected be forwarded to the new school. Provide the team with contact information for the new school as soon as possible.

Special Education Component & Virginia Timelines	Brief Description	Tips for Families and Service Providers Working With Families
<p>Eligibility</p> <p>An eligibility meeting must occur within 65 business days after the special education administrator receives the CST referral to evaluate</p>	<p>The <i>Individualized Education Program (IEP)</i> team, often called the Eligibility Committee at this point in the process, consists of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the parent, • general education teacher, • special education administrator, and • school personnel who conducted the assessments. <p>The eligibility team determines if a child is eligible for special education. To do so, the team must demonstrate that there is a disability and it affects educational performance.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ask if you can speak with the evaluators prior to the meeting or receive a copy of the reports to review ahead of time. Copies of reports should be available at least 2 business days before your meeting. • Ask questions if assessment findings do not make sense. • Collect and keep copies of all reports and a copy of the eligibility minutes. • Ask for recommendations from the team on your child’s learning style and strategies that can be used in the classroom and the home setting.
<p>IEP Meeting</p> <p>Review at least annually</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Using evaluation data and IEP team members’ expertise and knowledge of the student, an Individualized Education Program is developed describing what special education services are needed to help the student reach identified goals. • The IEP team will meet to review and revise the educational plan at least once a year. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Think about your child’s educational needs and discuss them at the meeting. • Ask about the progress that your child has made and talk to teachers about skills that you see demonstrated outside school. • Bring any information you may find useful to your child’s IEP team. • Schedule an alternate meeting date if you cannot attend the original meeting time.
<p>Reevaluation</p> <p>At least every 3 years</p>	<p>A child with identified special needs must be reevaluated at least every three years to determine if services are still needed or to assess current educational needs. This process is also called a triennial evaluation.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • You will be asked for written permission before this process can take place. • The reevaluation process can occur earlier than three years if there are concerns about educational needs. • Collect copies of all reports and maintain them in your personal records.
<p>Resolving Disagreements</p> <p>As needed</p>	<p>When the family and school personnel disagree at any point in the special education process, there are three procedures families may use:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • mediation (a voluntary process), • due process hearing (a formal process with a hearing officer), and • complaint (a signed letter to the Virginia Department of Education that describes a potential violation of special education law). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Voice your questions and concerns as soon as possible. Working with school staff early in the process can prevent some issues from reaching this step. • Consider the pros and cons of each option and select the one that will be most helpful in serving your child. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Consult <i>A Parent’s Guide to Special Education</i> for additional details about these methods of resolving disagreements. – Contact your Parent Resource Center for support and information. • Contact Dispute Resolution and Administrative Services at the Virginia Department of Education for additional guidance, as needed.



Terms You May Hear

School personnel may use the following terms when discussing special education services and homelessness.

Special Education Terms

Assistive Technology “means any item, piece of equipment, or product system, whether acquired commercially off the shelf, modified, or customized, that is used to increase, maintain, or improve the functional capabilities of a child with a disability.”⁵ This includes both “low tech” items (such as enlarged photocopies of textbook pages or a pencil grip) and “high tech” options (such as using a tape recorder or specialized computer equipment).

Adaptive Behaviors are the skills children develop to take care of personal needs such as dressing, eating, and brushing their teeth.

Child Find is a requirement for all school divisions to reach out to the community and identify students with disabilities in order to provide services. Children who are homeless should be included in this outreach effort.

Developmental Delay refers to a disability affecting a child, ages two through eight, who is experiencing delays when compared with peers, on appropriate measures in one or more of the following areas: physical, cognitive, communication, social or emotional, or adaptive development.

Early Intervention or EI (also referred to as Part C of IDEA) is the term used to describe a special education program to address the needs of children with disabilities ages birth through two years.

Early Childhood Special Education or ECSE (also referred to as Section 619) is the special education program to address the needs of children with disabilities ages three through five who have not begun kindergarten.

Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP) addresses the special education needs of a child receiving early intervention services under Part C of IDEA. Infants and toddlers will have an

Special Education Terms, continued

IFSP rather than an IEP. This includes children from birth to two years, inclusive.

Motor Skills are skills such as fine motor skills (for example, grasping and gripping an object) and gross motor skills (for example, jumping, skipping, and walking) that may be assessed during the referral process.

Parent Resource Centers are offices staffed by a special education teacher and a parent of a student with a disability found in many school divisions in Virginia. These offices provide workshops to help families understand special education and provide a variety of resources for parents.

Homeless Education Terms

Best Interest refers to making a decision consistent with the McKinney-Vento Act about where students should attend school when they are homeless. Parents or guardians (or youth if unaccompanied) should work with school personnel to make this determination.

Doubled Up refers to a living situation where an individual or a family is sharing the housing of another family due to a loss of housing or a lack of funds to secure their own home. This can be considered a homeless situation under the McKinney-Vento Act.

Local Homeless Education Liaison is the person designated by the local school division to ensure local compliance with the McKinney-Vento Act, including providing outreach to families and students experiencing homelessness.

Project HOPE-Virginia is the name given to the Virginia Department of Education’s *McKinney-Vento* program which provides technical assistance and resources. See the contact information on the back page of this brief.

⁵ Virginia Department of Education. (2001). *A Parent’s Guide to Special Education*. Richmond, VA: Author.



Homeless Education Terms, continued

School of Origin refers to the last school a student attended before becoming homeless or the last school in which the student was enrolled. If in the student's best interest, the McKinney-Vento Act states that a student may stay in the school of origin even if they move outside of the attendance zone and school division. See other Project HOPE resources for additional information about school of origin and attendance options for students while homeless.

Unaccompanied Youth is a young person who is not in the physical custody of parents or a guardian may be considered homeless under the McKinney-Vento Act. This includes runaways, students denied housing by their families, and school-aged women who are pregnant without housing options.

Other Educational Terms

504 Plan documents what specific accommodations must be provided for students who have a disability but do not require special education services to be successful in school. By providing accommodations in the general education classroom, these students will be able to demonstrate academic skills.

Virginia Standards of Learning Tests are assessments developed for Virginia that align with the Virginia Standards of Learning which guide the curriculum in each grade. Student performance on these assessments impacts promotion and high school graduation for individual students, as well as providing an indicator of school and school divisions' performance in meeting the academic needs of students.

Resources

Print, Computer, and Video

- *Discover IDEA CD* (2002). Available from The Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) for \$7.95, contact them toll-free at 888-232-7332.
- *IDEA Requirements for Preschoolers with Disabilities*. (2000). Available from The Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) on the web in html and pdf formats at www.ideapractices.org
- *Reflections on Early Childhood*. (2001). Available from NECTAS for \$15.00 (11 minute video where three adults with disabilities reflect on their early childhood experiences).
- *A Parent's Guide to Special Education*. (2001). Virginia Department of Education. This guide provides additional information about the special education process, including all timelines for steps in the special education process. Free of charge. Available from: <http://www.pen.k12.va.us/VDOE/sped/parents.shtml> or call 800-292-3820

Websites

- Council for Exceptional Children www.cec.org or call 877-232-4332 or 866-915-5000 (TTY)
- Families/Advocate Partnership for Education www.fape.org or call (888) 248-0822 (952) 838-9000 (TTY)
- IDEA www.ideapractices.org or call CEC at the number listed above.
- Infant & Toddler Connection of Virginia www.infantva.org or call 800-234-1448 or 804-771-5877 (TTY)
- U.S. Department of Education – information for parents and families www.ed.gov/index.jsp
- Useful links sponsored by the Virginia Board for People with Disabilities www.vaboard.org/usefullinks.htm

Virginia Resources

Parent Educational Advocacy Training Center (PEATC)

<http://www.peatc.org>

Northern VA **703-923-0010** (Voice/TTY)
Toll free for VA parents **800-869-6782**
Richmond, VA **804-819-1999** (Voice/TTY)
Toll free for VA parents **866-819-7328**
Spanish **703-569-6200**

Special education information and support for families of children with disabilities.

Project HOPE – Virginia

See contact information below

The office of the state coordinator for the education of homeless children and youth, Project HOPE-Virginia is part of the Virginia Department of Education and administered through The College of William and Mary. Other information briefs developed by Project HOPE-Virginia are available on our website, or they can be ordered through our office. Readers may wish to review our brief on homelessness and special education for families and homeless service providers. There is no charge for these resources.

Virginia Department of Education

<http://www.pen.k12.va.us/VDOE/sped/parents.shtml>
800-292-3820

Resources for families of students in Virginia schools can be found at this website, including information about enrollment, Standards of Learning, and contact information for state and local school division staff.

Virginia Interagency Action Council for the Homeless (VIACH)

<http://www.viach.state.va.us/index.html>

804-371-7175

Organization of federal and state agencies, local continuums of care, and non-profits who serve individuals experiencing homelessness.

DEFINITION OF HOMELESS

Anyone who, *due to a lack of housing*, lives:

- In emergency or transitional shelters;
- In motels, hotels, trailer parks, campgrounds, abandoned in hospitals, awaiting foster care placement;
- In cars, parks, public places, bus or train stations, abandoned buildings;
- Doubled up with relatives or friends;
- In these conditions and is a migratory child or youth.

*To determine homelessness, consider the **permanence** and **adequacy** of the living situation.

Project HOPE

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This and other information briefs are available on the Project HOPE-Virginia website:

<http://www.wm.edu/hope>

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