

# Enrolling Students Experiencing Homelessness: First Step to the Schoolhouse Door

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Project HOPE-Virginia

In collaboration with the Virginia Department of Education

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## **Pivotal Role: School Enrollment Personnel**

School personnel who enroll students play a pivotal role in ensuring that children and youth experiencing homelessness have access to an education and that the school is meeting the requirements of federal legislation.

When students experience homelessness, enrollment can be a frustrating process. Enrollment personnel can make this process less stressful by becoming familiar with the legal rights of children and youth experiencing homelessness. A sensitive system of identification and referral will make a world of difference to these students and their families.

This information brief provides enrollment staff with an overview of the legislation, suggested procedures aligned with the McKinney-Vento Act for enrolling such students, and references to additional resources that may be useful.

## **The McKinney-Vento Act**

The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, Title X, Part C of the No Child Left Behind Act, requires that schools provide students experiencing homelessness with school access and support their academic success.

1. When families or youth are homeless, they often experience many moves. Therefore, the McKinney-Vento Act allows students to remain in one school to increase academic stability, even if this is no longer the school of residency.

2. If a move to a new school is necessary, the receiving school must enroll the students immediately, even when normally required documents, such as birth certificates, immunization records, or proof of residency are not available.
3. To assist school personnel in the implementation of the McKinney-Vento Act, all school divisions have a local homeless education liaison (liaison). When questions arise or further resources are needed, the liaison should be contacted. A listing of all local homeless education liaisons in Virginia can be found at the Project HOPE-Virginia web site.

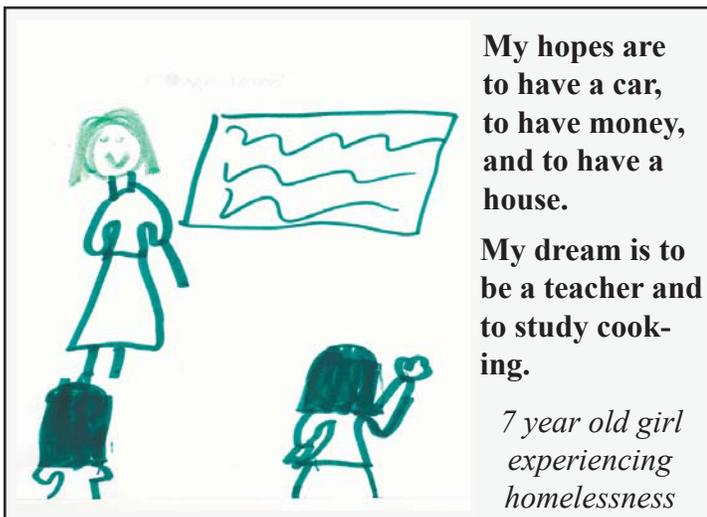
Enrollment personnel are among the first staff who meet families and are key to ensuring that children who are homeless are identified and that the families are aware of their educational rights under the McKinney-Vento Act.

## **Identification**

Since people experiencing homelessness may be reluctant to inform the schools of their living situation, how can enrollment personnel determine who should be identified? The legal definition, common signs of homelessness, and several carefully phrased questions are valuable tools. In addition, the liaison and the staff at Project HOPE-Virginia can be of

## **Possible Signs of Homelessness**

- History of attending many schools
- Erratic attendance and tardiness
- Consistent lack of preparation for class
- Sleeping in class
- Hostility and anger or extremes in behavior (e.g., shyness, withdrawal, nervousness, depression)
- Poor hygiene and grooming
- Inadequate or inappropriate clothing for the weather
- Hunger and hoarding food
- Multiple families at the same address or the address of a low income hotel in the area
- Resistance to parting with personal possessions (e.g., not wanting to leave a favorite toy unattended or put a coat in a locker)



assistance when questions arise.

The McKinney-Vento Act (Section 725) defines “homeless children and youth” (school age and younger) as children and youth who *lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence*, including children and youth who are:

- Sharing the housing of other persons due to loss of housing, economic hardship, or a similar reason;
- Living in motels, hotels, trailer parks, camping grounds, cars, public spaces, abandoned buildings, substandard housing, bus or train stations, or similar settings *due to the lack of alternative adequate accommodations*;
- Living in emergency or transitional shelters;
- Abandoned in hospitals;
- Awaiting foster care placement;
- Migratory children who qualify as homeless because they are living in circumstances described above; or
- Unaccompanied youth, including youth not in the physical custody of a parent or guardian, such as runaways and youth denied housing by their families.

### **Identification Tips**

Some possible signs of homelessness are listed in the box on page 1. Other indicators that may be evident through the registration process include:

- Lack of enrollment documents,
- Reluctance to share information about residency and comments, such as:
  - ◊ “We’ve been moving around a lot.”
  - ◊ “I don’t remember the name of the last school.”
  - ◊ “I just moved in with my sister (uncle/friend).”
  - ◊ “We’re going through a rough time right now.”

While these signs could reflect difficulties other than homelessness, they provide a basis for further exploration and discussion. Remember, these warning signs are indicators that point to the need for further investigation of a family’s living situation. Enrollment personnel should have ready a list of questions that may be used when these initial indicators are found. The following tips and questions have been used by enrollment staff to help families share needed information in a respectful manner.

- When staff recognizes that a family may be experiencing homelessness, it is important that such a discussion is conducted in a private space to maintain confidentiality.
- Initial questions might include:
  - ◊ “Can you tell me more about your recent moves?”
  - ◊ “How long did you live at your last address?”
  - ◊ “What brought you to our community?”
- Using the word homeless may be uncomfortable for the enrolling family. The educational definition is broad and includes situations the family may not initially consider as homeless.
  - ◊ Terms such as “being in transition” or “temporarily

housed” may be used early in the discussion.

- ◊ Introduce homelessness to the discussion with a statement such as, “The description of your current living arrangement may meet the definition of homelessness we use in schools. If it does, there are some additional ways we can help your child.”
- ◊ Share a copy of the Project HOPE-Virginia parent brochure and review the educational rights available under the McKinney-Vento Act.
- ◊ If a private space is not readily available, place a parent brochure with the enrollment papers and allow the parent to review it, saying, “You might want to look this over and let me know if you have any questions or see other ways I can be of assistance.”
- ◊ Some school divisions have added residency questions to their enrollment forms to allow families and youth to identify themselves.

Once a student is identified as being homeless, the student’s record must be flagged in the student record collection system. Consult your liaison for the procedure being used in your school division.

### **Immediate Enrollment**

Under the McKinney-Vento Act, students experiencing homelessness must be enrolled in schools immediately, even if they are missing documentation typically required for enrollment. Enrollment is defined as “attending classes and participating fully in school activities” (Section 725). The Code of Virginia was amended in 2004 to align with the requirements of the McKinney-Vento Act. Local policies cannot present additional barriers to immediate enrollment. Contact your liaison if you have a question regarding local procedures for enrollment.

When a student is enrolled without documentation that is typically required, inform the liaison, who can assist in collecting needed information after enrollment has occurred. In addition, the McKinney-Vento Act requires the receiving school to contact the sending school immediately to obtain any missing school records. Further, care should be taken when confirming residency. If the parent does not give permission to contact a leasing agency or rental office, consider alternative means to check the family’s address, such as a home visit. Finally, if an unaccompanied youth is enrolling, the youth should be referred to the liaison, who must assist the youth in the enrollment process.

### **Coordinating Services**

When children and youth are experiencing homelessness, ensuring that they receive all needed support services in a timely manner will increase the likelihood of success in school. Consult your liaison to learn more about local procedures to access:

- Transportation
- Title I



**My hope is to have a car so I can travel around to see different things. My dream is of having a pet. I would like a frog.**

*6 year old boy experiencing homelessness*

- Free and reduced-priced meals
- Special education or gifted programs
- Division-wide training and communication about families in unstable living arrangements
- Interagency and cross-division collaboration to aid in identifying families in need and locating support services for them

### **School of Origin**

The McKinney-Vento Act requires that students have the right to remain in the school of origin when feasible and in the student's best interest. School of origin is an option even when a residential move places the student in a new school division. Remaining in a familiar school is an important factor in student achievement and can provide one element of stability when a child's life outside of school is full of uncertainty and change.

Enrollment staff who are involved with withdrawals play a dual role. When families withdraw their children from school, this can be an opportunity to determine whether a loss of housing is a cause of the move and requested withdrawal. Again, privacy and open-ended questions are needed to determine if homelessness is a factor. Explaining the school of origin option and other educational rights under McKinney-Vento at this point in the process can prevent unnecessary moves or enrollment delays. The McKinney-Vento Act has specific steps that must be followed for school of origin determinations, including what to do when the family and school do not agree about the placement. The liaison will know the procedures to follow and who should be notified if the family is interested in maintaining their children in the school of origin.

Despite efforts to ensure families are informed of the

school of origin option and other educational rights, withdrawals and transfers may occur. Families and youth may not have informed the previous school of their reasons for withdrawing or may not have known that remaining in the school of origin was an option that could be considered. If the transfer occurs within the school division, follow your local procedures for notifying appropriate staff. If the student is transferring from another school division, the school of origin option still exists. When describing this option to families, it is important to explain the need to have a discussion with the original school division before a decision can be made. The family may be given the contact information for the liaison in the sending school division and for the potential receiving division. In addition, the principal at the previous school may be contacted. If movement across school divisions occurs frequently, the liaisons may choose to collaborate and formalize the notification steps that will be taken.

### **Academic Success**

Enrollment staff can ease the stressors associated with the high mobility experienced by families and youth in homeless situations. Familiarity with policies and procedures for enrolling these children and youth is crucial to their academic access and success. The tip sheet on the next page suggests ten ways to support children and youth experiencing homelessness and their families through the enrollment process. Remember, you CAN make a difference!

**More Project HOPE-Virginia information briefs are available on our web site (see page 4). Look for these and other titles:**

- *Questions and Answers on Homeless Education*
- *What Educators Can Do*
- *Unlocking Potential! What Educators Need to Know About Homelessness and Special Education*



### **Parent Packs**, developed by the

National Center for Homeless Education (NCHE) may assist families in maintaining important school documents. This sturdy, laminated folder provides parents a place to keep

important records and documents related to their children's education. The folder is printed with information on the rights of children and youth experiencing homelessness and helpful tips about enrollment and disenrollment. These are available free of charge in Spanish and English from the NCHE web site at <http://www.serve.org/nche>. Or you can make your own with a 9" x 11" (laminated, if possible) mailing envelope. Insert photocopies of the student's records (scholastic, immunization, social security number, etc.).

## 10 Things Enrollment Personnel Can Do for Students Experiencing Homelessness

1. Learn to identify the signs of homelessness.
2. Assure families that children can enroll if you think that they are experiencing homelessness. (This is mandated by the McKinney-Vento Homeless Education Act, P.L. 107-110).
  - Enroll the child immediately (even without records). Ask for the name and city of the last school attended; then call that school and ask to have the records sent.
  - Flag the student in the record system as homeless. Include the student in the free and reduced-price meal program.
  - Arrange for the child to take a placement test if records are not available.
3. Take the family to a private place to fill out enrollment forms.
4. Offer to assist with filling out the enrollment forms. Hesitation may indicate an inability to read.
5. Arrange for the student to have lunch that day.
6. Have copies of the school/class supply lists, calendars of events, and other helpful information.
7. Provide a welcome pack with grade-level supplies. Some schools maintain supply closets with clothing, school supplies, and personal items.
8. Privately and confidentially alert the child's teacher, school counselor, and other personnel of the student's living situation, as indicated by school division policy.
9. When the family requests a withdrawal, offer to refer them to the appropriate personnel to assist in determining if it is feasible to maintain enrollment in the current school. If the family does change schools, ease that transition by:
  - Preparing a Parent Pack (see page 3),
  - Sharing records with the new school immediately to expedite appropriate placement, and
  - Giving the family contact information for the liaison of the next school division, if known.
10. Be sensitive, patient, calm, and reassuring. YOU can make a difference!

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

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

Original artwork and quotations by students experiencing homelessness are provided courtesy of Fairfax County Public Schools Homeless Education Program.

### 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 the above conditions and is a migratory child or youth.

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

Project HOPE-Virginia is Virginia's Program for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth. The College of William and Mary administers the program for the Virginia Department of Education. Funding is authorized under the McKinney-Vento Homeless Education Act, Title X, Part C of the *No Child Left Behind Act* (P.L. 107-110). The purpose of Project HOPE is to ensure the enrollment, attendance, and success of homeless children and youth in school.