

RESOURCE DOCUMENT FOR BEST PRACTICES FOR SUPPORTS AND SERVICES TO STUDENTS WHO EXPERIENCE HOMELESSNESS



June 2024

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INTRODUCTION

In the United States, homelessness is a critical social issue that negatively impacts students' engagement in school and, consequently, academic achievement.¹ Homelessness directly affects the well-being of students, as this phenomenon itself is traumatic.² This traumatic experience escalates the likelihood of cumulative risk.³ Researched consequences of homelessness on children's physical health include lack of prenatal care and immunization delays, increased rates of respiratory infections, skin problems, nutritional deficiencies, and chronic illness.⁴ Tolls on children's mental health, which can be related to maltreatment, loneliness, depression, anxiety, and behavioral problems, also have been documented.⁵ In particular, young people experiencing homelessness have higher rates of posttraumatic stress disorder than their peers in the general population.⁶ Additionally, mortality rates for these youth can be up to 40 times that of the general population, for which suicide and drug overdose have been identified as the leading causes of death.⁷ The acute adversities associated with homelessness, which can vary from disruption of routines, loss of housing or possessions, or substance abuse to domestic violence and sex trafficking, collectively threaten the ability of students experiencing homelessness to function both in school and at home.⁸

Homelessness can negatively interfere with student academic engagement, in terms of attendance, discipline, and support services.⁹ Generally, students experiencing homelessness have increased rates of grade retention, lower rates of literacy and math achievement, and poor to average grades.¹⁰ Youth experiencing homelessness are also more likely to be suspended, expelled, or drop out of school.¹¹

In addition to implementing McKinney-Vento mandates related to removal of barriers, transportation, stability, and best interest, schools are in unique positions to offer students experiencing homelessness resources and social connections.¹²

¹ Buckner (2008); Miller (2011); Pavlakis et al. (2017)

² Brumley et al. (2015); Coates & McKenzie-Mohr (2010); Hatchimonji et al. (2021)

³ Cutuli (2018); Masten et al. (2015)

⁴ David et al. (2012); Edidin et al. (2012); Masten (1992); Murphy & Tobin (2011); Rafferty & Shinn (1991); Wynne et al. (2013)

⁵ Coates & McKenzie-Mohr (2010); Fantuzzo & Perlman (2007); Kidd & Shahar (2008); Rafferty & Shinn (1991); Swick & Williams (2010)

⁶ Bender et al. (2010)

⁷ Kidd & Shahar (2008)

⁸ Cutuli (2018); Flatley et al. (2022); Murphy & Tobin (2011)

⁹ Miller (2011); Murphy & Tobin (2011); Stone & Uretsky (2016)

¹⁰ Cutuli et al. (2013); Fantuzzo et al. (2012); Murphy & Tobin (2011)

¹¹ Edwards (2020); Erb-Downward & Blakeslee (2021); Murphy & Tobin (2011)

¹² Masten et al., (1997)

BACKGROUND

The Education for Homeless Children and Youth (EHCY) program is Title IX, Part A of the *Every Student Succeeds Act* (ESSA). A video overview of the EHCY program in Virginia can be found [here](#). ESSA defines homelessness as “lacking a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence.” Students who meet this definition include those:

- living with family or friends due to a loss of housing, economic hardship, or similar reason (often violence in the home);
- living in a hotel/motel, trailer park, or campground due to the lack of alternative adequate accommodations;
- living in shelters or transitional housing; and
- living in unsheltered settings such as on the street, in a car, or in a park.

The EHCY program requires a state office of the coordinator for the education of children and youth experiencing homelessness. The state coordinator’s responsibilities include training and technical assistance for local school divisions, collaboration with other offices at the state department of education and other agencies that serve children, youth, and families experiencing homelessness. Since 1995, the William & Mary School of Education has administered the EHCY program for the Virginia Department of Education (VDOE). The program is called Project HOPE-Virginia. Information about HOPE staff, trainings available, and resources for school divisions, families, and the community at large can be found on the [HOPE website](#).

In addition to the state coordinator, every school division is required to appoint a local McKinney-Vento liaison. The liaison ensures that the school division is identifying students experiencing homelessness, immediately enrolling these students even when they lack normally required documentation, and maintaining enrollment in the school of origin if it is in the student’s best interest, which includes providing transportation when a student moves out of the attendance zone. In addition, the liaison must ensure there are no barriers that prevent a student experiencing homelessness from accessing other school programs for which the student may be eligible and make referrals to community-based services the student and family may need. All school divisions are required to have a local policy that documents adherence with McKinney-Vento legislation. Many school divisions use the Virginia School Board Association’s policy, JECA, to meet this requirement. [Find your local McKinney-Vento liaison](#).

LEGISLATION

The 2024 General Assembly passed House Bill 168 which required the Department of Education to develop and make available to each school board a resource document containing guidance and best practices for providing the necessary supports and services to homeless students, including guidance and best practices relating to:

- I. Decisions regarding whether and when such a student should remain enrolled in a school in a previous school division of residence;
- II. Wrap-around supports and services for such students that include the parents when they are available and specific wrap-around supports and services for such students who may have experienced additional trauma prior to becoming homeless; and

- III. Any other means by which such students can be best served and protected, particularly those homeless children and youths who are at risk of becoming victims of human trafficking.

Section 1: Decisions regarding whether and when such a student should remain enrolled in a school in a previous school division of residence.

Students experiencing homelessness face significant housing instability and residential mobility. To buffer the impact of this instability, these students have the right to remain in the school of origin which “*means the school that a child or youth attended when housed or the school in which the child or youth was last enrolled, including a preschool*” [Section 722(g)(3)(I)(I)]¹³. Remaining in the school of origin should be based on what is in the student’s best interest. There is a presumption that remaining in the school of origin IS in the student’s best interest “*except when doing so is contrary to the request of the child's or youth's parent or guardian, or (in the case of an unaccompanied youth) the youth*” [Section 722(g)(3)(B)(i)]¹³.

Determining best interest should be based on student-centered factors including “*factors related to the impact of mobility on achievement, education, health, and safety of homeless children and youth, giving priority to the request of the child’s or youth’s parent or guardian or (in the case of an unaccompanied youth) the youth.*” When the parent or guardian or unaccompanied homeless youth disagree with the school division, a written explanation of the school division’s decision must be provided along with the process to appeal the decision.

School board policies address the right to remain in the school of origin. It is the responsibility of the McKinney-Vento liaison to ensure this policy is implemented. Local school board policies address local appeals and the dispute resolution process [§722(g)(3)(B)(iii)]¹³. There is a state level appeal process when local appeals are exhausted, and disagreement continues. Virginia’s dispute resolution process was developed following ESSA and provided to school divisions through Superintendent Memo #215-17. Local dispute resolution processes are included in federal program monitoring of school divisions’ McKinney-Vento programs.

Project HOPE-VA provides training (webinars, regional training, state conference sessions, and technical assistance) to liaisons to implement the process. The HOPE [website](#) includes a link to the Superintendent Memo and the following resources:

- Sample best interest determination form;
- Overview of the dispute resolution process for Virginia Public Schools; and
- Sample written explanation template.

In addition to Virginia-specific resources, the U.S. Department of Education’s technical assistance center’s [website](#) has information regarding **school selection decisions**.

¹³ McKinney Vento, 42 USC CHAPTER 119, SUBCHAPTER VI, Part B: Education for Homeless Children and Youths

Section 2: Wrap-around supports and services for such students that include the parents when they are available and specific wrap-around supports and services for such students who may have experienced additional trauma prior to becoming homeless.

With the exception of American Rescue Plan Homeless Children and Youth (ARP-HCY) funds which expire September 30, 2024, the provision of wrap-around supports by schools to students experiencing homelessness is limited to educational needs of the student and referrals to community services for the family. Many McKinney-Vento liaisons are school social workers or oversee such staff. These staff have expertise in identifying community resources to meet student and family needs.

Ensuring that students experiencing homelessness are connected to all the services they need in school is critical. Rather than separate services, this often means connecting these students to services available for all students in a timely manner.

Resources that support this work can be found at the following sites:

- National Center for Homeless Education:
 - [Providing Wraparound Services Under the American Rescue Plan Homeless Children and Youth Program](#)
 - [Partnering with School Social Workers to Expand Local Homeless Liaison Capacity and Provide Wraparound Services under the American Rescue Plan Homeless Children and Youth Program](#)
 - [The Education Rights of Children and Youth Experiencing Homelessness: What Service Providers Need to Know](#)
- Virginia Department of Education (VDOE), Office of [Behavioral Health & Wellness \(OBHW\)](#):
 - [Attendance Works: Reducing Chronic Absenteeism](#)
 - [College and Career Access and Success Resources](#)
 - [Instructional Strategies for Increasing Protective Factors](#)
 - [OBHW Career and Learning Center](#)
 - [School Counselors Resources](#)
 - [Social Emotional Learning Resources](#)
 - [Virginia Community School Framework](#)
- School House Connection:
 - [Flexing the Flexibility of ARP-HCY Funding Series: Making the Most of Federal Relief Dollars to Help Students Experiencing Homelessness](#)
 - [PK-12 Resources: Tools, Innovative practices, and the Latest Research](#)
 - [School House Connection: Tools and Resources](#)

Section 3: Other means by which homeless students can be best served and protected, particularly those homeless children and youths who are at risk of becoming victims of human trafficking.

Attending school can act as a protective factor when students are at risk of becoming victims of trafficking. When students are connected to school and adults are interacting with them daily, warning signs of potential victimization can be observed. Project HOPE-VA has provided training to McKinney-Vento liaisons through webinars and conference sessions to increase awareness of potential signs of trafficking.

The McKinney-Vento mandate for immediate enrollment, even when there is no birth certificate or proof of custody, is required when students are experiencing homelessness. Immediate enrollment gives students access to school at a time when they are vulnerable and provides them with a safe place. School divisions have local school board policies that include immediate enrollment. To ensure this occurs, all staff are required to receive basic McKinney-Vento training. This includes training staff to identify warning signs to make appropriate referrals. Resources that support this work can be found at the following sites:

- [Trafficking and the Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children \(CSEC\) – National Center for Homeless Education](#)
- National and state resources
 - [Human Trafficking Response in Virginia](#)
 - [National Network for Youth](#) – offers a certificate in human trafficking that focuses on homeless and runaway youth.
 - [Project HOPE-VA website](#)
 - [The Polaris Project](#)
 - National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments: [Human Trafficking Webinar Series: How to Talk with Youth about Human Trafficking & Exploitation](#) and [Unaccompanied Youth and Trafficking Webinar](#)

Recommended Websites of Organizations that Support Students Experiencing Homelessness

[National Center for Homeless Education \(NCHE\)](#)

[National Network for Youth \(NN4Y\)](#)

[Project HOPE-Virginia](#)

[School House Connection \(SHC\)](#)

Conclusion

School boards may wish to review local policy related to students experiencing homelessness and inquire about how they can support the McKinney-Vento liaison to provide appropriate educational services and referrals to students experiencing homelessness in their schools.

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