

As required by the North Carolina Constitution and North Carolina law, the Watauga County Board of Education (the “board”) is committed to providing a free public school education to all children who are legally entitled to enroll in the school system. In accordance with the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act and the North Carolina State Plan for Educating Homeless Children, the board will make reasonable efforts to identify homeless children and youth of school age located within the area served by the school system, encourage their enrollment, and eliminate barriers to their receiving an education that may exist in school system policies or practices. Based on individual need, homeless students will be provided services available to all students, such as preschool, free or reduced price school meals, services for English learners, special education, career and technical education (CTE), academically or intellectually gifted (AIG) services, and before- and after-school care.

The provisions of this policy will supersede any and all conflicting provisions in board policies that address the areas discussed in this policy.

A. DEFINITION OF HOMELESS STUDENTS

Homeless students are children and youth who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence. The term “homeless student” will also be deemed to include the term “unaccompanied youth,” which includes a youth who is not in the physical custody of a parent or guardian. Homeless children and youth include those students who are as follows:

1. sharing the house of other persons due to loss of housing, economic hardship or a similar reason;
2. living in motels, hotels, transient trailer parks, or camping grounds due to the lack of alternative adequate accommodations;
3. living in emergency or transitional shelters;
4. abandoned in hospitals;
5. living in a primary nighttime residence that is a public or private place not designed for or ordinarily used as regular sleeping accommodations for human beings;
6. living in cars, parks, public spaces, abandoned buildings, substandard housing, bus or train stations, or similar settings; or
7. living in a migratory situation that qualifies as homeless because the child lacks a fixed, regular and adequate nighttime residence.

B. ENROLLMENT, ASSIGNMENT, AND TRANSPORTATION OF HOMELESS STUDENTS**1. Enrollment****a. Eligibility**

Notwithstanding the enrollment eligibility requirements established by the board elsewhere in policy, school personnel shall immediately enroll homeless students even if they do not have proof of residency, school and immunization records, birth certificates, or other documents; have missed application or enrollment deadlines during a period of homelessness; have outstanding fees; or are not accompanied by an adult. The homeless liaison shall assist the students and parents or guardians in securing appropriate records or otherwise meeting enrollment requirements.

b. Records

Homeless students transferring into the school system may provide cumulative and other records directly to school system personnel. The superintendent or designee shall not require that such records be forwarded from another school system before the student may enroll. However, school personnel shall immediately request the official records from the previous school.

Information regarding a child or youth's homeless situation must be treated as a student record and protected accordingly. See policy 4700, Student Records.

2. Assignment

A homeless student (or the student's parent or guardian) may request to attend (1) his or her school of origin or (2) any public school that other students living in the same attendance area are eligible to attend. The school of origin is defined as the school the student attended before losing permanent housing or the school in which the student was last enrolled, including a preschool. When a student completes the final grade level served by the school of origin, the school of origin includes the designated receiving school at the next grade level for all feeder schools. Unless, not in the student's best interest, a homeless student who continues attending the school of origin will remain enrolled in the school of origin for the entire time the student is homeless and until the end of any academic year in which the student moves into permanent housing.

The superintendent shall designate the Director of Student Assignment or other appropriate personnel to decide, in consultation with the homeless liaison, which school a homeless student will attend. The decision must be based upon consideration of student-centered factors related to the student's best interest, including factors concerning the impact of mobility on achievement, education, health, and safety of homeless students, giving priority to the request of the student's parent or guardian or the unaccompanied youth. The superintendent's designee must presume that keeping the student in the school of origin is in the student's best interest unless contradicted by the student's parent or guardian or the unaccompanied youth.

If the superintendent's designee determines that it is not in the student's best interest to attend the school of origin or the school requested by the parent or guardian or unaccompanied youth, he or she must provide a written explanation of the reasons for the determination to the parent or guardian or unaccompanied youth, along with information regarding the right to appeal the placement decision as described in Section D, below.

3. Transportation

The board of education will provide homeless students with transportation services comparable to those of other students. In addition, at the parent or guardian's request (or at the request of the homeless liaison for unaccompanied youth), the board will provide transportation services to/from the school of origin. The superintendent or designee and the homeless liaison shall coordinate homeless students' transportation needs, based on the child's best interest. In situations in which a student attends school in this system but his or her temporary housing is in another system (or vice versa), the superintendent or designee shall work with the other system to share the cost and/or responsibility for transportation. If an agreement cannot be reached between the systems, the cost of such transportation will be divided evenly.

If a homeless student becomes permanently housed and chooses to remain in his or her school of origin, the board will provide transportation to the student for the remainder of the school year.

C. ELIGIBILITY FOR TITLE I SERVICES

Homeless students are automatically eligible for Title I services. The homeless liaison and the Title I director shall collaborate to identify the needs of homeless students.

D. DISPUTE RESOLUTION PROCESS

A parent, guardian, or unaccompanied youth who disagrees with a decision of school officials with regard to eligibility, school selection, or enrollment of a student who is homeless (hereinafter, referred to as a "complainant") may appeal the decision to the

school system's homeless liaison in accordance with this section upon registering or attempting to register the child or youth at the school in which enrollment is sought.

Any employee who is aware that an unaccompanied youth or a parent or guardian of a homeless student is dissatisfied with a decision of school officials with regard to eligibility, school selection, or enrollment should immediately refer that individual to the school system's liaison for homeless students.

As used in this section, "school days" means days when students are scheduled to be in attendance.

1. Notice, Stay Put, and Informal Resolution

Upon learning of a complainant's disagreement with a decision of school officials, the homeless liaison shall take the following actions.

- a. The homeless liaison shall arrange to have the student immediately admitted to the school in which enrollment is sought (either the school of origin or the school located in the attendance zone of the student's temporary residence) if enrollment is at issue. Once enrolled, the student must receive all services for which he or she is eligible and must be allowed to participate fully in school activities, pending resolution of the dispute.
- b. Within one school day of learning of the complainant's disagreement, the homeless liaison shall provide the complainant a copy of the school system's uniform statement of rights and procedures that is written in a language, manner, and form the complainant can understand, to the extent the school system deems practicable. The written statement must include all of the following:
 - 1) contact information, including telephone number, e-mail address, and physical address of the homeless liaison and of the State Coordinator for homeless education, with a brief description of their roles;
 - 2) notice that, within two school days of the school's decision, the complainant has the right to notify the homeless liaison that the complainant intends to appeal the decision;
 - 3) an explanation of the appeal procedure, including the timeline and process for making the initial appeal and for pursuing a subsequent appeal to the superintendent and board, as provided by this policy;

- 4) a complaint form that a complainant can understand, complete, and submit to the homeless liaison to initiate the dispute resolution process and to pursue any subsequent appeals to the superintendent and board;
 - 5) notice that the board of education or a designated panel of the board will make the final decision on behalf of the school system;
 - 6) notice of the right to appeal, or request an extension of time to appeal, the final decision of the school system to the State Coordinator within three school days of receipt of the final decision;
 - 7) notice of the right to enroll immediately in the school located in the assignment area of the student's temporary residence or remain in the school of origin with transportation provided by the school system pending resolution of the dispute, if such transportation is requested by the parent, guardian, or homeless liaison on behalf of the youth;
 - 8) notice that the right to enroll includes the right to fully participate in all school activities;
 - 9) notice of the right to obtain assistance of advocates or attorneys; and
 - 10) notice of the right to provide supporting written or oral documentation during the appeals process.
- c. The homeless liaison shall attempt to informally resolve the matter. Complainants are encouraged to attempt informal resolution through discussion with the homeless liaison when possible.
 - d. If informal resolution is unsuccessful, the homeless liaison shall inform the complainant of the right to appeal the matter by initiating the dispute resolution process provided in subsection D.2, below.
 - e. If the complaint initiates the dispute resolution process, the homeless liaison shall expedite the process so that a final decision in the dispute is reached within 15 school days or 30 calendar days, whichever is less.
2. Steps in the Dispute Resolution Process and Related Timelines
 - a. Homeless Liaison Review

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- i. If informal resolution of a complaint is unsuccessful, the complainant may initiate the dispute resolution process by making a formal appeal to the homeless liaison, either directly or through the principal of the school in which enrollment is sought. The appeal must be presented within five school days of the decision giving rise to the complaint unless the homeless liaison agrees to an extension of up to five additional school days for good cause.
 - ii. The appeal may be made orally or in writing on the designated complaint form. If the complainant makes an oral appeal, the homeless liaison shall complete the written complaint form on the complainant's behalf without delay.
 - iii. The complaint should include the date of the filing, a description of the disputed action pertaining to eligibility, school selection, or enrollment, the name of the person(s) involved and a description of the relief requested. The complainant must be informed of the right to provide supporting written or oral documentation and to seek the assistance of an advocate or attorney.
 - iv. No more than two school days after the complainant initiates the dispute resolution process, the local liaison shall (1) inform the superintendent, other school officials participating in the dispute resolution process, and the State Coordinator of the dispute and (2) provide a written decision, including the reasons for the decision, to the complainant and the superintendent.
- b. Appeal to the Superintendent of the Liaison's Decision
- i. Within two school days of receiving the liaison's decision, the complainant may appeal the decision to the superintendent orally or in writing using the form designated for this purpose. Oral appeals must be made to the homeless liaison, who shall commit the appeal to writing on the designated form. The homeless liaison shall ensure that the superintendent receives copies of the written complaint and the response of the liaison.
 - ii. The superintendent or designee shall schedule a conference with the complainant to discuss the complaint.
 - iii. Within four school days of receiving the appeal, the superintendent or designee shall provide a written decision to the complainant including a statement of the reasons for the decision.
- c. Appeal to the Board of the Superintendent's Decision

- i. If the complainant is dissatisfied with the superintendent's decision, he or she may file an appeal with the board of education within two days.
 - ii. The appeal may be filed orally or in writing using the form designated for this purpose. Oral appeals must be made to the homeless liaison, who shall commit the appeal to writing on the designated form.
 - iii. The board or a panel of at least two board members acting on behalf of the board will render a decision on the appeal. The board or board panel will provide the complainant with a written decision within five school days of receiving the appeal. In unusual circumstances the board or board panel may extend this time but will avoid exceeding the lesser of (1) 15 school days from when the complaint was received or (2) 30 calendar days from when the complaint was received
 - iv. The board or board panel's decision will constitute the final decision of the school system for purposes of the complaint's right to appeal to the State Coordinator.
 - v. If the matter under appeal is a school assignment, a board panel decision will be a recommendation that must be submitted to the full board for a final determination as required by state law and policy 4150, School Assignment. However, in order to ensure an expedited appeals process for students who are homeless, the recommendation of the board panel shall be considered the final decision of the board for purposes of appeal to the State Coordinator if a final determination by the full board reasonably cannot be accomplished by the deadline described in the previous paragraph.
 - vi. The written statement of the final decision will include the name and contact information of the State Coordinator for homeless education and will describe the appeal rights to the State Coordinator. If the matter under appeal is a school assignment and the appeal was not heard by the full board, the written decision will also note that review of the matter by the full board as required by state law is pending.
- d. Appeal to the State Coordinator of the Board's Decision

If the complainant is dissatisfied with the decision of the board or board panel, he or she may file an oral or written appeal with the State Coordinator for homeless education within three school days of receiving

the board or panel's decision or within the period of any extension granted. The State Coordinator will issue a final decision on the complaint. The appeal must include:

- i. the name of the complainant and, if available, his or her physical address, e-mail address, and telephone number;
- ii. the relationship or connection of the person to the child in question;
- iii. the name of the school system and the school in question;
- iv. the federal requirement alleged to have been violated;
- v. how the requirement is alleged to have been violated; and
- vi. the relief the person is seeking.

Within three school days following a request from the State Coordinator, the homeless liaison shall provide the record of complaint, a copy of the board or panel's decision, and any other documents necessary to complete the record.

E. HOMELESS LIAISON

The superintendent or designee shall appoint and train a school employee to serve as the homeless liaison. In addition to the duties specifically assigned elsewhere in this policy, the homeless liaison's duties shall include, but not be limited to, the following:

1. ensuring that school personnel identify homeless children and youth;
2. ensuring school/preschool enrollment of and opportunities for academic success for homeless children and youth;
3. ensuring that homeless families and children have access to and receive educational services for which they are eligible;
4. ensuring that homeless families and children receive referrals to healthcare, dental, mental health and substance abuse, housing, and other appropriate services;
5. informing parents or guardians and any unaccompanied youth of available transportation services and helping to coordinate such services;

6. ensuring that public notice of the educational rights of homeless students is disseminated in locations frequented by parents or guardians and unaccompanied youth;
7. informing parents or guardians of educational and related opportunities available to their children and ensuring that parents or guardians have meaningful opportunities to participate in their children's educations;
8. communicating the dispute resolution process to parents, guardians, and unaccompanied youth experiencing homelessness;
9. helping to mediate enrollment disputes, including ensuring that a homeless child or youth is enrolled immediately pending final resolution of the dispute;
10. developing a uniform written notice that explains to parents, guardians, and unaccompanied youth their rights and the process for appealing a decision of school officials, as required by subsection D.1.b of this policy. The notice must be written in a simple and understandable format and translated to other languages as needed and practicable;
11. ensuring that when parents, students, and unaccompanied youth initiate the dispute resolution process, all parties comply with the dispute resolution policy and that parents, students, and unaccompanied youth are provided with the information listed in subsection D.1.b of this policy;
12. informing unaccompanied youth of their status as independent students and assisting in verifying such status for the purposes of the Free Application for Federal Student Aid;
13. ensuring that school personnel providing services to homeless students receive professional development and other support;
14. working with school personnel, the student, parents or guardians, and/or other agencies to obtain critical enrollment records, including immunization and medical records, in a timely manner; and
15. working with the superintendent or designee to identify board policies or procedures that might serve as a barrier to enrollment of homeless students, including those related to immunization records, medical records, uniforms or dress codes, school fees, and school admission.

Legal References: McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, 42 U.S.C. 11431, *et seq.*; *Non-Regulatory Guidance on Education for Homeless Children and Youths Program*, U.S.

Department of Education (July 2016); G.S. 115C-366(a2), -369; 16 N.C.A.C. 6H .0114, .0115, .0116; State Board of Education Policy SBOP-020, SPLN-000

Cross References: Immunization and Health Requirements for School Admission (policy 4110), Domicile or Residence Requirements (policy 4120), Discretionary Admission (policy 4130), School Assignment (policy 4150), Student Records (policy 4700)

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