

How to Talk to Parents Who are Experiencing Homelessness

One of the hardest conversations you may have is with a parent who is afraid to tell you about their living situation or is unaware that their current living situation qualifies their children to receive entitled services under McKinney-Vento legislation. Some parents are also fearful that their living situation will cause alarm, and that they may be reported to Child Protective Services or Immigration.

First, build trust and rapport with the student and parents:

- Leave your personal biases at home
- Be hospitable and kind
- Take the time to observe and listen
- Be cognizant of the possible living situations when asking questions
- Use open-ended questions
- Keep an open-door policy
- Offer available resources



Alleviate fear of CPS and Immigration:

- Being homeless, in and of itself, is not a reason to contact Child Protective Services.
- Schools do not communicate with law enforcement regarding legal status.
- Forms and information regarding homeless status are confidential and are not released to contacts outside of the school or district.

When to initiate the conversation or respond based on these signs and observations:

- Student wearing the same clothing or dirty clothes and/or having inadequate clothing and shoes
- Inability to contact parents; parents continually reach out via phone, email, notes
- Rumors about the student moving around a lot or sharing an address with others
- Improper hygiene or lack of access to hygiene products, showers, or laundry facilities
- Undiagnosed medical, mental conditions, or academic challenges
- Trouble adjusting to school rules or norms
- Problems understanding or keeping up with academic content pacing
- Lack of school supplies or clothes for school
- The inability to be on time for school or attend on a regular basis
- Inability to complete homework or projects
- Student is often hungry or may fall asleep in class
- Records and learning gaps may indicate student has attended multiple schools
- Student may need help making friends or may be reluctant to engage with other children
- Student may express worry about other siblings or parent while in school



**Based on these signs and observations, always ask yourself,
“I wonder if _____ is experiencing homelessness?”**

Lead-in Questions or Statements:

- “Can you tell me a little bit about your living situation? Do you live in a house, apartment, studio, motel, trailer, converted garage, or shelter?”
- “I have noticed that _____ has been _____ (notate observation). Is there anything you’d like me to know or help with? We have a Family Resource Center, Community Liaison, (appropriate to your district), that/who can help provide resources and information that may help your child. Would you like me to make a referral for you?”

- “Are you aware of the McKinney-Vento Act, and the services your child may be eligible for depending on your living situation?”
- “I noticed your child is having trouble getting to class on time. Would you like assistance with transportation? Maybe we can help.”
- “Let me tell you about some of the resources our district offers:”(varies by district/charter school)
 - After-school programs
 - Tutoring
 - Intervention programs
 - Medical and dental referrals
 - Immunizations referral
 - Parenting programs and classes (be specific)
 - Social Services referrals
 - Housing referrals
 - Preschool referrals
 - Clothing, uniforms, backpacks, school supplies, hygiene kits, food...
 - College career readiness support
 - Counseling services



Parents need to know their child’s rights and available services:

- Schools must immediately enroll children and youth in homeless situations, even if normally required documents, such as birth certificates, proof of guardianship, immunization records, or proof of residency are not available.
- The term “enroll” means the student is attending classes and participating fully in school activities.
- Students experiencing homelessness can remain in their “school of origin,” even if their temporary living situation is located in another school district or attendance area, if that is in their best interest. School districts must keep homeless students in their school of origin unless it is against the parent’s or guardian’s wishes or not in the best interest of the child. The school of origin is described as the school attended when permanently housed or last enrolled.
- Students immediately qualify for a school nutrition program.
- School districts must also help unaccompanied youth (not living in the physical custody of a parent or guardian) choose and enroll in a school. Guardianship cannot be a barrier to enrollment. Some students, due to family situations, may not be able to live with their family; others are not permitted by their parents or guardians to live at home. The local liaison should be contacted to assist unaccompanied youth who wish to enroll in school.
- School districts must provide homeless students with free transportation to and from their school of origin. It is the school district’s responsibility to provide students in homeless situations with transportation services comparable to those provided to other students.
- School districts must determine how students in homeless situations will be given the same opportunities to meet state academic achievement standards that all students are expected to meet.
- States must establish procedures to resolve disputes regarding the educational placement of homeless students promptly. Schools must provide written explanations of placement decisions and the enrollment dispute process. Whenever a dispute arises, the student must be admitted immediately to the requested school while the dispute is being resolved.



Closure:

Part of working with homeless students is that you never quite knowing how long they will be with you. Your students experiencing homelessness may be with you for the entire school year, a semester, a month, or just a week. But what is most important is how they experience school while they are with you. We want them to feel encouraged and cared for while on this journey, and we want to give you all of the tools you need to support your students experiencing homelessness. You are an integral part of building a constructive relationship between the home, school, and community!