

I Just Found out One of My Students is Homeless. What Do I Do Now?



There are many ways students are identified as homeless. The *Student Housing Questionnaire* is the primary tool that districts use to identify students during registration (initial identification) or annual identification (first-day packet).

Additionally, parents or students may self-identify, or staff members may make a referral to the Homeless Liaison if they suspect the student may be experiencing homelessness. Outside agencies such as law enforcement, street outreach teams, Monterey County Office of Education, Department of Social Services, and non-profit organizations also refer families or individual students to the school Homeless Liaison for assistance.

For many students experiencing homelessness, school is the only place of stability in their lives. Teachers and staff play a crucial role in creating a classroom environment that is safe and supportive for all students, especially those who are highly mobile and have experienced the trauma that often accompanies homelessness.

Providing support, services, and resources to students and their families experiencing homelessness is essential. This information and these strategies can also be used to support the educational success of students. *Here are some steps you can take to help:*

Maintain Confidentiality: Respect the student's privacy by keeping their situation confidential. Do not disclose their homelessness status to other students or families. You can disclose this confidential information to staff members who offer services specific to their needs. Contact your Homeless Liaison for guidance.

Connect with the Student: Talk to the student privately and express your concern for their well-being. Let them know that you are there to support them and that you want to help in any way you can. Teachers are well-positioned to collect information about what students need such as food, clothing, hygiene products, shelter, or mental health services. Your Homeless Liaison will be able to provide resources and/or refer students and their families to programs or agencies that can assist with these needs.

Be Sensitive to the Student's Living Situation: Some of the learning activities we ask students to participate in may alienate students experiencing homelessness. Students who are living in cars, shelters, or unstable housing may not want to share about their "weekend" or "vacation" but instead, ask them to share about something they want to learn today. Be sensitive to asking students to bring things from home, such as classroom treats or art supplies; make sure to have extras so all students can participate in celebrations or activities.

Refer to Support Services: Your school or district may have resources and support services in place to help homeless students. These services can include counselors, social workers, or liaisons who specialize in assisting homeless students. Connect the student with these resources.

Take a Trauma-Informed Approach: The experience of and events leading up to homelessness can expose students to violence, abuse, hunger, trafficking, and other traumatic experiences. Allow students to hold on to personal possessions in class, keeping in mind that any possession may be the child's only one. Provide

well-defined transition procedures from one activity to another and give choices when appropriate to counter the loss of control experienced in their lives.

Academic Support: Work with the student to ensure they have access to the necessary educational resources and support. This might include providing them with school supplies, textbooks, and information about tutoring services. Students experiencing homelessness are also prioritized to receive academic assistance through the before and after-school programs. Additionally, homework assignments and projects may need to be modified or adjusted for students experiencing homelessness.

Attendance and Transportation: Understand that homeless students may face challenges in attending school regularly due to transportation issues. Your Homeless Liaison will work with the school transportation department to find a solution that ensures the student can regularly attend school. However, under certain circumstances, the student might still be late and classroom accommodations must be made to ensure the student is not penalized.

Flexibility and Understanding: Be flexible with deadlines and attendance policies, as homeless students often face unpredictable living situations that can affect their ability to meet regular school requirements. Disciplinary policies must take homelessness into consideration. Provide structure and adhere to a consistent daily routine and clear, concise rules. Plan assignments so children can keep up without having to take work home.

Connect with Community Resources: Reach out to local homeless shelters, charities, or other community organizations that can provide assistance to the student and their family. Your Homeless Liaison, Family Resource Center, or County Office of Education can provide a list of these organizations.

Advocate for the Student: If necessary, advocate on behalf of the student to ensure they receive the necessary services and support. This may involve working with school administrators, district staff, and/or other teachers. The student may need expedited referrals for academic evaluations, behavior support, or counseling services. Or, the student may need additional food, hygiene products, or clothing. Reach out to your Homeless Liaison for assistance.

Remember that every student's situation is unique, and your approach should be sensitive and tailored to their specific needs. The goal is to provide a supportive and nurturing environment that helps the student overcome the challenges of homelessness and continue their education.

TIP: Know the Signs

Be familiar with common characteristics of students experiencing homelessness, including:

- Enrollment at multiple schools, lack of records, gaps in learning, poor/inconsistent attendance.
- Poor hygiene, unmet medical/dental needs, wearing the same clothes repeatedly, fatigue.
- Social and behavioral challenges, such as extreme shyness, withdrawal, or aggression; clinginess; difficulty with peer and/or adult relationships; poor attention span; anxiety late in the school day.
- Lack of participation in field trips and/or afterschool activities, lack of basic school supplies, inability to complete special projects.

