Identifying Students Without Stable Housing: A Critical First Step

This California Homeless Education Technical Assistance Center (HETAC) tip sheet

- outlines California Department of Education (CDE) and local educational agency (LEA) responsibilities under federal and state law related to identifying children and youth experiencing homelessness,
- recommends implementation strategies to ensure an effective approach to identification, and
- shares resources for more information relating to identification.

Context

The experience of homelessness brings with it many challenges and stressors, including unmet basic needs, mobility and instability, uncertainty, and anxiety. This stress accompanies children and youth throughout their daily lives, including as they go to school. As a result, students experiencing homelessness are more likely to be chronically absent from school, get lower grades, have special education needs, score poorly on assessment tests, and drop out of school. Identifying students experiencing homelessness is a critical first step to ensuring they receive the educational supports and services they are guaranteed under federal and state law and have the best opportunity to make a sustainable exit from homelessness in their future.

Defining Homelessness



The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, as amended by the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, establishes the definition of homelessness used by U.S. public schools as follows:

The term "homeless children and youths" means individuals who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence, and includes

i. children and youths who are sharing the housing of other persons due to loss of housing, economic hardship, or a similar reason; are living in motels, hotels, trailer parks, or camping grounds due to the lack of alternative adequate accommodations; are living in emergency or transitional shelters; or are abandoned in hospitals;
ii. children and youths who have a primary nighttime residence that is a public or private place not designed for or ordinarily used as a regular sleeping accommodation for human beings;
iii. children and youths who are living in cars, parks, public spaces, abandoned buildings, substandard housing, bus or train stations, or similar settings; and
iv. migratory children who qualify as homeless because they are living in circumstances described in clauses (i) through (iii) [42 U.S.C. §11434a(2)].

Unaccompanied youth, defined as “a homeless child or youth not in the physical custody of a parent or guardian,” also qualify for McKinney-Vento rights and services [42 U.S.C. §11434a(6)].

For more information, consult the National Center for Homeless Education’s *Determining Eligibility for McKinney-Vento Rights and Services* issue brief.

Identification under the McKinney-Vento Act and California's Assembly Bill 27



Given its importance, the requirement of **identification** is woven throughout the federal McKinney-Vento Act.

- Identifying children and youth experiencing homelessness is a responsibility of both the state education department and individual local educational agencies (LEAs) [42 U.S.C. §11431(2); 42 U.S.C. §11432(d)(2); 42 U.S.C. §11432(g)(1)(B); 42 U.S.C. §11432(g)(7)].
- Identification is a required duty of the LEA local homeless education liaison (hereafter *local liaison*).
- State education departments must collect data on the number of children and youth experiencing homelessness identified each school year, and post this number publicly on the department's website, updating it annually [42 U.S.C. §11432(f)(1)(A)]. While statute assigns the responsibility for data collection to state education departments, this responsibility is fulfilled in partnership with LEAs and schools as they collect and report data on students experiencing homelessness.
- Professional development provided to local liaisons and other LEA personnel must include a focus on improving student identification [42 U.S.C. §11432(d)(5)(A)].
- LEAs are required to coordinate with community partners – including housing and other service providers – to ensure the prompt identification of children and youth experiencing homelessness [42 U.S.C. §11432(g)(5)(C)(i)].
- Identification is a key focus of LEA McKinney-Vento subgrant awards (i.e., Education for Homeless Children and Youth [EHCY] grants) [42 U.S.C. §11433(a)(1)].

To ensure effective identification, the McKinney-Vento Act includes a related emphasis on **outreach**.

- Local liaisons must ensure that children and youth experiencing homelessness are identified by school personnel through outreach and coordination activities with other entities and agencies [42 U.S.C. § 11432(g)(6)(A)(i)].
- Local liaisons must ensure that the rights of students experiencing homelessness are posted in an understandable manner in locations in schools and throughout the community frequented by parents, guardians, and unaccompanied youth [42 U.S.C. § 11432(g)(6)(A)(vi)].

Mirroring federal statute, California Education Code requires LEAs to ensure the **identification** of children and youth – including unaccompanied youth – experiencing homelessness (Ca. Educ. Code § 48851.5).

- LEAs and county offices of education (COEs) must include the contact information for the local liaison and information about the educational rights and resources available to students experiencing homelessness on their websites. Likewise, schools that have websites must include the contact information for the LEA's local liaison and any school employees or contractors who assist the local liaison (Ca. Educ. Code § 48852.6).
- LEAs must administer a housing questionnaire to all students annually. This questionnaire must include an explanation of the rights of students experiencing homelessness [Ca. Educ. Code § 48851(b)].

Identification Strategies



LEAs can help ensure an effective approach to identifying children and youth experiencing homelessness by implementing, at a minimum, three key strategies:

- using a housing questionnaire,
- training LEA and school staff, and
- posting information publicly.

Using a Housing Questionnaire

Including a housing questionnaire as part of the LEA's enrollment process helps screen for McKinney-Vento eligibility among enrolling students and ensures compliance with California Education Code. While the questionnaire must be administered at least annually, LEAs may want to administer the questionnaire at other times throughout the school year – such as sending the questionnaire home with report cards or after winter break – in case a student's housing has changed. CDE provides a model housing questionnaire that LEAs can use as is or customize to meet local needs. CDE also provides the following related resources: *LEA Guidance for Completing the Model Housing Questionnaire* and *Housing Questionnaire Frequently Asked Questions*.

Training LEA and School Staff

Training LEA and school staff – including leadership, registrars, attendance officers, principals, classroom teachers, school counselors, and school social workers – helps "extend the eyes and ears" of the local liaison to ensure that students experiencing homelessness are identified and connected to needed supports. Topics to cover in training include understanding the homeless definition, recognizing signs of homelessness among students, key rights and services for McKinney-Vento students, and referring students to the local liaison for assistance. Live and recorded trainings are available from the HETAC, CDE, and the National Center for Homeless Education (NCHE).

Posting Information

Posting homeless education information on LEA and school websites, in public areas in schools, and in locations throughout the community provides another way for students and families to access information. It also helps "extend the reach" of the local liaison by engaging community partners in identifying youth and families experiencing homelessness and referring them to school-based assistance. Information can be shared via posters, brochures, flyers, and social media and should be shared in a manner and form understandable to youth and families [42 U.S.C. §11432(g)(6)(A)(vi)]; this may include sharing information in English and other common languages. Resources should include updated local liaison contact information.



Download free posters in multiple languages from CDE

Sample Plan for Implementation

Developing a plan can help take the guesswork out of implementing a comprehensive and effective approach to identification. Consider the sample plan below.

Month(s)	Activities
Jul/Aug	• Include a housing questionnaire in the school enrollment process, including via online registration and as part of the registration/walk-through/residency verification process. • Make follow-up phone calls to students flagged for McKinney-Vento eligibility on housing questionnaires if more information is needed. • Update local liaison contact information on homeless education awareness materials (posters, flyers, brochures, etc.) and LEA and school websites. • Post "You Can Enroll in School Posters" at all school sites and in relevant places throughout the community; share posters in English and other languages, as needed, to support local student populations.
Sept	• Provide homeless education training for all LEA, charter, and school site local liaisons and other relevant LEA and school staff, such as registrars, teachers, and school counselors. • Ensure that all elements of program record 191 are flagged correctly in CALPADS (California Longitudinal Pupil Achievement Data System) for all students experiencing homelessness.
Oct	• Plan for National Homeless Youth Awareness Month (November).
Nov	• Share information and make presentations throughout the LEA and community for National Homeless Youth Awareness Month.
Dec/Jan	• Send the housing questionnaire home with all students, reminding families to update their emergency contact information and address and inform the school if their housing situation has changed. • Send an email to all LEA and school staff about strategies for identifying and supporting students experiencing homelessness. Sample email language is available from CDE.
Feb	• Include a housing questionnaire and homeless education information as part of the enrollment process for Transitional Kindergarten and Kindergarten. • Provide another homeless education training for all LEA, charter, and school site local liaisons and other relevant LEA and school staff to refresh understanding and ensure that new staff are trained.
Mar/Apr/May	• Review homeless education data in CALPADS for the current school year, compare current and previous year data, and reach out to schools with low McKinney-Vento identification numbers.
Jun	• Send an end-of-year letter (see sample letter) to McKinney-Vento families to remind them of whom to contact next school year if they need assistance. • Share information with families about summer resources, including free meals and other programming available in the community.

Additional Resources

Access additional information and resources on identifying children and youth experiencing homelessness from CDE, the NCHE, and SchoolHouse Connection.

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