





Beyond the Basics:
Strategies to Support Unaccompanied Homeless Youth

HETAC Webinar | November 12, 2025

Meet Your Presenters



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About the HETAC

The Homeless Education Technical Assistance Center (HETAC)

- is funded by the California Department of Education to serve as the state's homeless education technical assistance center
- is operated jointly by the Contra Costa, Los Angeles, and San Diego County Offices of Education (COEs)

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Which HETAC serves my county? Learn more on the HETAC's *Contact Us* webpage

Today's Roadmap

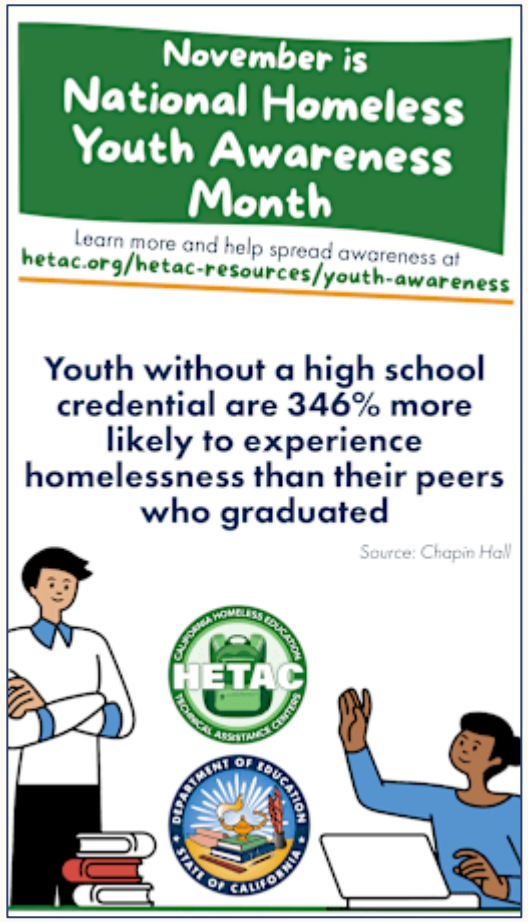
- Who are unaccompanied youth?
- Educational rights and supports for unaccompanied youth
- Unaccompanied youth 201 topics
- Resources for more information
- Q&A, discussion, and scenarios



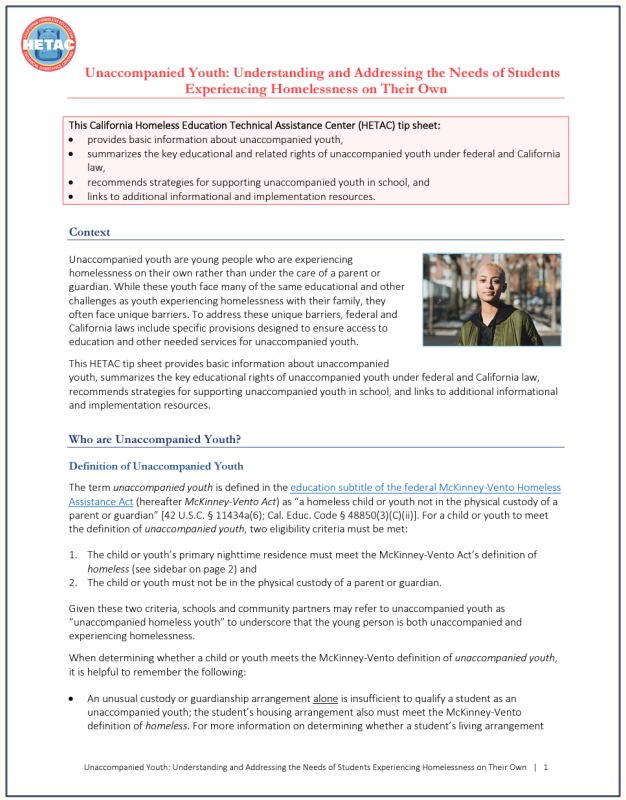
Featured HETAC Resource

HETAC National Homeless Youth Awareness Month Toolkit (2025)

- Sample Board Resolution and Press Release
- Sample Calendar of Activities and Activities for Schools
- Social Media Graphics and Sample Messages
- Zoom Backgrounds
- Awareness Videos webpage
- Links to related national and state resources



Featured HETAC Resource



Unaccompanied Youth: Understanding and Addressing the Needs of Students Experiencing Homelessness on Their Own

This California Homeless Education Technical Assistance Center (HETAC) tip sheet:
- provides basic information about unaccompanied youth,
- summarizes the key educational and related rights of unaccompanied youth under federal and California law,
- recommends strategies for supporting unaccompanied youth in school, and
- links to additional informational and implementation resources.

Context

Unaccompanied youth are young people who are experiencing homelessness on their own rather than under the care of a parent or guardian. While these youth face many of the same educational and other challenges as youth experiencing homelessness with their family, they often face unique barriers. To address these unique barriers, federal and California laws include specific provisions designed to ensure access to education and other needed services for unaccompanied youth.

This HETAC tip sheet provides basic information about unaccompanied youth, summarizes the key educational rights of unaccompanied youth under federal and California law, recommends strategies for supporting unaccompanied youth in school, and links to additional informational and implementation resources.

Who are Unaccompanied Youth?

Definition of Unaccompanied Youth

The term *unaccompanied youth* is defined in the education subtitle of the federal McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act (hereafter *McKinney-Vento Act*) as "a homeless child or youth not in the physical custody of a parent or guardian" [42 U.S.C. § 11434a(6); Cal. Educ. Code § 48850(3)(C)(ii)]. For a child or youth to meet the definition of *unaccompanied youth*, two eligibility criteria must be met:

1. The child or youth's primary nighttime residence must meet the McKinney-Vento Act's definition of *homeless* (see sidebar on page 2) and
2. The child or youth must not be in the physical custody of a parent or guardian.

Given these two criteria, schools and community partners may refer to unaccompanied youth as "unaccompanied homeless youth" to underscore that the young person is both unaccompanied and experiencing homelessness.

When determining whether a child or youth meets the McKinney-Vento definition of *unaccompanied youth*, it is helpful to remember the following:

- An unusual custody or guardianship arrangement alone is insufficient to qualify a student as an unaccompanied youth; the student's housing arrangement also must meet the McKinney-Vento definition of *homeless*. For more information on determining whether a student's living arrangement

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Unaccompanied Youth: Understanding and Addressing the Needs of Students Experiencing Homelessness on Their Own

This HETAC tip sheet:

- provides basic information about unaccompanied youth,
- summarizes the key educational and related rights of unaccompanied youth under federal and California law,
- recommends strategies for supporting unaccompanied youth in school,
- includes federal and state citations for legislative provisions, and
- links to additional informational and implementation resources.



Who Are Unaccompanied Youth?

McKinney-Vento Act Basics

Subtitle VII-B of the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act

- was reauthorized by Title IX, Part A of the Every Student Succeeds Act
- establishes the definition of *homeless* and *unaccompanied youth* used by U.S. public schools
- addresses the unique educational barriers and challenges faced by students experiencing homelessness
- requires state education departments to designate a State Coordinator for Homeless Education and school districts to designate a local homeless education liaison

Who is Homeless?

Children and youth who **lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence**, including

- sharing the housing of other persons *due to loss of housing, economic hardship, or a similar reason*
- living in motels, hotels, trailer parks, or camping grounds *due to the lack of alternative adequate accommodations*
- living in emergency or transitional shelters, or abandoned in hospitals
- living in a public or private place not designed for or ordinarily used as a regular sleeping accommodation
- living in cars, parks, public spaces, abandoned buildings, substandard housing, bus or train stations, or similar settings
- migratory children living in the above circumstances

Unaccompanied Youth

The term "unaccompanied youth" includes a **homeless** child or youth not in the physical custody of a parent or guardian

- For a child or youth to meet the definition of *unaccompanied youth*, **two eligibility criteria must be met**:
  - The child or youth's primary nighttime residence must meet the McKinney-Vento Act's definition of homeless **and**
  - The child or youth must not be in the physical custody of a parent or guardian.
- It is the **nature of the housing in relation to the student** (not the parent(s)/guardian(s) or host) that determines whether the student is experiencing homelessness
- The McKinney-Vento Act does not include age-related eligibility criteria, including for unaccompanied youth
- Given the definition, many people use the term ***unaccompanied homeless youth***

"But the student chose to leave..."

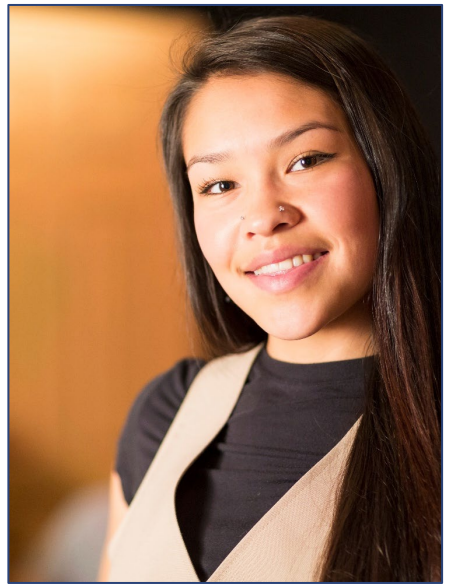
- A student may be considered an unaccompanied youth regardless of whether the student was forced from the home or ran away
- The cause of student/parental separation may not be disclosed readily due to its sensitive or private nature
- Determinations of McKinney-Vento eligibility for unaccompanied youth should be made on a case-by-case basis focusing on the nature of the student's nighttime residence



Unaccompanied Youth vs. Unaccompanied Minors

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) defines unaccompanied minor as a child who

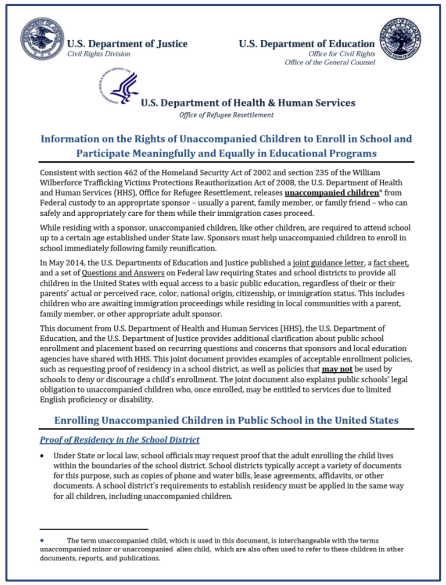
- has no lawful immigration status in the United States
- has not attained 18 years of age; and,
- with respect to whom, there is no parent or legal guardian in the United States, or no parent or legal guardian in the United States available to provide care and physical custody



Unaccompanied Youth vs. Unaccompanied Minors (cont)

See the joint federal memo entitled *Information on the Rights of Unaccompanied Children to Enroll in School and Participate Meaningfully and Equally in Educational Programs*

- "If an unaccompanied child is homeless, the child may be eligible for protections and supports under the [M-V EHCY Program]."
- To be eligible, "the unaccompanied child must meet the [M-V Act's] definition of homelessness."
- "HHS does not release unaccompanied children to homeless sponsors. However, an unaccompanied child may experience homelessness […] after they are released to a sponsor."



U.S. Department of Justice
Civil Rights Division

U.S. Department of Education
Office for Civil Rights
Office of the General Counsel

U.S. Department of Health & Human Services
Office of Refugee Resettlement

Information on the Rights of Unaccompanied Children to Enroll in School and Participate Meaningfully and Equally in Educational Programs

Consistent with section 462 of the Homeland Security Act of 2002 and section 235 of the William Wilberforce Trafficking Victims Protections Reauthorization Act of 2008, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), Office for Refugee Resettlement, releases unaccompanied children* from Federal custody to an appropriate sponsor – usually a parent, family member, or family friend – who can safely and appropriately care for them while their immigration cases proceed.

While residing with a sponsor, unaccompanied children, like other children, are required to attend school up to a certain age established under State law. Sponsors must help unaccompanied children to enroll in school immediately following family reunification.

In May 2014, the U.S. Departments of Education and Justice published a joint guidance letter, a fact sheet, and a set of Questions and Answers on Federal law requiring States and school districts to provide all children in the United States with equal access to a basic public education, regardless of their or their parents' actual or perceived race, color, national origin, citizenship, or immigration status. This includes children who are awaiting immigration proceedings while residing in local communities with a parent, family member, or other appropriate adult sponsor.

This document from U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), the U.S. Department of Education, and the U.S. Department of Justice provides additional clarification about public school enrollment and placement based on recurring questions and concerns that sponsors and local education agencies have shared with HHS. This joint document provides examples of acceptable enrollment policies, such as requesting proof of residency in a school district, as well as policies that may not be used by schools to deny or discourage a child's enrollment. The joint document also explains public schools' legal obligation to unaccompanied children who, once enrolled, may be entitled to services due to limited English proficiency or disability.

Enrolling Unaccompanied Children in Public School in the United States

Proof of Residency in the School District

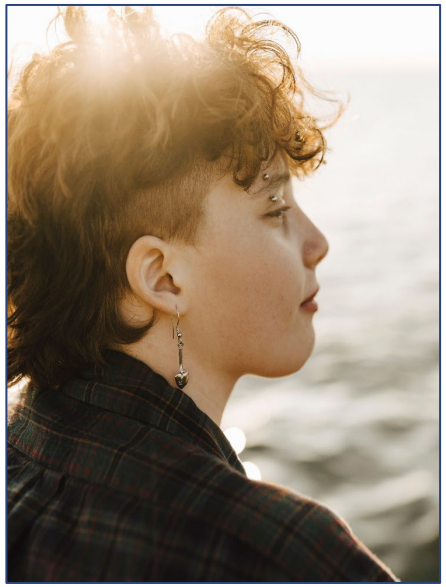
- Under State or local law, school officials may request proof that the adult enrolling the child lives within the boundaries of the school district. School districts typically accept a variety of documents for this purpose, such as copies of phone and water bills, lease agreements, affidavits, or other documents. A school district's requirements to establish residency must be applied in the same way for all children, including unaccompanied children.

* The term unaccompanied child, which is used in this document, is interchangeable with the terms unaccompanied minor or unaccompanied alien child, which are also often used to refer to these children in other documents, reports, and publications.

Causes of Youth Homelessness

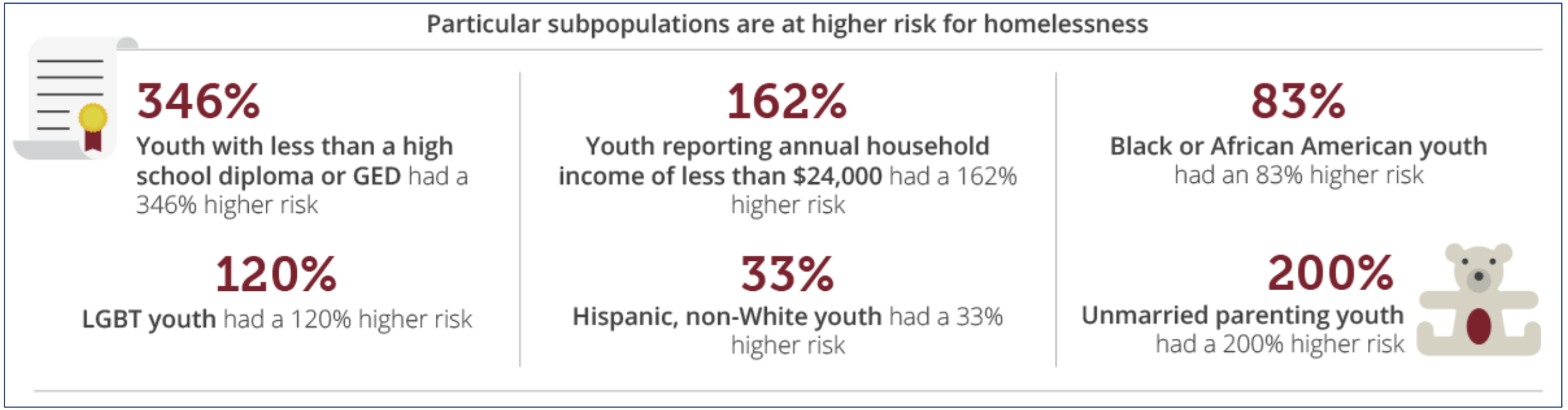
Youth may run away or be forced from the home due to family conflict related to

- parental abuse or neglect
- changes in family structure, including through the death of a parent or caregiver
- the youth's or parent's alcohol or drug use
- the youth's sexual orientation, gender identity, or pregnancy
- other challenging household dynamics, including economic hardship



Source: Congressional Research Service, *Runaway and Homeless Youth: Demographics and Programs*

Risk Factors for Youth Homelessness



Source: Chapin Hall, *Missed Opportunities: Youth Homelessness in America, National Estimates*

Impacts of Youth Homelessness

Homeless youth experience **disproportionately high rates** of

- unmet basic needs
- poor physical health
- untreated mental health issues
- substance use
- sexual, physical, or criminal exploitation
- school disengagement

Source: Congressional Research Service,
Runaway and Homeless Youth: Demographics and Programs

The youth–adult pathway is the most common pathway to homelessness, with 35% of people experiencing homelessness as an adult having experienced homelessness in their formative years.

Source: Children and Youth Services Review,
Direct and Indirect Pathways Between Childhood Instability and Adult Homelessness in a Low-Income Population



Questions?



Education Rights and Supports for Unaccompanied Youth

Education Rights and Supports

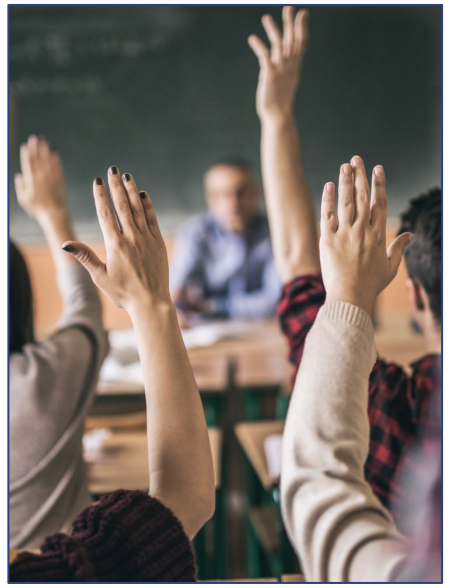
Unaccompanied youth have the **same educational rights** under the McKinney-Vento Act as students experiencing homelessness with a parent or guardian

- Immediate school enrollment, even if lacking required documentation
- School selection (school of origin or local school, according to the student's best interest)
- School of origin transportation
- College preparation and readiness assistance
- Comparable services
- Title I, Part A services
- Free school meals
- Removal of barriers

Visit the HETAC's *The Educational Rights of Students Experiencing Homelessness: A Primer for California Local Educational Agencies webpage* for more information

Rights and Supports Specific to UHY

- Immediate enrollment, even without a parent or guardian
- Prioritization of the unaccompanied youth's requested school in best interest determinations
- Targeted support from the local liaison
  - Obtaining needed records once immediate enrollment has occurred
  - Accessing school of origin transportation
  - Accessing the McKinney-Vento dispute resolution process

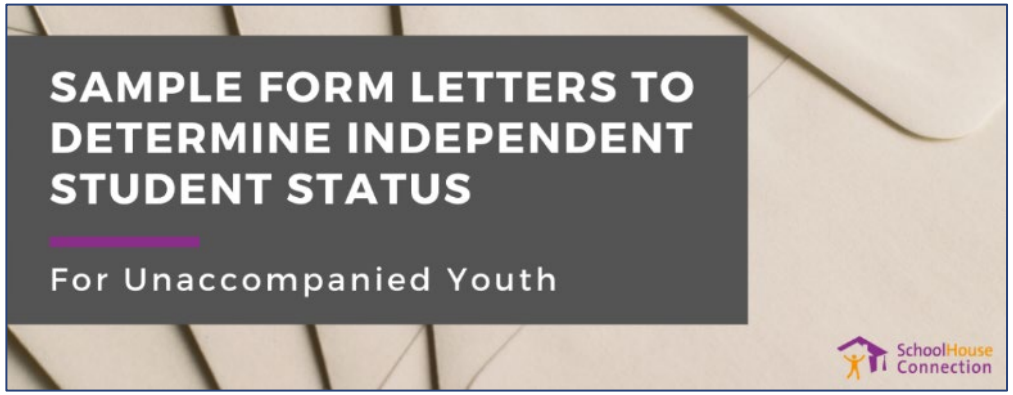


Access to Federal Student Aid

- Local liaisons must inform unaccompanied youth of their **independent student status** on the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) and assist with verification of this status

- Independent students do not include parent information on their FAFSA, and their federal aid is calculated based only on the student's income and assets

Access a template for documenting independent student status from SchoolHouse Connection



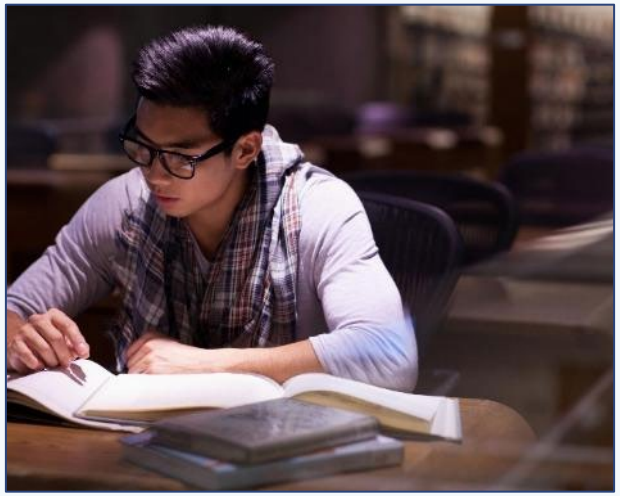
Scenario: Jayden

Jayden (17, 12th grade) has been staying with his girlfriend's family for the past three months after frequent conflicts with his father led him to leave home. His father hasn't formally relinquished custody, and Jayden occasionally receives money for groceries from him via Venmo. Jayden isn't sure how long he'll be able to stay with his girlfriend's family and he's feeling really anxious about his current situation and how it might affect college applications and financial aid.

- *Would you deem Jayden an unaccompanied youth under McKinney-Vento? Why or why not?*
- *What can you do to support Jayden?*



Questions?



Unaccompanied Youth 201 Topics

Caregiver Affidavit

A caregiver affidavit

- allows a caregiver to **enroll a child in school and approve their "school-related medical care"** (e.g. immunizations and physical exams, including medical exams conducted at school)
- does not affect the rights of the student's parents
- does not require notarization
- is not required for all unaccompanied youth (schools cannot require unaccompanied youth to have one on file)
- does not change or affect the student's status as unaccompanied

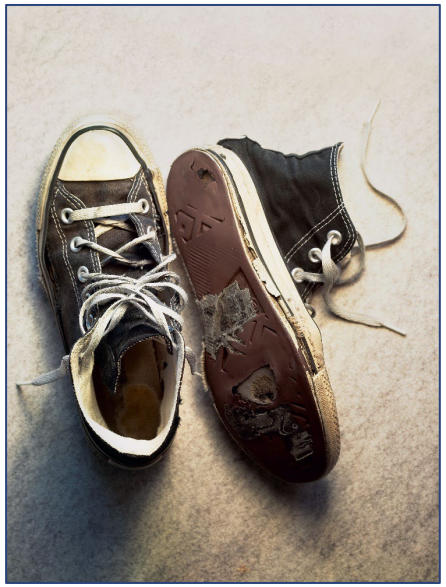
For more information, visit the California Courts caregiver's authorization affidavit webpage

Access to and Sharing of Student Information

Under FERPA, a **parent** means a parent of a student and includes a natural parent, a guardian, or an individual acting as a parent in the absence of a parent or a guardian.

- The **Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA)** governs access to and sharing of student information
- Parents maintain FERPA rights for minor students; rights transfer to the student when they turn 18
- FERPA permits schools to allow students under age 18 to have access to their education records and provide consent for disclosures, as long as
  - those rights do not supersede the rights of their parents.
  - the student is deemed "responsible enough"
- If a parent or guardian is present and attempting to exercise FERPA rights, their rights supersede the rights of others

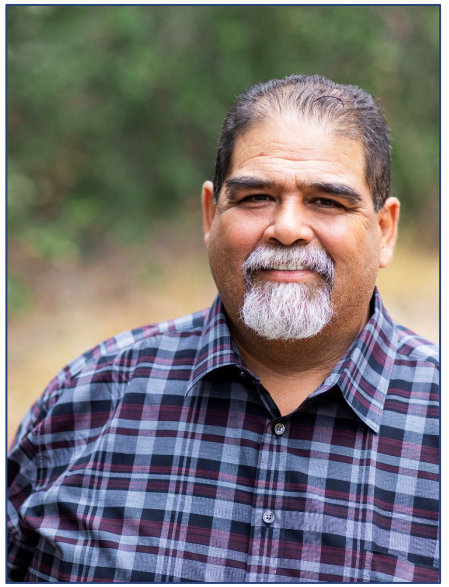
Child Welfare Involvement



- Assembly Bill (AB) 652 (Penal Code § 11165.15) clarifies that a youth's homeless or unaccompanied status is not, in and of itself, a sufficient basis for reporting child abuse or neglect
- Schools should not report a student to child welfare based solely on the fact that the student is homeless or an unaccompanied youth
- Child welfare reports should be made only when the school knows or reasonably suspects the student may be experiencing abuse or neglect

Special Education

- Under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), a parent usually serves as the student's educational decisionmaker
- IDEA defines parent as
  - a natural, adoptive, or foster parent;
  - a guardian (but not the state if the child is a ward of the state);
  - an individual acting in the place of a natural or adoptive parent with whom the child lives, or an individual who is legally responsible for the child's welfare



Special Education (cont)



For unaccompanied youth with special education needs who do not have a parent who is willing and/or able to act as educational decision maker

- a **surrogate parent**, who may not be involved with the care or education of the child, should be appointed within 30 days
- a **temporary surrogate parent**, who may be involved with the care or education of the child, may be appointed immediately

Who Signs?



- **Work permits:** A parent, guardian, foster parent, caregiver with whom the minor resides, or residential shelter services provider can sign
- **Extracurricular Activity Participation Forms:** The person who signed the student's enrollment forms often sign the student's extracurricular forms (whether the student, a caregiver, or the local liaison or other school official)
- **Medical Treatment:** CA law governs when a minor must or may consent for their own care and opportunities in which other adults may consent to care on the minor's behalf; learn more from the National Center for Youth Law

Who Signs? (cont)

- **Medi-Cal:** CA law provides that a minor may receive certain services without parental consent; these services are known as minor consent Medi-Cal services and are categorized by age
- **CalFresh:** Minors may apply for CalFresh benefits independently if they are living apart from their parents or guardians and are purchasing, preparing, and eating food separately from others in their household. Minors who are living with a group of people and sharing food with them must apply for CalFresh with everyone in that household.



Missing Children and Law Enforcement

- CA law clarifies that schools are **not required to report all minor youth experiencing homelessness on their own to law enforcement** in case the youth has been reported missing
- CA law specifies the following:
  - Law enforcement agencies responsible for the investigation of a missing child must inform the LEA or private school where the student is enrolled that the child is missing within 10 days of the child's disappearance. The notice must be provided in writing and include a photo of the child, if available.
  - If notified of a missing child by law enforcement, the school must place a notice that the child has been reported missing on the front of the missing child's school record.



Missing Children and Law Enforcement (cont)

- If a school receives a record inquiry or request from any person or entity for a missing child about whom the school has been notified by law enforcement, the school must immediately notify the law enforcement authorities who informed the school that the child is missing.
- Upon initial enrollment or transfer of a child into a new public or private elementary school, the principal is urged to check to see if the child resembles a child listed as missing in quarterly missing persons bulletins provided to the school by the CA Department of Justice.

In instances where a school must notify law enforcement of an inquiry about a child reported missing by that law enforcement agency, schools are encouraged to share any knowledge the school has about potential safety concerns in alerting the inquirer about the student's whereabouts.

Scenario: Andrea

Andrea (15, 10th grade) has been living in a garage behind a neighbor's house since her mom entered an inpatient behavioral health program. The neighbor is supportive but the arrangement is informal via a verbal agreement with Andrea's mom. Andrea isn't sure when her mom will complete treatment and wonders if she'll be able to get a place for them to live when she gets out. The garage has electricity but no plumbing, so Andrea sometimes showers at school. She uses a hot plate to prepare food.

- *Would you deem Andrea an unaccompanied youth under McKinney-Vento? Why or why not?*
- *Can Andrea apply for CalFresh on her own?*



Questions?

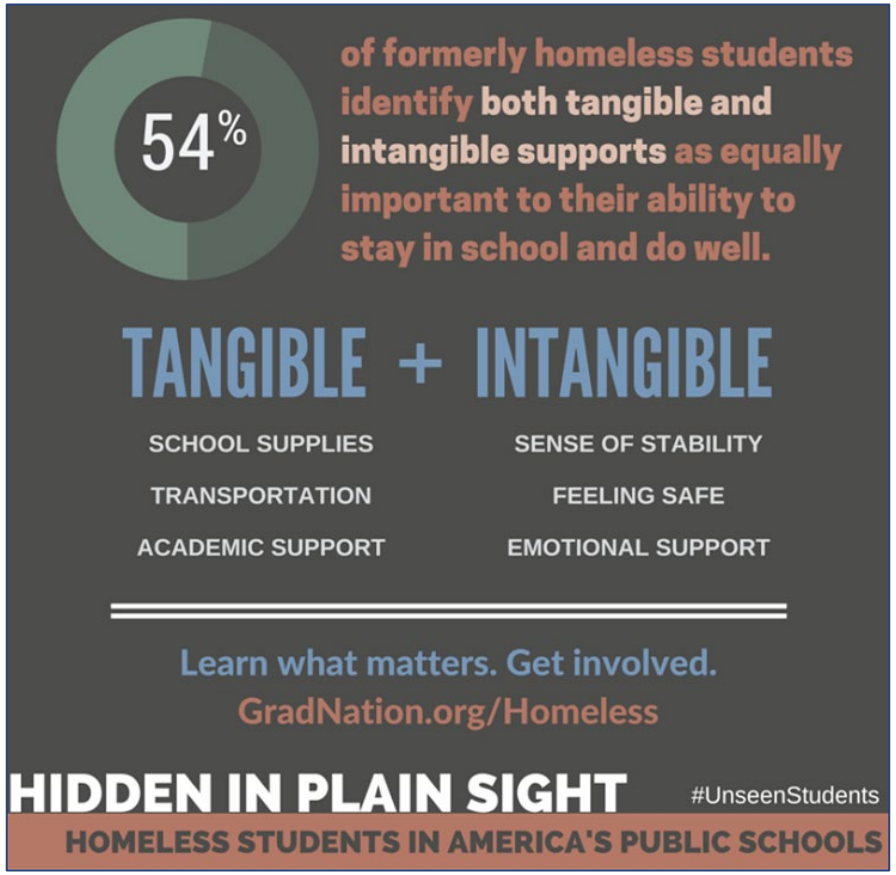
Strategies for Supporting Unaccompanied Youth in School

- **Policy review, revision, and development**
  - LEAs should review their policies to ensure they remove barriers, including barriers related to guardianship, immediate enrollment, and full participation in school for unaccompanied youth
- **Identification**
  - LEAs should take intentional steps to ensure the identification of unaccompanied youth as a first step to ensuring their access to education and school-based supports
  - *Example:* Coordination with faculty advisors for parenting youth programs and LGBTQ+ student groups

Strategies for Supporting Unaccompanied Youth in School (cont)

- **Training**
  - Ensure that relevant LEA and school staff receive training on the rights and services available to unaccompanied youth
  - CA Education Code and the McKinney-Vento Act require LEA homeless liaisons to offer training at least annually to LEA employees who provide services to students experiencing homelessness
- **Building Trust**
  - Create a welcoming and responsive school environment
  - Employ trauma-informed practices

Student Needs



Source: Civic Enterprises and Hart Research Associates, *Hidden in Plain Sight: Homeless Students in America's Public Schools*

Resiliency



“The deep belief that at one time you really mattered to another human being”

Vincent Feletti, MD



Questions?

Don’t Quit on Me!



Source: America’s Promise Alliance, *Don’t Quit on Me*
(click to play the video on the America’s Promise Alliance YouTube channel)

What Do You Think?

Please share in the chat:

What is one key takeaway from today's webinar?

What is one action step you'll take as a result of our time together today?

Thanks for Joining!



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