A General Guide to Pennsylvania's Education for Children and Youth Experiencing Homelessness (ECYEH) Program

Pennsylvania
Department of Education

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Introduction

The Education for Children and Youth Experiencing Homelessness (ECYEH) Program was authorized by Title VII, Subtitle B of the Stewart B. McKinney Homeless Assistance Act of 1987, and more recently under the Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 (ESSA). The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act (McKinney-Vento Act) was the first comprehensive federal law dealing with the problem of homelessness in America. For the full text of the final regulations disseminated by the U.S. Department of Education, as amendments to the McKinney-Vento Act, go to https://www.govinfo.gov/app/details/FR-2016-03-17/2016-06073/summary.

Pennsylvania's primary goal for its ECYEH Program is to educate local education agencies (LEAs) and other entities who work with children, youth and families, on the rights of children and youth experiencing homelessness. They should also work collaboratively to eliminate barriers that may impede enrollment, attendance, or receipt of services that support academic success – including special student populations such as preschool-aged children experiencing homelessness, unaccompanied youth, and out-of-school youth.

The ECYEH Program provides support for activities or services that enable these children and youth to enroll, attend, and succeed in school. The ESSA provisions provide clarification and reinforce the important role of school district homeless liaisons in working with and supporting students experiencing homelessness.

The program is authorized to provide funds through the Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE) to coordinate the enrollment and delivery of services for the educational success of children and youth experiencing homelessness. This booklet is a brief overview of some important issues surrounding child homelessness – such as who they are, how they are affected by homelessness, and their available educational choices and federal rights. The booklet should raise awareness regarding students experiencing homelessness.

A Definition of Homelessness

A family or student is considered homeless under the McKinney-Vento definition if they are in any of these places or situations:

- Public or private emergency or transitional shelters.
- Public or private places not designated for, or ordinarily used as, regular sleeping accommodations such as vehicles, parks, motels, campgrounds, abandoned buildings, substandard housing, etc.
- Living with a parent in a domestic violence shelter.
- Living with relatives or friends due to lack of housing.
- Living in transitional housing programs.
- Runaway children (under 18 years of age) and children and youth who have been abandoned or forced out of their home by parents or other caretakers (unaccompanied youth). These children may be in temporary shelters awaiting assistance from social service agencies or may live alone on the street or move from place to place among family members, friends, or acquaintances.
- Children of migrant families who lack adequate housing.
- Children abandoned in hospitals.

School District Homeless Liaison

Per the federal law, every school district must assign a person (a liaison) to ensure that students experiencing homelessness are identified, enrolled, and able to succeed in school. The liaison is responsible for identification of McKinney-Vento eligible students and supporting the needs of these students. The liaison:

- Assesses McKinney-Vento eligibility and the needs of students and families experiencing homelessness.
- Interprets laws relating to student homelessness.
- Works as a team member to remove educational barriers.
- Provides case management; monitors student progress.
- Makes referrals to facilitate appropriate services to ensure full attendance and access to an appropriate education.

The liaison also acts as a resource to school staff to inform, facilitate, and support appropriate services.

McKinney-Vento Eligibility and Identification

The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act defines "homeless children and youths" as, "individuals who lack a fixed, regular and adequate nighttime residence." However, because the circumstances of homelessness vary with each family's or unaccompanied youth's situation, determining the extent to which the family or youth fits the definition must be applied on a case-by-case basis. The liaison must gather and analyze information from the family or youth and make an appropriate determination of eligibility. Expeditious determination of eligibility and immediate school enrollment are critical to the child's educational continuity and future success.

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Children and youth experiencing homelessness are difficult to identify for many reasons and often go unnoticed by school personnel. Students and parents may try to hide their situation because they are embarrassed by their homelessness. In addition, the fear of having children taken away often prevents families from revealing their living circumstances to school officials. Unaccompanied youth may not report their homeless status for fear of being returned to unsafe family environments. Homeless children and youth who are not enrolled in school and are living in places other than shelters, such as doubled-up with another family or in a low-cost motel, are even more invisible to schools and their communities. If you have any questions about eligibility or identification, contact your ECYEH regional or site coordinator.

Immediate Enrollment

It is important to remember that the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act requires the immediate enrollment of children and youth experiencing homelessness, even in the absence of records normally required for enrollment. School districts' enrollment policies and practices must ensure that no barriers exist for these students/families. Denying immediate enrollment to a student experiencing homelessness violates federal law and may place the student in danger in certain circumstances.

School Choice/School of Origin

According to federal law (see https://nche.ed.gov/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/SchoolSelectionBestInterest.pdf), the local education agency serving each child or youth to be assisted under this subtitle shall, according to the child's or youth's best interest:

"(i) continue the child's or youth's education in the school of origin for the duration of homelessness—

(I) in any case in which a family becomes homeless between academic years or during an academic year; and

(II) for the remainder of the academic year, if the child or youth becomes permanently housed during an academic year; or

(ii) enroll the child or youth in any public school that nonhomeless students who live in the attendance area in which the child or youth is actually living are eligible to attend."

The federal law defines "School of Origin" as the school the child or youth attended when permanently housed or the school in which the child or youth was last enrolled. The choice regarding placement shall be made regardless of whether the child or youth lives with the homeless parent(s) or has been temporarily placed elsewhere. These families or youth are presently unable to establish "homes" on a permanent basis.

Transportation

To counteract the educational disruption caused by students' mobility, the McKinney-Vento Act provides these students with the right to continue attending the school of origin or enroll in any public school that nonhomeless students who live in the same attendance area are eligible to attend, according to the student's best interest.

When determining a student's best interest, the following factors should be considered:

- Age of the child or youth
- Distance of a commute and the impact it may have on the student's education
- Personal safety issues
- Student's need for special instruction (e.g., special education and related services)
- Length of anticipated stay in a temporary shelter or other temporary location
- Time remaining in the school year

It is important to also consider the wishes of the parent/guardian and the student. Parents and youth should be informed of their school of origin rights and the available transportation services or other transportation options. The liaison can help set up transportation through coordination within the district and between other school districts.

Supporting Opportunities for School Success

In general, children experiencing homelessness do not perform as well in school, have lower achievement scores, and more academic failure than housed students. These children need the stability of school and rely on academic support provided to them. These students often change schools frequently. This can impact learning as students must adjust to new environments, new curricula, and new teachers and classmates, while still learning the same information other students are expected to master. The loss of a home can be traumatic, leaving children and youth with tumultuous feelings that can impact their social and intellectual well-being. Limited access to food, medical care and basic school supplies can also impact performance in the classroom.

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The following strategies and programs can support students' academic success:

- Access to Head Start and preschool programs administered by the local education agency or within the community.
- Academic support such as tutoring, afterschool programs and summer programs.
- Referrals to health care services, dental services, mental health services, and other appropriate services.

According to federal law and PDE policy for enrollment of students:

- Educational agencies shall ensure that each homeless child and each homeless youth has equal access to the same free, appropriate public education, including a public preschool education, as provided to other children and youth. Homeless students may reside in shelters, hotels, motels, cars, tents or be temporarily doubled-up with a resident family because of lack of housing. Homeless children and youth lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence.
- Unaccompanied homeless youth may enroll without documents and without the help of an adult. Unaccompanied homeless youth includes any child who is, "not in the physical custody of a parent or guardian." Falling within this definition are students who have run away from home, been thrown out of their home, or been abandoned or separated from their parents or guardians.
- Homeless youth are entitled to immediate enrollment and their families are not required to prove residency regarding school enrollment. These students should be enrolled without delay, in the district where they are presently residing, or continue their education in the district of prior attendance.

See https://www.pa.gov/agencies/education/programs-and-services/instruction/elementary-and-secondary-education/homeless-education.html

Effects of Homelessness on Educational and Social Development

Most notably, homelessness causes a disruption in a child's education. The transfer and enrollment process may occur multiple times in one school year. The impact of family mobility upon education is disruption and is the greatest barrier to school success. Changing schools means adapting to new teachers, schedules, friends, and accompanying details. Performance may slip until the child adapts to new settings. The attention of the child's caretaker may center on food, clothing, shelter, and safety to the exclusion of education. This may add to the disruption of the child's education. Like any other child experiencing disruption in their life, children experiencing homelessness need support, help with adjusting to new teaching styles, assignments, and some basic things like fees for class trips, etc.

These children may need an advocate in school. It is important for these children to have positive connections with their families, guardians, or other caring adults in their lives. They need programs and services that will nurture and reinforce their resiliency.

Protective Factors That Help Students Experiencing Homelessness

Research studies show that when schools are places where students routinely receive respect and support, the students' motivation to learn is improved. To counter the many risk factors in the lives of homeless children, schools need to enhance protective factors that promote positive behavior, health, well-being, and personal success. A child's resilience is fostered by building enough protective factors to offset the impact of a stressful life. Protective factors are grouped into three categories: caring and supportive relationships; positive and high expectations; and opportunities for meaningful participation in school activities.

Schools can promote protective factors by helping children and their families link with programs and activities that offer opportunities to strengthen existing relationships and create new ones. School-based parenting and enrichment workshops can help parents build stronger bonds with their children and the school community. The students should have clear standards for attendance, behavior and satisfactory performance. These expectations can serve as a positive structure to the student of a mobile family or unaccompanied youth.

When schools provide caring relationships, maintain high expectations, and provide opportunities for participation in school activities, they can serve as a "protective shield" for students. The skills learned and the recognition received in these activities are keys for growth and a sense of well-being.

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The Importance of Coordination and Collaboration

Addressing the unique needs of students experiencing homelessness requires a coordinated and collaborative approach through which the student, the parent, the school, social service agencies, and the public are aware and supportive of these families and their children. Local community agencies, service organizations, and public/private agencies on the local, county, and regional levels can partner with and support LEAs in meeting the needs of students experiencing homelessness. The following are ways in which coordination and collaboration can be facilitated. Contact your regional/site coordinator for additional information about how you can help.

School administrators can help the school board and local community to become more sensitive to the condition of homelessness.

Principals can introduce the family and child to teachers, counselors and other staff, and give a tour of the school; this sets the tone for parent involvement in the school.

Secretaries and enrollment staff can assist parents in filling out registration forms, with awareness that some parents may lack literacy skills.

Teachers can discretely make accommodations for required homework, arrange tutoring, or provide or arrange for needed school supplies.

School nurses can contact the student's previous school to obtain immunization records and health records or receive verification by phone.

Counselors, social workers, home and school visitors and school psychologists can help know the local community resources to make referrals for families in areas like housing, food, clothing and counseling; as well as making standard forms and information available about key school programs at each shelter. This includes materials on the school calendar, lunch and breakfast programs, and admission/withdrawal.

Schools' transportation staff can arrange for children to be able to attend the school of origin if in the student's best interest, arrange bus stops to pick up students at the shelter first and drop them off last to ease the embarrassment of living at the shelter.

Shelter personnel can be aware of school activities and schedules and help families and students fully participate in school functions.

Everyone involved with students should observe warning signs for possible homelessness:

- A lack of educational continuity (many school moves)
- School attendance and transportation problems
- Poor health and nutrition
- Poor hygiene
- Lack of privacy and personal space after school
- Social and behavioral concerns
- Reactions or statements by the parent, guardian, child, or youth

Dispute Resolution Process

PDE must ensure that LEAs comply with requirements set forth in the McKinney-Vento Act, including ensuring immediate enrollment, providing written notice to families concerning school selection, enrollment decisions, and providing enrollment and pendency in the school of choice while a dispute is being resolved. PDE has developed procedures for the resolution of disputes regarding enrollment, school selection, homeless status, and complaints of non-compliance with legal requirements pertaining to the education for homeless children and youths (for further information, visit https://www.pa.gov/agencies/education/resources/policies-acts-and-laws/basic-education-circulars-becs.html to see the Education for Homeless Youth Basic Education Circular, 42 U.S. §11432(g)(2)(A).

There are two dispute levels:

Level 1 – A dispute raised with an LEA, where a parent, guardian, or unaccompanied youth initiates the dispute. The LEA must issue a written disposition of the dispute within 20 business days after the liaison is notified of the dispute. The disposition is provided to the parent, guardian, or unaccompanied youth to explain the basis for the decision and advise the parent, guardian or youth of the right to appeal. All LEAs must inform families of the basis of their decision regarding enrollment or school selection, notify families of their right to remain in their school of choice pending resolution of the dispute, and explain the procedures for challenging the decision of the LEA.

Level 2 – A complaint filed with a McKinney-Vento Coordinator when a parent, guardian, or unaccompanied youth is dissatisfied with the LEA's disposition of a dispute or raising any issue of McKinney-Vento Act noncompliance files a complaint or appeal with a McKinney-Vento regional or site coordinator. For a list of coordinators, visit https://ecyehpennsylvania.center-school.org.
The child or youth remains in the school in which he or she is seeking enrollment until the complaint or appeal is resolved or until a disposition from a McKinney-Vento coordinator is received. Any dispute raised by a homeless family or youth concerning school enrollment or any other right under the McKinney-Vento Act whether received via telephone, letter, or any mode of communication shall be treated as a complaint.

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Resources

Regional and Site Coordinators

The ECYEH regional and site coordinators can assist with:

- School enrollment/placement
- Agency referrals (clothing, food, shelter)
- Tracking/transferring school records
- Accessing educational programs
- Interagency problem-solving
- Relevant literature related to homelessness
- Increasing public awareness on homeless issues
- Consultative phone calls to answer school, agency, and shelter questions

To identify your district homeless liaison, visit the statewide homeless liaison directory at https://directory.center-school.org/homeless/liaison.

Additional information and resources can be found on ECYEH regional websites:

Region 1 School District of Philadelphia
https://www.philasd.org/studentrights/#homeless

Region 2 Berks County Intermediate Unit
https://www.berksiu.org/page/ecyeh

Region 3 Lincoln Intermediate Unit
https://www.iu12.org/programs-services/education-for-children-and-youth-experiencing-homelessness-ecyeh

Region 4 Allegheny Intermediate Unit
https://aiu3.net/students-and-families/student-programs-and-services/education-for-children-youth-experiencing-homelessness

Region 5 Midwestern Intermediate Unit
https://www.miu4.org/departments/state-and-federal-programs/education-for-children-youth-experiencing-homelessness-region-5#

Region 6 ARIN Intermediate Unit
https://linktr.ee/region6ecyeh

Region 7 Luzerne Intermediate Unit
https://sites.google.com/view/region-7-ecyeh-website/home

Region 8 Bucks County Intermediate Unit
https://www.bucksiu.org/child-student-services/education-for-children-and-youth-experiencing-homelessness-ecyeh

Statewide Contacts

Storm Camara, State Coordinator
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Websites

Note: Inclusion on this list does not denote endorsement by the Pennsylvania Department of Education.

For additional information, and state and national resources, you can visit any of the following websites:

Pennsylvania Department of Education ECYEH
https://www.pa.gov/agencies/education/programs-and-services/instruction/elementary-and-secondary-education/homeless-education.html

Center for Schools and Communities ECYEH
https://ecyehpennsylvania.center-school.org

Homelessness Programs and Resources
https://www.samhsa.gov/communities/homelessness-programs-resources

Housing Alliance of Pennsylvania
https://housingalliancepa.org

Legal Center for Foster Care and Education
https://www.fostercareandeducation.org

National Alliance to End Homelessness
https://endhomelessness.org

National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth
https://naehcy.org

National Center for Homeless Education
https://nche.ed.gov

National Center on Family Homelessness
https://www.air.org/center/national-center-family-homelessness

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Websites continued

National Coalition for the Homeless
https://www.nationalhomeless.org

National Homelessness Law Center
https://homelesslaw.org

National Low Income Housing Coalition
https://nlihc.org

National Network for Youth
https://www.nn4youth.org

SchoolHouse Connection
https://www.schoolhouseconnection.org

U.S. Department of Education,
Office of Safe and Healthy Students
https://www.ed.gov/grants-and-programs/formula-grants/formula-grants-special-populations/education-for-homeless-children-and-youths#resources

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services,
Administration for Children and Families,
Administration on Children, Youth and Families
https://www.acf.hhs.gov/acyf

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services,
Administration for Children and Families,
Office of Head Start, Family Support and Well-being
https://headstart.gov/family-support-well-being

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