

THE MCKINNEY-VENTO ACT: SUPPORTING YOUTH WITHOUT STABLE HOUSING

The McKinney-Vento Act is a federal education law that provides the right to immediate school enrollment and full participation for children and youth who are considered homeless. The definition of homeless is very broad, covering any youth who lacks a “fixed, regular and adequate nighttime residence”, such as youth who are:

- Sharing the housing of others due to loss of housing, economic hardship or a similar reason (including running away from home or being forced to leave home);
- In shelters and transitional housing programs;
- Staying in cars, parks, abandoned buildings, campgrounds and public spaces; or
- Living in motels.

McKinney-Vento Act Basics

In brief, the McKinney-Vento Act requires that school districts and charter schools provide students experiencing homelessness with access to school and support their attendance and success. The rights and services the McKinney-Vento Act provides include:

- The right to receive the assistance of the McKinney-Vento homeless liaison, a staff member that every school district and charter school must designate to implement the law.
- The right to enroll in school and begin participating fully immediately, even if they cannot produce school records, birth certificates, immunization records, proof of residency, or other documents, and even if they are not accompanied by a parent or guardian.
- The right to continue attending the same school they attended when they had permanent housing, or the school in which they were last enrolled, even if their temporary living situation is located in another school district, if that is in their best interest.
- Prioritized eligibility for college access programs like TRIO and GEAR UP.
- Homeless youth who are not in the physical custody of a parent or guardian can complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid without parental signature or income information. Detailed information on unaccompanied youth and the FAFSA is available at http://www.naehcy.org/higher_ed.html.

McKinney-Vento and Dropout Prevention and Recovery Strategies

The McKinney-Vento Act has proven to be an effective tool in helping keep youth connected to school and making it easier to reincorporate those who have left. The following steps can help schools and dropout prevention/recovery programs implement the law and support students.

1. Be sure to identify the youth experiencing homelessness in your program or school; We can't serve youth if we don't know who they are. Identification strategies include:
 - Avoid using the word “homeless.” It evokes stereotypes that are inconsistent with federal law and prevents youth from identifying themselves due to fears of stigma or negative impacts.

- Train colleagues on the definition and signs of homelessness. Training materials are available at: <http://www.utdanacenter.org/theo/resources/toolkits.php>.
 - Provide outreach materials and posters in your program and where there are youth in high-risk situations, such as campgrounds, convenience stores, Laundromats, libraries, youth centers and shelters. Posters are available at <http://www.utdanacenter.org/theo/resources/posters.php>.
 - Ask youth to help. Youth can share information by word of mouth, using web-based social networking, and posting outreach materials where their peers will see them.
2. Help youth stay stable in one school, as long as it is in their best interest; Research consistently shows that keeping youth in the same school greatly improves their attendance, achievement and likelihood of high school graduation, even controlling for other factors. School stability strategies include:
 - Inform youth of their right to remain in the same school.
 - Evaluate each youth's best interest objectively. A checklist to guide this determination is available at: http://center.serve.org/nche/downloads/briefs/sch_sel_checklist.pdf.
 - Provide appropriate transportation to school, as required by the McKinney-Vento Act.
 3. Help youth enroll in school immediately, even when they lack documents. Strategies include:
 - Inform registrars and secretaries about immediate enrollment for McKinney-Vento students.
 - Do not let lack of a parent or guardian delay enrollment, since both the McKinney-Vento Act and Texas state law require enrollment for youth on their own. Strategies for serving youth on their own are available at <http://center.serve.org/nche/downloads/briefs/youth.pdf>
 - Do not let lack of immunization or school records delay enrollment. Immediate enrollment strategies are available at <http://center.serve.org/nche/downloads/briefs/assessment.pdf>.
 4. Help youth participate fully in school; Research shows that participation not only in the classes of their choice but also in sports and other activities keeps youth engaged in school. Full participation strategies include:
 - Make school a productive and efficient place for students by offering flexible options to maximize credit accrual and recovery, including computer-based modules and independent study to supplement classroom activities. More strategies are available at <http://center.serve.org/nche/downloads/briefs/credit.pdf>.
 - Facilitate youth's participation in extra-curricular activities as soon as they enroll.
 - Ensure that residency requirements, fees, transportation and other issues do not create barriers to participation. The Texas Homeless Education Office can help find solutions to these barriers; see more strategies at http://center.serve.org/nche/downloads/briefs/extra_curr.pdf.

McKinney-Vento Act Resources

The Texas Homeless Education Office's website houses information about the McKinney-Vento Act, at <http://www.utdanacenter.org/theo/>. A statewide directory of McKinney-Vento Homeless Liaisons is available at <http://www.utdanacenter.org/theo/directory/index.php>. Additional questions or concerns can be directed to Patricia Julianelle, Region 10 / Texas Homeless Education Office Legal Consultant, at danaidproject@austin.utexas.edu.