PREPARING FOR SCHOOL REOPENING AND RECOVERY:
Considerations in Serving Children and Youth Experiencing Homelessness

SchoolHouse Connection

State and local educational agencies across the country are beginning to prepare for schools to reopen in the fall. Currently, it is unclear what form preK-12 education will take in the 2020-2021 school year. Whether fully online, fully in-person, or some hybrid blend of the two, students experiencing homelessness will have new and dire needs. With public schools identifying over 1.5 million students experiencing homelessness, and the expectation of increased homelessness over the coming school year, even robust homeless education (McKinney-Vento Act) programs are likely to need increased capacity and funds. In addition, as school leaders consider hybrid models, it is essential to recognize the fundamental challenges and inequities of online learning for vulnerable students, including those experiencing homelessness, and to explore opportunities to prioritize them for in-person learning.

This checklist offers important considerations to help state and local educational agencies ensure equitable access to education for students experiencing homelessness as they prepare for the new school year.

Does every local educational agency (LEA) have a liaison currently in place with adequate capacity to identify McKinney-Vento students and ensure their enrollment, full participation, and equitable access to services?

- Use a simple tool to assess liaison capacity.
- Use COVID-19 relief funding and Title I, Part A funding to increase liaison capacity.
- Designate school site-level liaisons to increase the LEA's overall capacity to respond to homelessness.
- Many schools and districts are reporting increased staff turnover due to COVID-19 and economic stressors. Short training materials are available to ensure new liaisons are prepared to discharge their duties.

Are liaisons and other school staff reaching out to known or suspected McKinney-Vento students now, to help them prepare for the next school year?

- Consult our Keeping In Touch checklist for specific outreach and communication strategies.
- Be sure to inform students and families of their rights to:
  - Stay in their school of origin, whether school opens in the fall only online, or a combination of online and in-person.
  - Immediate enrollment if they do seek to enroll in a new school.
  - Access to free school meals, as well as assistance with accessing distance learning, and transportation to their school of origin if schools are open full- or part-time.

Are there systems in place to identify returning McKinney-Vento students, as well as students who are newly experiencing homelessness?

- Current levels of unemployment suggest imminent increases in homelessness among families who have never experienced it before, and who lack familiarity with available services and systems. As always, sensitive, trauma-informed outreach will be essential.
- Embed questions and information about homelessness in all school or district outreach efforts, including: food pick-up or delivery; mailing of learning packets; emails or other communications to all parents/students; school/district automated calling systems; and the school/district website, Facebook page, and other social media.
- Ensure that trained staff are available to connect with McKinney-Vento families and over the summer.

> **Lack of engagement in distance learning after schools closed in 2020 may be a warning sign of homelessness. Incorporate information about the McKinney-Vento Act in efforts to reengage those students.**

What questions can help identify students and families experiencing homelessness in the COVID-19 context?

- Have you had an eviction deferred, and when will the eviction moratorium end?
- Have you had rent or utility payments deferred, and when will those payments resume?
- Have you had steady income?
- Do you have a working stove and refrigerator?
- How long have you been where you are staying currently, and how long do you think you will be able to stay there?

Do LEA and/or school enrollment systems, whether online or in-person, accommodate the needs of families and youth experiencing homelessness?

- Ensure that students experiencing homelessness are enrolled immediately, as required by the McKinney-Vento Act, whether school is online, in-person, or a hybrid model.
- Provide registrars and other enrollment personnel adequate training on the McKinney-Vento Act.
- Ensure online enrollment systems are accessible and understandable to parents and youth experiencing homelessness, with information about the McKinney-Vento Act. Online systems must provide a way for parents and students to enroll without typically required documents, such as proof of residency, health records, or guardianship, and an internal mechanism to refer potentially homeless students to the liaison.

> Remember that McKinney-Vento students may face needs and challenges beyond their homelessness, particularly if they are students of color, with disabilities, and/or LGBTQ+. Center equity in all reopening plans and work with colleagues in special education, school safety, diversity, inclusion, and multiculturalism to ensure holistic responses.

Are schools prepared to address barriers to enrollment and retention in school, including ensuring access to COVID-related supplies such as personal protective equipment (PPE), hygiene supplies, clothing, and laundry?

- Prioritize students experiencing homelessness for resources that will be provided to all students, or to low-income students. Deliver or mail resources to students who lack transportation to pick them up.
- Expand the amount and uses of the Title I, Part A homeless set-aside as needed, to ensure it is adequate to address new barriers and increases in homelessness created by COVID-19.
- Target COVID-19 relief funding to students experiencing homelessness.
- Ensure McKinney-Vento students have equitable access to all school activities, whether online or in-person.

If distance learning will be part of reopening, are schools prepared to ensure students experiencing homelessness can access the internet, devices, meals, academic support, and adult mentorship?

- Prioritize students experiencing homelessness for devices and connectivity that will be provided to all students, or to low-income students. Deliver devices with meals or via U.S. mail when families and students cannot reach pick-up locations.
- Provide students with unlimited high-speed data, including through hotspots and cellphone data and minutes, to ensure students can complete all assignments and stay connected with liaisons, teachers, mentors, and peers.
- Plan to meet learning challenges beyond basic connectivity and devices, such as providing portable chargers for students without access to electricity; offering in-person or virtual supplemental academic support; and maintaining mentorship relationships with youth experiencing homelessness without a parent or guardian, in particular.
- Provide insurance for devices provided to McKinney-Vento students, recognizing the increased risk of theft and breakage due to unstable and unsafe living situations.

Do schools have plans in place to respond to increased trauma caused by extended shelter-in-place orders in unsafe living situations and increased economic stress?

- Invite community mental health providers to support students virtually and/or on-site at schools.
- Implement trauma-informed training and practices available from the National Child Traumatic Stress Network, ACES Aware, or similar resources.
- Adopt positive school discipline practices school- and district-wide.

Are community collaborations robust, so families and students can receive additional services that support educational success?

- Connect with community agencies providing food, health care, mental health care, shelter, and housing to families or youth, to find out what is available and how your students and families can access it.
- Use referral forms that can be completed and submitted online, or emailed to the liaison, for providers to connect families and students with liaisons.
- If 211 or another resource referral service is not available locally, create an on-line resource list that families and youth can access on a mobile device, and that community partners can update directly, such as through a google doc.
- In rural areas in particular, connect with faith communities, civic organizations, and youth groups that might be able to share McKinney-Vento information with families and offer support or funding for basic needs and distance learning equipment.