



# Unlocking Potential!

By Michele Myers, Ph.D.,  
and Patricia Popp, Ph.D.  
*The College of William and Mary*

In participation with the Virginia Department of Education

Information Brief No. 7 Revised Winter 2014

## What Educators Need to Know About Homelessness and Special Education

Increasingly, educators are being asked to serve many needs in students' lives outside of the traditional academic role. Students experiencing homelessness require additional support from teachers and administrators to ensure that social, developmental, and academic goals are met. When students who are homeless also have disabilities, the challenge for these professionals can appear even more complex. This can be a daunting task, considering the limited resources that schools have at their disposal. This information brief provides school personnel with the information they need to enroll, promote the attendance, and ensure the success of students with disabilities who are experiencing homelessness.

### *The Impact of Homelessness and Disabilities*

Homelessness is a social dilemma that has academic repercussions. It can be devastating to families and children, possibly causing students to fall behind their peers in achievement.<sup>1</sup> These students are at increased risk for academic and behavioral challenges due to the disruption of services caused by unstable living situations that often result in multiple school changes in a given year. School is a place where students spend a great deal of time; for students experiencing homelessness, school provides the stability and safety that they may not have in their living situation.

The McKinney-Vento Act, Title X, Part C of the reauthorization of the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA)*, ensures the right of children and youth experiencing homelessness to a free, appropriate public education.

Children who experience homelessness have been identified in need of special education services at two-to-three times the incidence rates observed for their housed peers.<sup>2</sup> It is important to note that not all students who are homeless have or will develop disabilities. In fact, they may be successful in school and qualify for services through gifted or talented programs. However, when students experiencing homelessness also have disabilities, educators are faced with the multiple challenges of meeting complex student needs and ensuring compliance with the requirements of both the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)* and the *ESEA*.

### *Meeting the Needs of Students with Disabilities who are Homeless*

The first step in meeting the needs of this special sub-group of students is identifying who is homeless. The McKinney-Vento definition of homelessness (see text on the back of this brief) includes students living in a variety of situations from "doubled-up" with friends or relatives to residing in shelters. Also, there are students who live in sub-standard housing, such as trailers or houses lacking electricity and plumbing, who may be considered homeless. Sometimes families share this sensitive information with school officials, but the stigma associated with homelessness can make this difficult.

More than 18,000 children were identified as experiencing homelessness by Virginia public schools during the 2012-13 school year.





Therefore, all educators must be familiar with the warning signs and be able to assist with the identification of students experiencing homelessness in order to ensure that the students and their families are appropriately supported.

Enrollment personnel may notice multiple school and household moves. The address provided may be a low-cost motel, shelter, or another family’s residence. In other cases, the fact that a family is homeless may be discovered when school personnel investigate academic or behavioral concerns. School personnel may notice signs commonly associated with homelessness, such as hoarding food, inconsistent hygiene, and/or reluctance or inability to tell where they live.

School personnel must enroll students who are homeless and were receiving special education

services or are suspected of having a disability. Educational decisions for these children should be made in compliance with the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act and the McKinney-Vento Act. School personnel must consider both acts as they navigate children’s unique living situations to provide an appropriate education. For example, due to the high mobility of students who are homeless, even small delays in enrollment can present barriers to learning. The McKinney-Vento Act requires that children have the right to remain in their home school when feasible or be enrolled in the new school immediately, even when documentation is not readily available. In addition, school personnel serving these students must know school and community resources that are available to support their work and assist decision making.

	IDEA	McKinney-Vento
<b>Current Authorization</b>	IDEA Reauthorization of 2004 (P.L. 108-446)	McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Improvement Act of 2001, Part X, Part C of the <i>Elementary and Secondary Education Act</i> .
<b>Began</b>	1975 as P.L. 94-412	1987 as Subtitle VII, B of P.L. 100-77
<b>Why</b>	In response to evidence that of the approximately 8 million students with disabilities, half were receiving either inappropriate or no educational services <sup>3</sup>	In response to reports that over 50% of students experiencing homelessness were not attending school regularly <sup>4</sup>
<b>Goals</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Improved educational outcomes</li> <li>• Parent involvement</li> <li>• Teacher support</li> <li>• Improved discipline and safety</li> <li>• Conflict resolution</li> <li>• Reduction in misclassifications</li> <li>• Early intervention services</li> <li>• Improved transitions from school to workplace</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Immediate enrollment</li> <li>• School selection and parent involvement</li> <li>• Dispute resolution – for school placement decisions</li> <li>• Transportation to school when appropriate</li> <li>• Access to comparable services</li> <li>• Student achievement – students are held to the same high standards as their housed peers and should participate in state and local testing</li> </ul>

School personnel may face challenges when trying to provide an appropriate education for students experiencing homelessness. Listed in the table below are common challenges and strategies to overcome them when determining eligibility and accessing services.

Potential Challenge:	What You Can Do:
<p><b>Providing outreach to families who are homeless to comply with current Child Find regulations.</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Work with the school division’s local homeless education liaison to identify shelters in the area and other places where families and youth who are homeless may be living.</li> <li>• Contact shelter staff and other service providers. Provide them with information and training about the Child Find process and who to contact in your school division when a potential need is identified.</li> <li>• Request the assistance of your local Parent Resource Center to provide outreach in the community. For example, offer a parent’s introduction to special education workshop at a local shelter.</li> </ul>
<p><b>The student is struggling in school. Is the difficulty related to the living situation?</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Check initial enrollment forms for parental comments regarding educational services the student previously received.</li> <li>• Review school records for special education paperwork and alert a special educator if there are questions about the documentation.</li> <li>• Complete a referral that addresses academic or behavioral concerns.</li> <li>• Address the issue right away. The student may move again before you evaluate the situation completely. Delaying the referral process, even to give the student time to adjust to changes in his or her living situation may result in the student not receiving needed educational services.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Missing records</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Have the parent or guardian sign a release of information form.</li> <li>• Contact previous school for needed records. Seek assistance from your local homeless education liaison, when needed.</li> <li>• Ask the student questions to determine if additional supports were received at a previous school such as:             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– How many students were in your class?</li> <li>– Were the students in your class in a different grade than you?</li> <li>– Did you have more than one teacher in the classroom?</li> <li>– Did you have an adult that worked only with you on your schoolwork?</li> <li>– Did you stay in the same classroom all day? (Except for usual resources)</li> <li>– What did you do when you took a test in your classroom?</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Establish procedures for special education personnel in each school to review all records of students experiencing homelessness to look for indications that an eligibility process was initiated at a previous school.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Incomplete eligibility process</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Contact the previous school for relevant documentation to assist in the eligibility decision.</li> <li>• Complete the testing components at the school the child currently attends and hold the eligibility meeting as quickly as possible.</li> </ul>

<b>Potential Challenge:</b>	<b>What You Can Do:</b>
<b>Incomplete testing process</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• If you are the sending school, alert the receiving school and make sure all relevant paperwork is in the child's file.</li> <li>• If you are the receiving school: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Expedite the eligibility if at all possible to ensure services begin at the new school.</li> <li>– Coordinate with the previous school to get copies of completed testing and finalize missing components at the new school site.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
<b>Missing physical for the eligibility process</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Contact the health department to arrange a physical. The school nurse is a good resource to facilitate this contact.</li> </ul>
<b>Copy of the current IEP is not in the student's folder</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ask the parents/guardians if they have a copy.</li> <li>• Have the parent sign a release of information form.</li> <li>• Contact the case manager from the previous school to see if a current IEP exists.</li> <li>• Have the IEP faxed from the previous school.</li> <li>• In the event the IEP is not accessible, check on the procedures within the local school division to determine how to serve the child while an IEP is being developed.</li> </ul>
<b>Chronic absenteeism</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Treat students as you would any other student who is chronically absent. Remember, the McKinney-Vento Act emphasizes the importance of school attendance.</li> <li>• Request that the school nurse follow up with questions about the student's health and coordinate medical services.</li> <li>• Have eligibility team members coordinate and schedule the assessment so that all the components can be done the same day.</li> </ul>
<b>Unresponsive parent/guardian</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Request that the social worker visit the parent or guardian.</li> <li>• Have a parent liaison from the school or the local homeless education liaison facilitate contact with the parent.</li> <li>• If living in a shelter, work with the shelter staff, such as a Child Services Coordinator.</li> <li>• Follow your local school division's procedures for holding an IEP meeting without parental involvement. A temporary surrogate may be assigned for unaccompanied homeless youth.</li> </ul>
<b>Student registers for school during the summer</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Establish procedures for office staff and provide a listing of contacts to address special education matters in a timely manner.</li> </ul>

Students who are homeless often manifest characteristics such as inattentiveness, aggression, lagging academic achievement, and frustration that are seen in students who qualify for special education services. Closing the achievement gap for homeless students may be further hindered if academic, behavioral, and social concerns are left unaddressed due to transience.<sup>5</sup> Once gaps in skill development are uncovered, taking timely measures can ensure that children receive the services they need.



## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Better Homes Fund. (1999). *America's homeless children: New outcasts*. Newton, MA: Author

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Rothstein, L. F. (1995). *Special Education Law*. New York, NY: Longman. Citing 20 U.S.C. § 1401(b)(1)-(5).

<sup>4</sup> National Coalition for the Homeless. (2001). *Fact Sheet: Education of Homeless Children and Youth*. Washington, DC: Author

<sup>5</sup> Walther-Thomas, C., Korinek, L., McLaughlin, V. L., & Williams, B. T. (1996). Improving educational opportunities for students with disabilities who are homeless. *Journal of Children and Poverty*, 2(2), 57-75.

---

## National Resources on Homelessness and Disabilities

### Council for Exceptional Children

<http://www.cec.sped.org>

CEC advocates for appropriate governmental policies, sets professional standards, provides continual professional development, advocates for newly and historically underserved individuals with exceptionalities, and helps professionals obtain conditions and resources necessary for effective professional practice.

### IDEA Partnership

<http://www.ideapartnership.org>

Funded by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Special Education Programs, the IDEA Partnership is a collaborative effort between various national, state, and local organizations to deliver a common message about the 2004 reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act.

### National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth

<http://www.naehcy.org>

NAEHCY, a national grassroots membership association, serves as the voice and the social conscience for the education of children and youth in homeless situations. NAEHCY connects educators, parents, advocates, researchers and service providers to ensure school enrollment, attendance, and overall success for children and youth whose lives have been disrupted by the lack of safe, permanent and adequate housing.

### National Association of Federal Education Program Administrators

<http://www.nafepa.org>

NAFEPA is made up of those working with Title I and other federal programs and seeks to promote and protect the educational rights of disadvantaged children. The organization provides leadership in dealing with both legislation and instruction.

### National Center for Homeless Education

<http://www.serve.org/nche>

NCHE acts as a clearinghouse for information related to the education of children and youth experiencing homelessness. Many resources are available online. Materials ordered from NCHE are free of charge. Quantities are limited.

### National Law Center on Homelessness & Poverty

<http://www.nlchp.org>

NLCHP is an advocacy organization whose Education division monitors and enforces compliance with the McKinney-Vento Act. The staff can provide updates on related legislation and provide resources related to education.

### U.S. Department of Education

<http://www.ed.gov>

This site provides information for teachers, school personnel, parents, and families, as well as updates and guidance on implementing federal legislation at the local level.



## Virginia Resources

### Parent Educational Advocacy Training Center

<http://www.peatc.org> | [partners@peatc.org](mailto:partners@peatc.org)

- Falls Church, VA **703-923-0010**  
Toll Free **800-869-6782**
- North Tazewell, VA **276-979-0408**
- Hampton Roads, VA **757-572-6579**

The PEATC provides special education information and support for families of children with disabilities.

### Project HOPE-Virginia

The office of the state coordinator for the education of homeless children and youth, Project HOPE-Virginia, is part of the Virginia Department of Education and administered through The College of William and Mary. Other information briefs developed by Project HOPE-Virginia are available on our website, or they can be ordered through our office. Readers may wish to review our brief on homelessness and special education for families and homeless service providers. There is no charge for these resources.

### Virginia Department of Education

[http://www.doe.virginia.gov/students\\_parents/](http://www.doe.virginia.gov/students_parents/)

- Toll Free **800-292-3820**

Resources for families of students in Virginia schools can be found on this website, including information about enrollment, the Standards of Learning, special education, graduation requirements, student records, and contact information for state and local school division staff. The following useful resource is available for families at no charge: *A Parent's Guide to Special Education*. (2010).





# *Notes*





## DEFINITION OF HOMELESSNESS

The federal McKinney-Vento Act guarantees school enrollment for anyone who, *due to a lack of permanent housing*, lives in **inadequate** or **temporary** settings, such as:

- In emergency or transitional shelters
- In motels, hotels, or campgrounds
- In cars, parks, public places, bus or train stations, or abandoned buildings
- Doubled up with relatives or friends
- In these conditions and is a migratory child or youth



**Project HOPE-Virginia**  
**Virginia Department of Education**  
The College of William and Mary – SOE  
P.O. Box 8795  
Williamsburg, VA 23187-8795  
Office: (757) 221-4002  
Fax: (757) 221-5300  
Toll Free in Virginia: (877) 455-3412  
[homlss@wm.edu](mailto:homlss@wm.edu) | <http://hope.wm.edu>

---

**Project HOPE-Virginia** is Virginia's Program for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth. The College of William and Mary administers the program for the Virginia Department of Education. Funding is authorized under the McKinney-Vento Homeless Education Act, Title X, Part C of the *No Child Left Behind Act* (P.L. 107-110). The purpose of Project HOPE-Virginia is to ensure the enrollment, attendance, and success of homeless children and youth in school.

