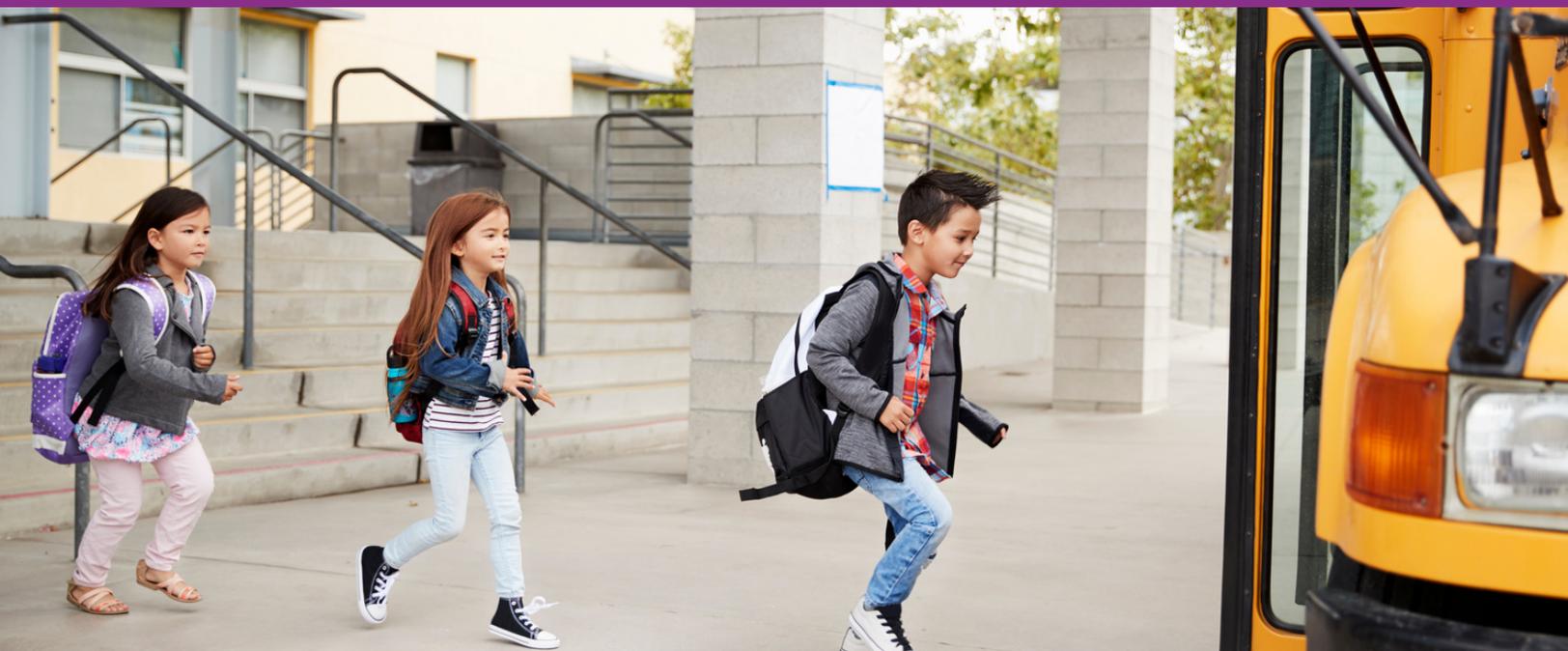


Updated April 2021

SCHOOL REOPENING AND RECOVERY

Considerations in Serving Children and Youth Experiencing Homelessness



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.

Across the country, many local educational agencies (LEAs) are beginning to reopen school buildings. Others are preparing to reopen in the fall. Whether attending school fully online, fully in-person, or some hybrid blend of the two, students experiencing homelessness have new and dire needs. Many are suffering from instructional loss and mental health challenges due to months of distance education, social isolation, and separation from the physical and emotional comforts that school buildings can provide. Others simply have disappeared from school: survey data suggest that **an estimated 420,000 fewer** children and youth experiencing homelessness have been identified and enrolled by schools so far this school year. At the same time, the shortcomings of eviction moratoria and limited access to rent relief raise concerns about significant increases in homelessness in the summer and fall.



The Illinois State Board of Education has published [Guidance for Schools and Districts on Supporting Homeless Students During the 2020-21 School Year](#). This document is an excellent model for other states to help ensure equitable access to education and services for students experiencing homelessness, as the school year begins under the shadow of COVID-19.



Under the American Rescue Plan Act (ARP), (P.L. 117-2), LEAs must develop and make publicly available on their websites a plan for the safe return to in-person instruction and continuity of services, within 30 days of receiving ARP funds. LEAs must seek public comment on in-person instruction plans prior to making them publicly available. In developing reopening plans, LEAs should:

- Ensure that the needs of students experiencing homelessness are explicitly addressed.
- Prioritize students experiencing homelessness for in-person learning opportunities, if desired by the student and/or their parent or guardian.
- Not assume safe and stable housing arrangements. Reopening policies and practices must presume mobility and homelessness, and intentionally address them.
- Ensure that reopening policies and practices do not conflict with the McKinney-Vento Act.

ARP contains \$800 million specifically to support the identification, enrollment, and school participation of children and youth experiencing homelessness, including through wrap-around services. It also requires state educational agencies to set aside at least 5% of the education funds they receive through the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) Fund to respond to the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on specific student groups, including students experiencing homelessness, and 2% for summer and afterschool programs for specific student groups, including students experiencing homelessness. LEAs must reserve 20% of ESSER funds to respond to the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on specific student groups, including students experiencing homelessness.

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

1. Does every local educational agency (LEA) have a liaison currently in place who has 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 [American Rescue Plan Act \(ARP\)](#) and [Title I, Part A funding](#) to increase liaison capacity by adding hours and support staff.
- 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.

2. Are liaisons and other school staff actively reaching out to known or suspected McKinney-Vento students, particularly those who have not been connected to education or attending regularly?

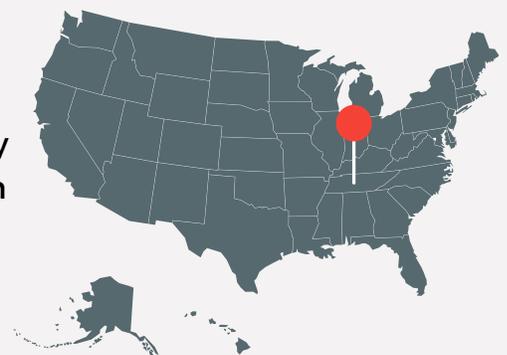
- Consult our Keeping In Touch checklist for specific outreach and communication strategies.
- Be sure to inform all students and families of their rights to:
- Stay in their school of origin, both for distance and in-person learning.
- Immediate enrollment if they do seek to enroll in a new school.
- Access to free school meals and other food benefits (including through the Pandemic EBT program), as well as assistance with accessing distance learning, and transportation to their school of origin if school buildings are open full- or part-time.



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

- Has anything changed with your housing? Do you need to update your address?
- How long have you been where you are staying currently, and how long do you think you will be able to stay there?
- 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?

The Metropolitan Nashville School District has had success screening for homelessness and housing challenges, as well as other basic and academic needs, by utilizing school employees as “navigators” to stay in touch and track families through weekly phone and video calls. The district has made its [Navigator manual](#) available to the public, including sample scripts for weekly calls.



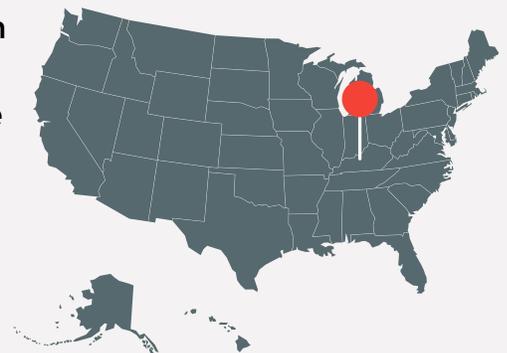
3. Are there sensitive, trauma-informed, and culturally-competent systems in place to identify returning McKinney-Vento students, as well as students who are newly experiencing homelessness?

- Screen for homelessness by embedding 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.
- Provide training to teachers, registrars, and other staff to assist with identification.
- If school will be held entirely or partially online, consult our “Identifying Students Experiencing Homelessness During School Building Closures” checklist.

4. 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 particular consideration for parents and students of color and English learners, and include 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.
- Consult our “Removing Barriers to Online Enrollment for Students Experiencing Homelessness” checklist for more strategies.

Paducah Public Schools in KY is providing transportation to ensure McKinney-Vento students can access the district’s summer programs. The district also is using Title I, Part A funds to hire an additional teacher and assistant at the middle and high school levels for added support and fun activities for students experiencing homelessness. ARP funds also could be used to ensure access to summer programs and provide additional service, including mental health support.



5. Are schools prepared to address barriers to enrollment and retention in school, including ensuring access to transportation, vaccines, COVID-19 testing, 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.
- Use ARP funds to provide transportation, help meet students' basic needs, ensure access to academic support, and provide enrichment opportunities.
- 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.
- Ensure students experiencing homelessness can participate fully in school activities, as required by the McKinney-Vento Act, by eliminating barriers to both online and in-person activities.

6. Knowing that many students experiencing homelessness have fallen behind academically and had attendance difficulties during distance learning, what systems are in place to re-engage students fully, avoid penalizing them for instructional loss, and address lost instruction?

- Implement the McKinney-Vento Act's requirement to award partial credit for work students have completed, even if they did not complete the full course. Counselors should review student transcripts and seek opportunities to award credits.
- Avoid punitive discipline, recognizing the trauma students may have experienced during school closures and the importance of keeping them engaged in school.

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.

7. 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?

- Ensure students experiencing homelessness have access to devices and connectivity.
- Offer flexibility for students with limited internet access, including asynchronous options to complete assignments and even paper packets.
- 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. Fees for lost or damaged devices cannot be barriers to full participation.

8. 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?

- Screen for trauma when school restarts, either in person or online. Simple, well-researched instruments include UCLA's [COVID-19 Screen for Child/Adolescent PTSD](#) and the [Structured Trauma-Related Experiences and Symptoms Screener](#).
- 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. A recent [review of programs with proven track records](#), many of which offer free tools and free online training, can help schools get started.
- Center equity: Take extra steps to ensure students of color have access to mental health supports, as [research](#) has found them less likely to reach out to teachers or counselors for mental health assistance. Also ensure mental health providers are LGBTQ+ positive and offer [online resources](#) sensitive to the challenges of LGBTQ+.
- Use ARP funds for these initiatives.

9. 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 homeless liaison, for providers to connect families and students with homeless liaisons.
- If 211 or another resource referral service is not available locally, create an online 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.

10. Are reopening policies and practices evaluated to ensure that they do not unintentionally create barriers for students experiencing homelessness?

- Policies that require COVID-19 testing as a condition of returning to in-person learning violate the McKinney-Vento's requirement to remove barriers to enrollment, and relegate homeless students to a learning modality that may not serve them well. Unaccompanied homeless youth lack parents to sign for testing.
- Pods, cohorts, or other restrictions on entering education after a certain date may exclude mobile children and youth, and also can be very stigmatizing for students who aren't a part of a pod, and who must leave or enter a pod. Schools that choose to adopt podding or cohorting should be sensitive to the needs of all highly mobile students, including McKinney-Vento students, uphold their educational rights, and take steps to ensure that they are not excluded or stigmatized for their mobility.
- Policies that require parents or youth to choose one learning modality for an entire school year can disadvantage children and youth who are experiencing homelessness, especially when the child or youth's best interest might change depending on where they are staying. Policies should be evaluated for compliance with federal law, and exemptions should be made for mobile students.