

# FINDING AND BUILDING ENGAGEMENT WITH STUDENTS EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS WHO LEFT SCHOOL DURING SCHOOL BUILDING CLOSURES: A CHECKLIST

Given the challenges of mobility, deep poverty, and trauma, keeping in touch with students and families experiencing homelessness can be a challenge in the best of times. After school buildings and early childhood programs closed during the pandemic, and as students and families continue to move more frequently due to ongoing housing and economic challenges, maintaining connections has become even more difficult. At the same time, the high numbers of students experiencing homelessness who have not returned to school since the pandemic, coupled with increases in homelessness reported by schools this fall, makes finding and building engagement with students more important than ever. This checklist offers some strategies that liaisons, schools, and early childhood programs can use to locate and keep in touch with students and families.

**Center Equity.** Keeping in touch with Black, Latinx, and Native students requires extra sensitivity and focused strategies. Parents of color are more likely to have had their own negative experiences with schools that may affect their comfort in communicating with schools, and they are more likely to face language barriers. Liaisons, social workers, counselors, and teachers may be more effective in reaching out to parents and students of color than administrators, attendance officers, or other staff more likely to be seen as threatening. English Language Learner staff are ideal for connecting with parents and students who are newcomers, while Native American staff can help connect with Native students and families. Culturally-specific community agencies also can provide support.

- Augment the local educational agency homeless liaison's capacity to do outreach.
  - Increase liaisons' dedicated hours to homeless-related activities, through ARP-HVY funds or by increasing the Title I, Part A homeless set-aside.
  - Enlist other school staff, such as counselors, paraprofessionals, social workers, and teachers, to reach out to students experiencing homelessness.
  
- Use all available means of communication to reach families and students: Email, phone, texting, regular mail, Facebook, Twitter, Remind, Instagram, Snapchat, GroupMe, discrete and respectful home visits, etc.

## WHAT FUNDS ARE AVAILABLE FOR THESE ACTIVITIES?

- ARP-HCY funds
- Title I, Part A funds, including both the homeless set-aside and regular Title I funds
- McKinney-Vento funds
- Other local educational agency and early childhood program funds
- Philanthropic and community support

- When families and students don't respond, don't give up. Reach out to emergency contacts and other students to ask if they have updated contact information, or if they can find students on social media and urge them to contact the school.
- Reach out to unaccompanied youth directly. Even if a parent's contact information is in the school data system, remember that most unaccompanied youth have no contact with parents or guardians.
- Once you connect with a parent or youth, stay in touch on a regular schedule. Use "check-in" forms to guide weekly conversations with student and families. Begin by telling students how much you've missed them, and then inquire about supports they might need to stay safe, healthy, and engaged in school and early childhood programs.
- Post flyers, brochures, and posters in the community where students and parents might see them, even if those locations are different since the pandemic. Consider locations such as campgrounds, motels, libraries, laundromats, social services offices, grocery stores, and pharmacies.
- Visit local motels and campgrounds where families experiencing homelessness sometimes stay, placing flyers on vehicle windows or under doors.
- Create user-friendly websites and Facebook pages with clear information about community resources, food banks, and available academic support, including how to obtain devices and internet connectivity.
- Set up a phone hotline for assistance with any needs.
- Provide parents and youth with the technology they need to stay in touch, such as pre-paid cell phones.
- Ask local radio and TV stations to encourage parents and students to connect with schools and early childhood programs, emphasizing the support available and talking about McKinney-Vento services during the news and commercial breaks.