

# Supporting Children and Youth Displaced by Disasters: Five Key Policies for Schools

Schools can provide stability, normalcy, and support for children and youth who are displaced by disasters. This brief summarizes five key policies and provides quick tips for their implementation.

## 1. Most Children and Youth Who are Displaced by Disasters Are Likely to be Eligible for Educational Protections and Services Under the McKinney-Vento Act

Most children and youth who are displaced by disasters are likely to be eligible for the protections and services of the education subtitle of the McKinney-Vento Act because they will meet the subtitle's definition of homelessness. The McKinney-Vento education definition of homelessness includes children and youth who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence. 42 U.S.C. §11434A(2)(A). It specifically covers children and youth living in shelters, transitional housing, cars, campgrounds, motels, substandard housing, and sharing the housing of others temporarily due to loss of housing, economic hardship, or similar reasons. 42 U.S.C. §11434A(2)(B). The Act also provides a means for identifying these children and youth: all local educational agencies (LEAs: school districts and many charter schools) are required to designate a liaison for McKinney-Vento students who is able to carry out ten specific legal duties, including identifying children and youth who meet the definition of homelessness. 42 U.S.C. §11432(g)(1)(J)(ii).

### TIP

While all determinations of eligibility under the McKinney-Vento act are individualized and should be made on a case-by-case basis, families and unaccompanied youth who are staying with others temporarily because they cannot return to their homes due to disasters generally would be eligible for McKinney-Vento services in school. There is no maximum duration of homelessness; unfortunately, families may experience homelessness for long periods of time. It's important to reach out to families at the beginning of the school year to re-determine eligibility.

## 2. Immediate School Enrollment

Many children and youth who are homeless as a result of disasters are forced to stay far from their previous school attendance area. Having fled in crisis, they are unlikely to have the documents typically required for school enrollment. Under the McKinney-Vento Act, these students have the right to enroll immediately in the attendance area where they are currently living, even if they lack paperwork typically required for enrollment, and even if they have missed application or enrollment deadlines during any period of homelessness. 42 U.S.C. §11432(g)(3)(C). Schools are required to assist in obtaining documentation, including immunization and health records. 42 U.S.C. §§11432(g)(3)(C), (D). Liaisons are required to ensure that homeless children and youths are enrolled in, and have a full and equal opportunity to succeed in, schools of that local educational agency. 42 USC §11432(g)(6)(A)(ii). Finally, LEAs must review and revise policies to remove barriers to the education of homeless children and youth, “including barriers to enrollment and retention due to outstanding fees or fines, or absences” 42 U.S.C. §11432(g)(1)(I).

### TIP

In cases of widespread disasters, it may not be possible to obtain records from previous schools. In these cases, school personnel should enroll students experiencing homelessness immediately, as required by the McKinney-Vento act, and speak with parents and youth directly to help determine appropriate class placement, including any special education services that may be part of the student’s Individualized Education Plan under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act.

## 3. School Stability and Transportation

After a disaster, families and unaccompanied youth may be forced to move from one temporary location to another. They also may enroll in one school while their previous schools remain closed due to damage, but later seek to return to their original school when it reopens. Under the McKinney-Vento Act, children and youth experiencing homelessness have the right to attend their “school of origin,” defined as the school the student attended when

### TIP

Several additional factors come into play when deciding between remaining in the school of origin or enrolling in a new school during times when school buildings are closed due to natural disasters. For example, if the school of origin’s building is

permanently housed, or the school in which the student was last enrolled, including preschools and designated receiving schools at the next grade level for feeder school patterns. 42 U.S.C.

§11432(g)(3)(I). The decision about whether to attend the school of origin, or enroll in a new school, must be based on the child's best interest, including factors related to the impact of mobility on achievement, education, health, and safety of homeless children and youth, and must give priority to the request of the parent, guardian, or unaccompanied youth. 42 U.S.C.

§11432(g)(3)(B)(ii). Each local educational agency (LEA) must provide transportation to the school of origin upon the request of a parent or guardian, or in the case of an unaccompanied youth, upon the request of the McKinney-Vento liaison. 42 U.S.C.

§11432(g)(1)(J)(iii).

closed, students can continue to participate in virtual learning at that school regardless of the distance between their temporary housing and the school. At the same time, if the local school building is open, parents or unaccompanied youth may prefer to enroll there for the direct access to school staff, academic support, and services. Helping parents and youth make careful decisions about where to attend school also can help enhance students' feeling of safety after a disaster and reduce disputes.

## 4. Support from Title I Part A

Every LEA that receives funding under Title I, Part A of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act is required to set aside funds to serve homeless students. 20 U.S.C. §6313(c)(3)(A). These funds may be used for services not ordinarily provided to other students, including transportation to the school of origin and other educationally-related support services, including food, clothing, and other basic needs ([see U.S. Department of Education Guidance](#)). LEAs may adjust the amount of the set-aside based on need.

### TIP

After a disaster, LEAs should review the Title I, Part A set-aside, in collaboration with the McKinney-Vento liaison, to ensure it is adequate to serve the increased numbers and needs of homeless students.

## 5. School Meals

Families and youth who become homeless as a result of disasters may struggle to meet basic needs, such as food. McKinney-Vento students are categorically eligible for free school meals; they do not have to complete an application.

### TIP

Inform families and youth that they are eligible for free school meals. Provide the local school food service office with the names of children and youth who are homeless, so that meals can be provided immediately. Take advantage of the [enhanced flexibility](#) for providing school meals during COVID-19. Additionally, refer families and youth to local food banks, including school-based food pantries, to address weekend and holiday food needs.

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### Quick Resources

- [McKinney-Vento Act: Quick Reference](#)
- [Title I Part A: Law, Guidance, and Use of Funds | SchoolHouse Connection](#)
- [National Center on Homeless Education's Disaster Preparation and Response Page](#)
- [Access to Food for Homeless and Highly Mobile Students](#)

### Early Childhood Resources

Early education and care settings can provide stability for young children who are homeless due to disasters, as well as a safe place while parents seek supports they will need to re-establish their families. McKinney-Vento liaisons are required to ensure that young children experiencing homelessness have access to and receive Head Start, early intervention programs (Part C of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act), and preschool programs administered by local educational agencies. 42 USC §11432(g)(6)(A)(iii)

- [Head Start & Early Head Start Program Locator](#)
- [Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies](#)

## Collaboration Resources

The ability to share information quickly among schools, disaster response agencies, shelters, and other service providers will expedite connections to the services that families need. Liaisons are encouraged to connect with disaster response agencies and other service providers to build awareness around McKinney-Vento and processes to refer youth and families to the LEA's liaison. To facilitate appropriate information-sharing, ask community partners to include your LEA specifically on release of information forms, and include disaster response agencies, shelters, and other service providers on release of information forms that parents, guardians and youth sign upon enrollment in your school.

- [A McKinney-Vento Toolbox: Constructing a Robust and Rigorous Homeless Education Program, in Case of Disaster and Every Day](#)
- [National Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster Long Term Recovery Guide](#)
  - See Especially: Appendix 1, Commonly Used Acronyms in Disaster Work
  - Appendix 2, Common Terms and Definitions
  - Appendix 3, Federal Disaster Programs

## Addressing Mental Health Needs

In the immediate aftermath of a disaster, as well as over the following months and even years, children and youth can suffer from anxiety, fear, and other emotional consequences of trauma. Parents and other caregivers also may be struggling emotionally with loss of home, possessions, pets, and even lives. Connecting students and families to mental health supports immediately can help parents, caregivers, and students feel safe and ready to focus on school.

- [National Child Traumatic Stress Network](#)
  - [Parent Guidelines for Helping Children Impacted by Arson and Fires](#)
  - [Trinka and Sam: The Big Fire](#)
- [American Psychological Association Psychology Help Center for Disasters](#)
  - [Tornadoes, hurricanes and children](#)
  - [Managing Traumatic Stress: After the Hurricanes](#)
- [Psychological First Aid for Schools](#)
  - [When Terrible Things Happen: For Students](#)

## Parent Guides in Spanish

- [Trinka y Juan y el Gran Fuego](#)
- [Guía para Padres con Hijos Que Han Sido Afectados por Incendios](#)
- [Guía Para Los Padres Para Ayudar A Los Niños Después de Un Huracán](#)