

COVID-19 and Homelessness: Information for Schools

COVID-19 disrupted education, services and life across the country. As our nation recovers from the pandemic, children and youth experiencing homelessness remain exceptionally vulnerable. As education programs and services are modified and adapted in the current and future environment, schools must continue to address the needs of students experiencing homelessness. The following “Questions and Answers” document, originally issued in June 2020, has been revised and provides some important information for education leaders to consider as LEAs review the current and ongoing needs of children and youth experiencing homelessness throughout the pandemic and recovery.

Are LEAs allowed to waive requirements of the federal McKinney-Vento Act during COVID pandemic?

No. The McKinney-Vento Act is still fully in effect. The way in which the law is implemented must change, of course, but the law is in effect. It is more important than ever that LEAs continue with identification efforts since many new families and youth may fall into homelessness due to the economic crisis, with many urgent needs. Due to their extensive statutory responsibilities under federal law, McKinney-Vento liaisons should be considered essential personnel and responsible for ensuring identification, enrollment, and connection to services for homeless students.

Schools must enroll McKinney-Vento students immediately during this pandemic [42 USC 11432(g)(3)(C)]. Enrollment means “attending classes and participating fully in school activities.” [42 USC 11434a(1)]. That means students experiencing homelessness need to be enrolled immediately, so they can participate immediately in any and all activities the school is offering—school meals, virtual classes, social work services outreach, etc. Review June 2020 CSDE memo titled [Recommendations for a Supportive and Inclusive Registration System During the COVID-19 Pandemic](#).

Should “best interest” determinations be conducted when in-school classes are cancelled and schools are offering virtual instruction or optional virtual learning?

Yes. The McKinney-Vento Act includes the right to enroll immediately “in any public school that nonhomeless students who live in the attendance area in which the child or youth is actually living are eligible to attend” or remain in their school of origin, according to the student’s best interest. In determining a student’s best interest, the impact of school closures and limited personnel certainly should be considered. Changing schools may increase the likelihood of a student falling behind academically or missing out on services. However, there may be important reasons to change to a local school, e.g. better access to school meals or other supports and services.

What are some basic strategies an LEA should consider that are targeted at the ongoing needs of children and youth experiencing homelessness throughout the COVID-19 crisis?

- Enhance identification efforts during school closures and modified points-of-contact with schools. Outreach about McKinney-Vento eligibility and services on all available platforms, ensure online enrollment processes ask about housing circumstances and engage with community providers to people experiencing homelessness.

- Ensure students are able to participate fully in all school activities by considering how homelessness increases their mobility and may include transportation or other challenges. This may include providing them access to devices and internet connectivity, but also consider emergency assistance such as gas vouchers or bus passes to pick up meals and schoolwork or drop off completed assignments. Delivery options of meals and assignments to where students are staying may also be considered.
- Connect with students struggling with housing and maintain communication by ensuring homeless families and youth have a way to stay in touch with the liaison, teachers, counselors, and others. This may include pre-paid cell phones or other tools to keep connected despite frequent moves and school closures. Once identified, communicate often with students, families and with community service providers, e.g. shelter and housing agencies, to ensure students stay connected and engaged in school.
- Re-evaluate the role of the current LEA McKinney-Vento liaison. Ensure they have capacity and resources to do their jobs effectively, fulfill their duties as outlined in the law and sufficiently address the ongoing needs of children and youth experiencing homelessness throughout the pandemic?

What resources are available to assist LEAs with addressing the needs of children and youth experiencing homelessness throughout the COVID-19 crisis?

The CARES Act created the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSEA) fund, of which a specific allowable use of funding is "activities to address the unique needs of students experiencing homelessness, including how outreach and service delivery will meet their needs." In planning the use of ESSER funds, LEAs will need to consult with various stakeholders at the local level to ensure that the most at-risk students' needs are met including McKinney-Vento (homeless) eligible children.

Both McKinney-Vento and Title I, Part A funds may provide LEAs with an already existing funding stream that can be used to target additional supports and services that benefit homeless students. With either funds, two principles should be considered when LEAs are exploring use of these funds to provide services to homeless students:

1. Services must be reasonable and necessary to assist homeless students to take advantage of educational opportunities.
2. Services are not available from other public or private sources, such as the USDA's National School Lunch Program and Breakfast Program, public health clinics, or local discretionary funds used to provide similar services for economically disadvantaged students generally.

What are allowable expenses or activities for CARES ESSER funds grants?

- *Any activity authorized by the ESEA of 1965, including the Native Hawaiian Education Act and the Alaska Native Educational Equity, Support, and Assistance Act ([20 U.S.C. 6301 et seq.](#)), the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act ([20 U.S.C. 1400 et seq.](#)) ("IDEA"), the Adult Education and Family Literacy Act ([20 U.S.C. 1400 et seq.](#)), the Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education Act of 2006 ([20 U.S.C. 2301 et seq.](#)) ("the Perkins Act"), or subtitle B of title VII of the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act ([42 U.S.C. 11431 et seq.](#)).*
- *Coordination of preparedness and response efforts of local educational agencies with State, local, Tribal, and territorial public health departments, and other relevant agencies, to improve coordinated responses among such entities to prevent, prepare for, and respond to coronavirus.*
- *Addressing learning loss among students, including low-income students, children with disabilities, English learners, racial and ethnic minorities, students experiencing homelessness, and children and youth in foster care, of the local educational agency, including by: (A) Administering and using high-quality assessments that are valid and reliable, to accurately assess students' academic progress and assist educators in meeting students' academic needs, including through differentiating instruction; (B) Implementing evidence-based activities to meet the comprehensive needs of students; (C) Providing information and assistance to parents*

and families on how they can effectively support students, including in a distance learning environment; (D) Tracking student attendance and improving student engagement in distance education; (E) Tracking student academic progress with evaluating and comparing to pre-pandemic grades and progress to identify students that experienced learning loss.

- *Providing principals and others school leaders with the resources necessary to address the needs of their individual schools.*
- *Activities to address the unique needs of low-income children or students, children with disabilities, English learners, racial and ethnic minorities, students experiencing homelessness, and foster care youth, including how outreach and service delivery will meet the needs of each population.*
- *Developing and implementing procedures and systems to improve the preparedness and response efforts of local educational agencies.*
- *Training and professional development for staff of the local educational agency on sanitation and minimizing the spread of infectious diseases.*
- *Purchasing supplies to sanitize and clean the facilities of a local educational agency, including buildings operated by such agency.*
- *Planning for and coordinating during long-term closures, including for how to provide meals to eligible students, how to provide technology for online learning to all students, how to provide guidance for carrying out requirements under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act ([20 U.S.C. 1401 et seq.](#)) and how to ensure other educational services can continue to be provided consistent with all Federal, State, and local requirements.*
- *Purchasing educational technology (including hardware, software, and connectivity) for students who are served by the local educational agency that aids in regular and substantive educational interaction between students and their classroom instructors, including low-income students and students with disabilities, which may include assistive technology or adaptive equipment.*
- *Providing mental health services and supports.*
- *Planning and implementing activities related to summer learning and supplemental afterschool programs, including providing classroom instruction or online learning during the summer months and addressing the needs of low-income students, students with disabilities, English learners, migrant students, students experiencing homelessness, and children in foster care.*
- *School facility repairs and improvements to enable operation of schools to reduce risk of virus transmission and exposure to environmental health hazards, and to support student health needs.*
- *Inspection, testing, maintenance, repair, replacement, and upgrade projects to improve the indoor air quality in school facilities, including mechanical and non-mechanical heating, ventilation, and air conditioning systems; filtering, purification and other air cleaning; fans, control systems, and window and door repair and replacement.*
- *Other activities that are necessary to maintain the operation of and continuity of services in local educational agencies and continuing to employ existing staff of the local educational agency.*

What are some examples of how children and youth experiencing homelessness and housing insecurity may be supported aligned under the current [Connecticut state-level priorities for education](#)?

Academic Supports, Learning Loss, Learning Acceleration and Recovery:

- Provide academic coaching and in-person learning opportunities. EX: offer teachers extra paid hours to provide individual academic support to students, to do weekly check-ins by text or other platforms outside of class, and provide weekly attendance certificates and other incentives to promote attendance.
- Prioritize students experiencing homelessness with small, socially distanced on-site academic

opportunities at school buildings and/or in the community.

- Increase capacity of counselors to ensure high school students experiencing homelessness are directly assisted with credit accrual and recovery, FAFSA completion, and college transition.
- Improve access to early childhood education services for young children experiencing homelessness by increasing capacity in preschool, Head Start, and early intervention programs.

Family and Community Connections:

- Increase the local homeless education liaison’s capacity for outreach, identification, and services. EX: augment their hours dedicated to McKinney-Vento duties and/or hiring additional staff to increase awareness of McKinney-Vento through posters, flyers, and other outreach materials throughout the community, coordinated with local partners.
- Support increased professional development on McKinney Vento and to identify homeless students in live and virtual environments to teachers, registrars, social workers, counselors, early childhood education staff, special education teams, and all school staff.
- Enhance communication options with students and families by providing prepaid cell phones for youth and parents. EX: Kansas City Public Schools purchased phones with one- and two-year contracts for McKinney-Vento high school seniors.
- Help students and families meet basic needs like food, health care, masks, hygiene items, and laundry or send small care packages to students weekly or monthly to keep them engaged.
- Secure and staff a vehicle for community outreach to motels, campgrounds, food banks and doubled-up students. EX: Paducah Public Schools in KY purchased a van with community donations, and the McKinney-Vento program has teamed up with school nutrition to provide school supplies, hygiene items and food.
- Conduct an audit of all LEA systems/processes and implement changes that create more “McKinney-Vento friendly” designs.

School Safety and Social-Emotional Well-being of the “Whole Student” and of our School Staff:

- Help meet rising mental health needs by targeting increased counseling and social work services to students experiencing homelessness, augmenting existing staff hours and/or hiring additional staff.
- Procure community mental health providers to support students virtually and/or on-site at schools.
- Ensure safe, reliable door-to-door transportation to all in-person learning opportunities.

Remote Learning, Staff Development, and the Digital Divide:

- Set up virtual centers in community, providing transportation, meals, and teachers to help students with distance learning.
- Offer tutoring specifically designed to support students experiencing homelessness in remote and hybrid learning.
- Upgrade online enrollment systems to ensure they are fully and easily accessible to families and students experiencing homelessness.

Does the most recent American Rescue Plan Act (ARP) package for Covid-19 relief aid for K-12 education through the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund (ESSER) address children and youth experiencing homelessness?

Yes. In addition to all previously mentioned supports under both CARES ESSER funds grants, ARP includes funding specifically dedicated to support the identification, enrollment, and school participation of children and youth experiencing homelessness, including through wrap-around services. Both States and LEAs must strategically use and leverage both ARP ESSER funds and

dedicated homelessness funding to locate, engage, maintain connection, and support students experiencing housing instability and homelessness.

What strategies can districts align with the State-Level Priorities Revisited: [Reimagining Schools to Transform Students' Lives](#) and the use of ARP ESSER funds to effectively support students experiencing housing instability and homelessness?

To accelerate learning and facilitate recovery, academic supports must be positioned to address learning loss and target resources for our students disproportionately affected by the pandemic, including students experiencing homelessness. Below are examples of strategies and targeted supports that schools and districts may consider:

Increase outreach and identification.

- Augment staff hours dedicated to McKinney-Vento liaison duties.
- Hire additional staff specifically tasked with finding and re-engaging McKinney-Vento students.
- Launch a local campaign to increase posters, flyers, and other outreach, including media, targeted in places homeless families and youth frequent such as grocery stores, public transportation and community services.
- Screen for homelessness by embedding questions and information about homelessness in all school or district outreach efforts, including in registration process with clear wording and in multiple languages.
- Increase professional development to teachers, registrars, social workers, counselors, early childhood education staff, special education teams, and all school staff to ensure their knowledge of McKinney-Vento and ability to assist with identification.

Enhance communication options with students and families.

- Provide prepaid cell phones for youth and parents with extended use options.
- Facilitate [“affinity groups”](#) for students to connect on platforms they use.
- Send small care packages to students weekly or monthly to keep them engaged.
- Staff a mobile project for community outreach to motels, campgrounds, food banks and similar places.

Increase counseling, social work and mental health services.

- Ensure school counselors can assist McKinney-Vento students with credit accrual and recovery, as well as FAFSA completion, and college transition.
- Hire or develop building-level “success coaches” to work with McKinney-Vento students.
- Develop the capacity of school staff to help students and families meet basic needs like food, health care, masks, hygiene items, and laundry.
- Recruit and engage parents and/or young people with lived experience to serve on projects aimed to improve school and district McKinney-Vento performance.
- Employ social workers to help families and youth access education and navigate other ARP services, such as shelter, utilities, housing and rental assistance, child care, Head Start, unemployment, and tax credits.

- Invite community mental health providers to support McKinney-Vento students virtually and/or on-site at schools.
- Ensure mental health providers employ trauma-informed practices and are sensitive to the challenges of LGBTQ.

Provide academic coaching, in-person enrichment opportunities, and access to summer learning.

- Offer teachers extra paid hours to provide individual academic support to their McKinney-Vento students.
- Encourage teachers to do weekly check-ins by text or other platforms outside of class, provide weekly attendance certificates and other incentives that promote attendance.
- Offer transportation to all available in-person enrichment opportunities.
- Use paid tutors or recruit volunteers specifically trained to provide remote and hybrid learning activities.
- Provide McKinney-Vento students with free access to summer learning and enrichment programs.

Improve systems that provide more and better transportation options.

- Increase the capacity of existing bus services that prioritizes McKinney-Vento students and eliminates any delays.
- Partner with public transportation providers to offer no-cost or reduced-cost options for students and families such as bus passes, train passes, bikeshare access, etc.
- Explore contracts with existing taxi, livery and rideshare providers to ensure that older students may have additional options to get to and from school (where allowed and within your district's legal guidelines).
- Assist parents and youth to obtain drivers' licenses and improve their access to a safe, reliable vehicle.
- Develop a reimbursement system for youth and parents experiencing homelessness for gasoline expenses to transport their children to and from school, enrichment and extracurricular opportunities.