

Supports for Students Experiencing Homelessness

Many families in our state are having a hard time finding and keeping stable housing. When a family loses housing and has to move, it can be hard for students to keep up with school.

There is a law called the “**McKinney Vento Act**” that requires school districts to help students who are experiencing homelessness. Students experiencing homelessness can receive:

- ✓ **Transportation to continue at their “School of Origin”**
- ✓ **Immediate Enrollment, if they have to change schools, and**
- ✓ **Additional Supports, including Free Meals.**

When we talk about “students experiencing homelessness,” that includes many students and families who have a roof over their heads, but not one that they can count on for the long-term. It includes situations when:

- a student or family has to double-up with someone else because they lost their own housing or can't afford their own place;
- families are making-do with something that does not have all the basics for adequate housing, but provides some shelter, like an RV or camper;
- families are staying in a shelter or a hotel; or
- young people are on their own, “couch-surfing,” staying temporarily with a relative, in a youth shelter, or outside.

These are just examples. If your housing is not regular, fixed or adequate, ask if you are eligible for supports. **If you think you might be eligible for McKinney Vento supports, please do not be shy about asking for help. Ask to talk to a “McKinney Vento Liaison” at the school district.**

Find contact information for a McKinney Vento Liaison by calling your district, or on the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) website, here:

<https://www.k12.wa.us/student-success/equity-education/homeless-education/homeless-education-liaison-contact-list>.

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Young People on their Own: Unaccompanied Homeless Youth

If you are a **young person, on your own**, staying with friends, with a relative or in a shelter, you can get **transportation to keep going to your same school** even if you are staying in a different district. You also have the option of **enrolling in school where you are staying**.

It is important to tell the school about your housing situation so they will know to follow the McKinney Vento requirements. If you are not sure who to tell, ask to talk to a **“McKinney Vento Liaison.”**

Find contact information for a McKinney Vento Liaison by calling the school district, or on the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) website, here:

<https://www.k12.wa.us/student-success/equity-education/homeless-education/homeless-education-liaison-contact-list>.

To learn more about your rights, check out the **Homeless Youth Handbook for Washington State**, available online, here: <https://www.homelessyouth.org/us/washington>. You can also check out the **Know Your Rights Toolkit from Schoolhouse Washington**, online here:

https://schoolhousewa.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/KnowYourRightsToolkit_040618.pdf.

School of Origin

Changing schools can be very hard for students. To help them stay on track, students eligible for McKinney Vento services can stay in the same school they have been attending even when they move. That is called the “School of Origin.”

A student's "school of origin" is:

- ✓ the last school they attended before they became homeless, or
- ✓ the school they have been most recently attending.

A school of origin could include a **preschool program** run by a school district.

A school of origin can also include the school at the next level up if a student is at the transition from elementary to middle school, or from middle school to high school. If a school district has "feeder patterns," where students from certain elementary schools go to an assigned middle school, or high school, then the usually assigned middle or high school could be a "school of origin" for a student.

Choosing between School of Origin and a New School: Best Interests Determination

Under the McKinney Vento law, district liaisons work with families and unaccompanied youth to figure out what will be in the student's best interest, choosing between:

1. Staying in the "School of Origin" or
2. Starting in a new school they would attend based on where they are currently staying.

Because changing schools often causes students to fall behind, the law says schools should help students stay in their School of Origin, unless:

- ✓ It is not feasible for the child, or
- ✓ The parent prefers to have their child at the new school (or in case of an unaccompanied youth, the youth prefers it).

You should get notice from the McKinney Vento liaison about the best interest decision. If you do not agree, you can appeal the decision. Ask for information about the appeal process.

If a parent (or an unaccompanied youth) and a district do not agree on the best interest decision under the McKinney Vento process, then:

1. **The student should be enrolled immediately in the school the parent (or unaccompanied youth) requests** (as long as it is either the School of Origin, or the school the child would attend based on where they are now staying), and
2. **The district should explain how to appeal the decision.**

Appeals about McKinney Vento best interests decisions should be decided while the student is in school, receiving transportation and supports to stay engaged with school.

Transportation to stay in a School of Origin

If you have to move across town, or even to a town that is many miles away, the district can work with you on a plan for transportation to keep your child in their school of origin.

Districts might send a bus, or give older students a city bus pass. If you have a vehicle, and you want to drive your children to school, a district can reimburse you for your mileage. If needed, a district might send a taxicab.

The school can also work with you to plan transportation so that your child can participate in extra-curricular activities, before or after school.

Immediate Enrollment in a New School

Immediate enrollment in the new school means getting your child signed up and in classes right away.

If staying in their old school does not make sense, you should be able to get your child enrolled in a new school, based on where you are now, even if you do not have paperwork usually required at enrollment (like copies of bills or a lease, or prior school records).

The law does not set a specific number of days for what it means to be enrolled and in class “immediately,” but schools are encouraged to try for the **same day, or the next school day**. That is true for any student eligible for McKinney Vento services, **including students with IEPs (Individualized Education Programs) or Section 504 plans for disability accommodations**.

Students should not have to wait to start school while records are gathered and reviewed.

Schools should do what they can to try to get a copy of records from prior schools, including IEPs and other individualized support plans. They can also call the prior school to see if they can talk with a teacher, counselor or other person familiar with your child. They can ask you and your child about what kind of classes they were in, and what they worked on at school. The school might want to do some quick assessments to check your child’s reading level, or math skills, for example. They might give them a class schedule to start with and make changes when they have more complete information and records. Schools should not make a child wait at home while they collect full copies of records.

Other Options for School Enrollment

The school of origin and the school that your child would be assigned to based on where you are currently staying are the two main options for students experiencing homelessness.

Like any other family, you can also ask for transfers within the district, or a “choice” transfer to another district. While those options are not guaranteed, they should be equally available to all students. Find information about school choice options at your district office, or read about options on our website: <https://oeo.wa.gov/en>.

Getting Help

If you have questions about McKinney Vento supports, please call the school or district office near you and ask to talk to a “McKinney Vento Liaison.”

You can also reach out to the Washington State Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI)’s Homeless Education office at 360-725-6505 or by email at HomelessEd@k12.wa.us.

If you have questions or concerns, you can also contact our office to see if we can help. You can reach us at 1-866-297-2597, email us at oeoinfo@gov.wa.gov, or connect with us through our online intake system, here: <https://services.oeo.wa.gov/oeo>.