



Unaccompanied Youth Toolkit for Shelters and Service Providers

McKinney Vento 101
Basic School Services Available for Unaccompanied Youth

Q: Why is school so important for unaccompanied youth?

A: School is often the most “normal” part of a homeless youth's day. School provides youth with many opportunities to grow and succeed. Schools offer academics, adult and peer support, meals, basic medical and mental health services, sports and clubs, and other activities. Schools can also connect youth to other resources and supports available in the community. They can teach youth the skills they need to find safety and security as adults. Many youth understand education is a way out of poverty.

Q: Do youth experiencing homelessness have the right to go to school?

A: Yes. Unaccompanied youth have the same right as other students: the right to a free and appropriate public education. The McKinney-Vento Act is a law that makes sure youth experiencing homelessness can attend school. It protects youth who lack a fixed, regular and adequate nighttime residence, includingⁱ:

- Sharing the housing of others due to loss of housing, economic hardship or a similar reason (including running away from their home or being forced to leave home);
- In shelters and transitional housing programs;
- Staying in cars, parks, abandoned buildings, substandard housing, campgrounds and public spaces; and
- Living in motels.

Q: What does the McKinney-Vento Act say?

A: The law provides homeless youth with many rightsⁱⁱ, including:

- The right to receive the assistance of the school district McKinney-Vento homeless liaison, a staff person that every school district must designate to ensure homeless youth can enroll in school and receive services.ⁱⁱⁱ
- The right to enroll in school and begin attending immediately, even if they cannot produce normally required documents, such as proof of guardianship, birth certificates, immunization records, or proof of residency.^{iv}
- The right to participate fully in school, including extra-curricular activities.^v
- The right to continue attending their “school of origin” (the school they attended when they had permanent housing or the school in which they were last enrolled), even if they are staying in another school district, if that is in their best interest.^{vi}
- The right to receive transportation to their school of origin.^{vii}
- Automatic eligibility for free school meals.^{viii}

Q: Can unaccompanied youth under 18 enroll in school without a parent’s or guardian’s signature?

A: Yes. The McKinney-Vento Act applies to unaccompanied youth who are experiencing homeless and not in the physical custody of a parent or guardian. Under the law the lack of a parent or legal guardian cannot delay the enrollment of an unaccompanied youth. Schools must have policies in place to make sure unaccompanied youth can enroll in school.^{ix}

In practice, schools enroll unaccompanied youth in different ways. One of the most common ways is for youth to enroll themselves in school; Many states have laws that specifically give youth the right to enroll themselves in school, and many school districts have similar policies. In other cases adult caregivers who are not legal guardians enroll youth, or school district liaisons complete enrollment papers. Whatever approach they choose, schools should set it out in a clear policy and share it with secretaries, registrars, counselors and administrators. Schools must also work with groups that serve unaccompanied youth, such as shelters, street outreach teams, and drop-in centers, to make sure unaccompanied youth are attending school.

Q: How can schools support the enrollment and success of unaccompanied youth?

A: Unaccompanied youth are striving to stay in school despite lacking a safe, stable homes and the guidance of parents. They face great challenges in meeting their most basic needs. Schools can offer many services to help youth succeed, such as:

- Access to showers and laundry facilities when available at school.
- Access to the school library or other quiet place to study before and after school.
- School uniforms, clothing, hygiene items, food and school supplies.
- A stable adult mentor to check-in with students, encourage them, and monitor their attendance and grades.
- Academic support and tutoring.
- Opportunities for enhanced credit accrual and recovery, including offering credit for work experiences.^x
- Discrete, confidential opportunities to connect with other youth experiencing homeless, if the youth wish to do so.
- Assistance in connecting with services available in the community, such as youth drop-in centers, shelters, health and mental health care, legal aid and SNAP/Food Stamps.

Q: Who can an unaccompanied youth contact for help enrolling in school?

A: Your local school district McKinney-Vento liaison is the place to start: contact your school district office to reach the liaison. If you are not able to contact the liaison, or if the liaison does not help you, contact your State McKinney-Vento Coordinator (contact information available at http://center.serve.org/nche/states/state_resources.php). The National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth offers many resources (<http://naehcy.org>); as does the National Center for Homeless Education (<http://center.serve.org/nche/index.php> or 1-800-308-2145).

ⁱ 42 U.S.C. §11434A.

ⁱⁱ For a longer summary of the McKinney-Vento Act, see: <http://center.serve.org/nche/downloads/briefs/administrators.pdf>.

ⁱⁱⁱ 42 USC §11432(g)(1)(J)(ii).

^{iv} 42 USC §11432(g)(3)(C).

^v 42 USC §§11432(g)(3)(C) and 11434A. For more information on youth's rights to participate in extra-curricular activities, please see: http://center.serve.org/nche/downloads/briefs/extra_curr.pdf

^{vi} 42 USC §§11432(g)(1)(J)(iii), 11432(g)(3)(A)-(B).

^{vii} 42 USC §11432(g)(1)(J)(iii).

^{viii} U.S. Department of Agriculture Child Nutrition Service, Child Nutrition and WIC Reauthorization Act, Memorandum SP4 (July 19, 2004).

^{ix} For a summary of the McKinney-Vento Act's provisions on enrolling unaccompanied youth and implementation strategies, see: <http://center.serve.org/nche/downloads/briefs/guardianship.pdf>

^x For more information about credit accrual and recovery for unaccompanied youth, see: <http://center.serve.org/nche/downloads/briefs/credit.pdf>.