



HELPING HOMELESS YOUTH SUCCEED IN COLLEGE: STRATEGIES FOR TRANSITIONING FROM HIGH SCHOOL TO COLLEGE

[Last Updated October 2019]

Postsecondary education is increasingly necessary for obtaining employment that pays enough to afford housing. It is a critical factor in ending the cycle of homelessness and improving the health, stability, and overall well-being of youth experiencing homelessness.

The Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 (ESSA) recognized the importance of postsecondary education for homeless students by amending the McKinney-Vento Act to improve the transition from high school to postsecondary education. Under the Act, local educational agency (LEA) homeless liaisons are required to ensure that unaccompanied homeless youth are informed of their status as independent students for college financial aid and obtain assistance to receive verification for the FAFSA. Additionally, state McKinney-Vento plans must describe how homeless youth will receive assistance from school counselors to improve their readiness for college.

The transition from secondary to postsecondary education can be challenging for any student, but especially for youth who have histories of trauma, mobility, and lack of family support. Teachers, counselors, McKinney-Vento liaisons, and service providers can play a key role in supporting the decision to go to college and assisting youth in the transition.

Supporting the Transition from Secondary to Postsecondary

K-12 Educators and McKinney-Vento Liaisons:

- Reach out to McKinney-Vento eligible students as early as freshman year to schedule meetings to discuss postsecondary options (e.g. four-year institutions, community colleges, technical colleges, etc.). Continue meeting with these students throughout the year to answer questions, serve as a resource, and remind them of deadlines. Create a checklist to review each time you meet to keep them on track. Encourage McKinney-Vento students to read the U.S. Department of Education's guide, "[I Want to go to College: Now What?](#)"
- Participate in the [John Burton Advocates for Youth training course](#) focused specifically on the transition from high school to college.
- If students are interested in postsecondary education, make sure they take the ACT/SAT exams. Most low-income and homeless students will qualify for fee waivers ([ACT](#) & [SAT](#)).
- Encourage all students to complete the FAFSA. Even if students aren't committed to postsecondary plans, it is important for them to fill out the FAFSA so they can receive financial aid if they do decide to attend higher education. There are a variety of [scholarship opportunities](#) for students, including [parenting students](#), including our [Youth Leadership & Scholarship Program](#). See more information on FAFSA on our [Financial Aid Tip Sheet](#).
- Host a college tour. A college tour is a great way to experience college life first-hand and imagine oneself there. If a college tour isn't feasible, host a panel of current homeless college students or



alumni to talk about their experiences and answer questions. Read how one liaison hosted a [“McKinney-Vento Opportunity Tour”](#) and get ideas for how you might replicate her success.

- Be aware of state laws that offer in-state tuition, tuition, and fee waivers like Florida, California, and Maryland. For a full list of states, see our [State Policy Resource](#).
- Partner with college access programs and other higher education supports like the Dean of Students Office or TRIO Support Services. See our [Pathways to Partnership: Higher Education guide](#) for ideas.
- Educate school staff (teachers, counselors, social workers, and graduation coaches) on the services and opportunities available to McKinney-Vento students by hosting annual trainings.
- Provide an education resource guide for homeless and foster youth such as Fresno’s iPlan.

Homeless Service Providers:

- Offer opportunities within the shelter to learn more about postsecondary options. Emphasize the importance of finishing high school and pursuing a postsecondary degree.
- Advertise when local college fairs are in the area.
- Support youth in completing college applications and FAFSA forms and provide documents to assist unaccompanied homeless youth with independent student determinations. See more on our [Financial Aid Tip Sheet](#).
- Familiarize yourself with higher education timelines and deadlines. Start introducing offices and support programs early on from the [Pathways to Partnership: Higher Education guide](#).

Higher Education Professionals:

- Establish relationships with K-12 liaisons and community youth providers, especially if your institution has a homeless higher education liaison or a single point of contact. For more information about homeless higher education liaisons, see our archived webinars, including [Learning from our Higher Education Liaisons: Best Practices in Supporting Homeless College Students Part 1](#), [Part 2](#), and [Paving the Way To and Through Higher Education: Learning From Indiana’s Homeless Liaisons](#).
- Create a welcoming, easily-accessible physical space for students transitioning from high school to postsecondary education to connect with a higher education liaison or point of contact.
- Encourage students to attend summer bridge programs that assist in the transition to higher education. These programs offer introductory classes, facilitate familiarity with the campus, and establish a sense of community with peers and administrators. [IUPUI’s Thrive Program](#) extends their summer bridge program and provides support throughout students’ first year. As the “first look” at a college campus, summer bridge programs build a sense of community and help with retention rates, like [Georgetown University’s Community Scholars Program](#) impressive 91% graduation rate or [Florida State University’s Unconquered Scholars Program](#) where students experiencing homelessness can meet other individuals similar to them.

Other Strategies:

- Seek out local opportunities that help college-bound students prepare for college, like the [DC Office of the State Superintendent of Education’s college starter kits](#) that provide essential items (laptop, luggage, school supplies, hygiene items, etc.) to high school graduates.

To see other tip sheets on higher education from SchoolHouse Connection, click [here](#).