SchoolHouse Connection

June 2020

REMOVING BARRIERS TO ONLINE ENROLLMENT FOR STUDENTS EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS

The McKinney-Vento Act requires state and local educational agencies to remove barriers to school enrollment.[1] The right to enroll immediately in school, even without documents normally required for enrollment, is one of the core protections of the Act.[2] It recognizes that homelessness often makes it impossible to prove residency, produce immunization and other health records, and, for youth experiencing homelessness on their own, have a parent or guardian complete the enrollment process.

Unfortunately, the increasing trend of online enrollment erects barriers to immediate enrollment for students experiencing homelessness. These barriers have become more obvious in the wake of school closures due to COVID-19, which made online enrollment the only option for most students. At the same time, COVID-19 has laid bare the inequities in access to technology of students of color, low-income students, and students experiencing homelessness. As they attempt to enroll through online systems, families and youth experiencing homelessness struggle with limited access to technology and connectivity, as well as basic enrollment barriers such as lack of information about the McKinney-Vento Act, lack of a pathway to enroll without documents, and inaccessible language. Students and families for whom English is not their first language, and those unfamiliar with online platforms and processes, will be disproportionately impacted by these barriers.

REMEMBER THE RIGHT TO REMAIN IN THE SCHOOL OF ORIGIN!

Enrollment in a new school may not be in the best interest of students experiencing homelessness, despite changes in their living situation. It is critical that schools inform youth and families of their right to remain in the school origin and receive transportation[3], and of the importance of school stability, whether instruction is being provided in-person, online, or via take-home packets.

This checklist outlines some of the most common barriers to online enrollment for students experiencing homelessness and provides strategies for addressing them. Using this checklist to assess and remove barriers will help ensure students experiencing homelessness can have immediate and equitable access to school.

[1] 42 U.S.C. 11432(g)(1)(I).
[2] 42 U.S.C. 11432(g)(3)(C).
[3] 42 U.S.C. 11432(g)(3).

CHECKLIST AT-A-GLANCE

- ☐ Does the enrollment website include information about McKinney-Vento rights, including immediate enrollment without documents, and services?
- ☐ Does the enrollment website provide an easily-accessible pathway for students experiencing homelessness to enroll without proof of residency, a parent or legal guardian, and other documents?
- ☐ Is the enrollment website, including McKinney-Vento information, written in a manner understandable to all families and students? Is information available in multiple languages?
- ☐ Are there convenient alternatives to online enrollment for students and families who cannot access the online format, or who need personal assistance to complete the enrollment process?
- ☐ Is the school ensuring that families and students have access to electronic devices and internet connectivity?
- ☐ Is the enrollment website easily accessible from a phone, and with limited data allotment and speed, recognizing those realities for families and students experiencing homelessness?

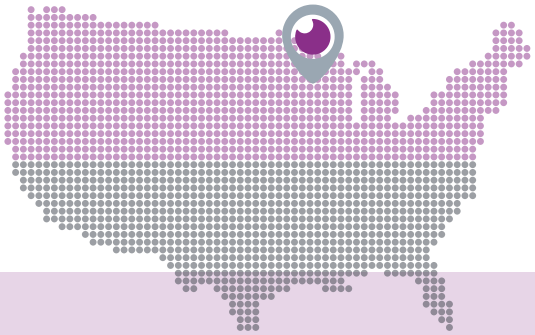
1. Does the enrollment website include information about McKinney-Vento rights, including immediate enrollment without documents, and services?

- ☐ Place McKinney-Vento information prominently on the front page(s) of the enrollment website. Use descriptive terms such as “staying temporarily,” “staying in someone else’s home,” or “in transition,” rather than labels like “homeless” that families and students may not identify with or understand.
- ☐ Explain that McKinney-Vento students can enroll without the usual documents, and provide an easy and immediate avenue for that enrollment.
- ☐ Display McKinney-Vento enrollment information and forms prominently.
- ☐ Provide contact information for the McKinney-Vento liaison and other school staff trained on enrolling students experiencing homelessness.
- ☐ Place McKinney-Vento information prominently on individual school websites, as well as the district website.

2. Does the enrollment website provide an easily-accessible pathway for students experiencing homelessness to enroll without proof of residency, a parent or legal guardian, and other documents?

- ☐ Ask about students’ living situations among the first questions asked of all students in both online and paper enrollment processes.
- ☐ Design online enrollment forms and processes to accommodate McKinney-Vento situations, allowing students to enroll without proof of residency or a parent/guardian’s signature.
- ☐ Set enrollment forms to automatically provide the McKinney-Vento liaison with contact information for students who indicate possible homelessness.

Wisconsin



Appleton Area School District (WI) changed its online enrollment homelessness filtering question from "Is the student homeless?" to “Is the student’s nighttime residence owned or rented by the parent/guardian?”

"I felt that changing the online enrollment housing question to a more factual and less subjective wording would help identify more students eligible for McKinney Vento support. When a parent answers ‘No’ to the question, a drop-down menu of living situation choices appears. This also results in the student's name getting flagged for me in our student data system for assessment for McKinney Vento eligibility and support. If a parent answers ‘Yes,’ they simply get moved along to the next question. I also advocated to add a new question to help me identify unaccompanied homeless youth."
- Christi DeChamps, Homeless & Foster Care Support

Housing

Is the student's nighttime residence owned or rented by the parent/guardian?

- ○ Yes
- ◉ No

What is the student's current nighttime living situation?

- ○ Homeless/Domestic Violence Shelter
- ○ Hotel, motel, campground, trailer park due to lack of housing
- ○ Shared housing/doubled up due to loss of housing, economic hardship, personal housing crisis
- ○ Transitional Housing Program (supported housing program)
- ○ Unsheltered - living in vehicle, park, public space, abandoned building, etc.

Is the student residing with a caregiver/person other than a parent/guardian?

- ○ Yes
- ○ No

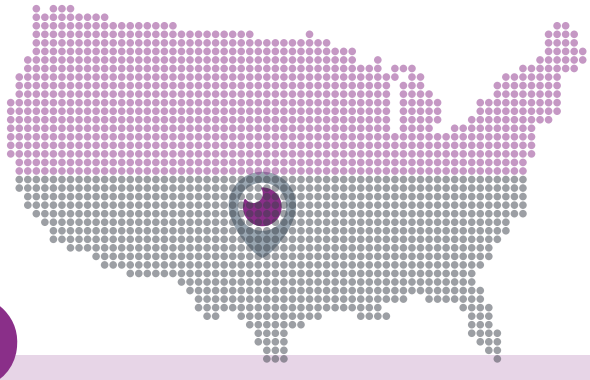
For more information click on this link.

Image Above: Example of Appleton Area School District's new online enrollment homelessness filtering question.

3. Is the enrollment website, including McKinney-Vento information, written in a manner understandable to all families and students? Is information available in multiple languages?

- ☐ Keep enrollment instructions as brief as possible, and the process as simple as possible. Once the student is in school, additional follow-up can occur as needed.
- ☐ Ensure that the reading level of enrollment systems, and school and district websites overall, are at a level that allows parents with less than a high school education, and students themselves, to navigate the system easily.
- ☐ Remove any steps to enrollment that create additional barriers for students in homeless situations, whether enrolling online or in-person.
  - ☐ Offer an option for registrants to proceed without requesting a PIN or code.
  - ☐ Create a secure page for students in homeless situations to enter information.
- ☐ Offer online enrollment forms in all languages spoken in the district, and make links to these forms easy to locate.
- ☐ Enlist bilingual school staff to assist with both online and in-person enrollment.
- ☐ Partner with community organizations that serve students and families of color and immigrants, and train them in online enrollment processes, so they can support families and students.
- ☐ Create simple videos in multiple languages, and with subtitles, that explain McKinney-Vento rights and services, identify the McKinney-Vento liaison, and clarify enrollment instructions.

Texas



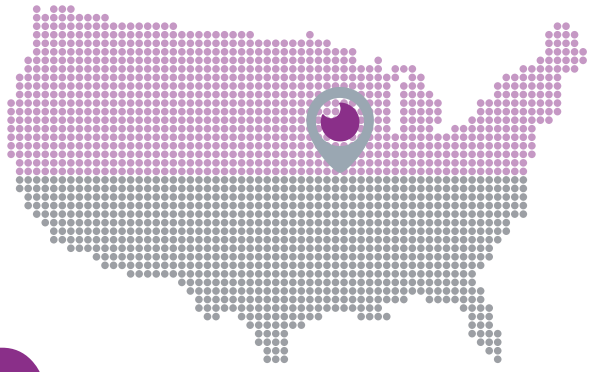
San Antonio Independent School District (TX) offers online videos with step-by-step instructions on how to register via computer and cell phone, in English and Spanish. The online enrollment system notes in several places that students without a permanent home and students in foster care do not have to supply all the documents usually needed for registration. The website provides a number to call for assistance and a link to an Enrollment Guide with information for homeless and foster students.

"San Antonio ISD has a supportive administration and enrollment managers that understand our district's 90% economically disadvantaged rate and support the outreach to discover which students are homeless."
- Estella Garza, Director of Family Support Services

4. Are there convenient alternatives to online enrollment for students and families who cannot access the online format, or who need personal assistance to complete the enrollment process?

- ☐ Allow in-person enrollment at school sites as an alternative to online enrollment. As needed, in-person enrollment can follow social distancing and other safety measures that may be in place.
- ☐ Institute enrollment options by phone if schools are closed due to a pandemic. Ensure that online enrollment forms include simple instructions for accessing in-person or telephonic enrollment.
- ☐ Complete the student's enrollment in one visit, recognizing that finding the time and transportation to visit the school can be challenging for families and students experiencing homelessness.
- ☐ Ensure that all posters, brochures, and other materials that discuss enrollment of students experiencing homelessness include information about in-person enrollment, in addition to the web site address for online enrollment.
- ☐ Meet with students and families at community agencies like shelters, meal sites, and motels, to help eliminate transportation and other enrollment barriers.

Missouri



Kansas City Public Schools (MO) has turned their online enrollment form into a fillable PDF that can be saved and emailed or faxed directly to the homeless liaison.

"This allows community agencies to help families complete the enrollment application. This method has helped a lot and families can complete the form on handheld devices like cell phones and tablets."
- Melissa Douglas, McKinney-Vento Homeless Liaison

Students in Transition - Homeless Services

Apply Here

Applications are being accepted for the 2019-2020 school year. Please click the Apply Here button to download our application. Once you've completed your application, please send it to homelessservices@kcpublicschools.org.

If yes to any of these questions, click here to start a referral.
Are you sharing the housing of other persons due to loss of housing, economic hardship, or a similar reason?
Are you currently residing in a shelter, motel, hotel, in a car, or at a campsite because your home has been damaged or because of economic reasons?
Are you currently living in or participating with a community based temporary housing arrangement?

Image Above: Example of Kansas City Public School's online enrollment questionnaire.

5. Is the school ensuring that families and students have access to electronic devices and internet connectivity?

- ☐ Extend the practices that became common with school closures by providing students with tablets or laptops, mobile hotspots, prepaid cell phones, and other devices and connectivity. Title I, McKinney-Vento, and other funds can help meet those costs. Many corporate foundations and philanthropic organizations also are offering grants for technology assistance.
- ☐ Coordinate with community agencies to provide on-site computer stations and assistance with both online and in-person enrollment.
- ☐ Create mobile enrollment stations by equipping buses with laptops, internet, and staff at peak enrollment periods; buses can park in areas where homeless families and/or unaccompanied youth are concentrated.

Technology and Connectivity Resources

- Digital Wish offers Mobile Beacon Hotspots for $120 per year.
- T-Mobile's EmpowerED offers a hotspot with unlimited high speed data for $20 a month.
- The Federal Communications Commission offers the Lifeline Program.

Summaries of internet and device resources are available at:

- https://www.highspeedinternet.com/resources/are-there-government-programs-to-help-me-get-internet-service
- https://www.cabletv.com/blog/low-income-internet
- https://ispfamily.com/free-government-internet-and-laptop/

6. Is the enrollment website easily accessible from a phone, and with limited data allotment and speed, recognizing those realities for families and students experiencing homelessness?

- ☐ Streamline the initial enrollment process for quick completion even with slow or limited data connections.
- ☐ Ensure that the enrollment website, as well as school and district websites generally, are mobile-device friendly to allow enrollment quickly and easily on a tablet or smartphone.
- ☐ Design the enrollment process so families do not have to fill out the same information on multiple forms, or for multiple children at different schools.
- ☐ Create a process for quickly sharing information with different school campuses.