

HOMELESS STUDENTS – GUIDELINES AND PROCEDURES

INTRODUCTION:

The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, reauthorized in December 2015 through the federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), ensures educational rights and protection for children and youth experiencing homelessness.

DEFINITION OF HOMELESSNESS:

The Federal Government defines a child or youth who is homeless as one who lacks a fixed regular and adequate residence or has a primary nighttime residence not designed for or ordinarily used as a regular sleeping accommodation for human beings. (McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, Section 103 (A) (1) (2)).

Under the Federal definition, the following children are considered homeless:

- Children and youth who are sharing the housing of other persons due to loss of housing, economic hardship, or a similar reason; are living in motels, hotels, trailer parks, or camping grounds due to lack of alternative adequate accommodations; are living in emergency or transitional shelters; are abandoned in hospital; or awaiting foster care placement;
- Children and youth who have a primary nighttime residence that is a public or private place not designed for or ordinarily used as a regular sleeping accommodation for human beings;
- Children and youth who are living in cars, parks, public spaces, abandoned buildings, substandard housing, bus or train stations, or similar settings; and
- Unaccompanied youth – youth not in the physical custody of a parent or guardian.

Boston Public Schools (BPS) is responsible for ensuring the identification, enrollment, attendance, and academic success of students who are homeless. All personnel should be aware of the unique needs that children, adolescents, and families who are homeless. This growing population may be at risk due to the transitional nature and status of their lives. For children and adolescents, school may represent stability and consistency in what otherwise is often an unstable situation. We are committed to supporting our students who are experiencing homelessness and strive to keep students in their home schools.

STATEMENT OF PURPOSE AND SCOPE:

This circular is intended to provide school staff with guidance regarding the rights of students who are homeless and provide them with the education services needed to ensure they have an equal opportunity to meet the same academic standards to which all students are held. There are, however, some procedures that may differ from the standard procedures. These may include choice of school, registration, transportation, record transfer and confidentiality.

SCHOOL SELECTION:

A student who is experiencing homelessness has the right to continue attending the school of origin (i.e., the school they were attending when permanently housed or the school in which last enrolled) or a school within the new community where they are temporarily housed. This right is guaranteed under the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act.

SCHOOL ASSIGNMENT AND TRANSPORTATION:

If a student who is attending the Boston Public Schools becomes homeless and needs transportation, the family should visit one of the BPS Welcome Centers:

<https://www.bostonpublicschools.org/welcomecenters>

Families requesting reassignment should also visit any of the Welcome Centers at various locations:

- Roslindale: 515 Hyde Park Ave. Roslindale, 617-635-8040,
- Dorchester: 1216 Dorchester Ave. Dorchester, 617-635-8015,
- Roxbury: 2300 Washington St., Roxbury, 617-635-9010
- East Boston: 312 Border Street, Boston, MA 02128, 617-635-9597

Families who are experiencing homeless and move into Boston have the right to enroll their children in the Boston Public Schools. They should go to any Welcome Center Site to register. An individual may be considered to be **homeless** if that **person** is “**doubled-up**,” a term that refers to a situation where individuals are unable to maintain their housing situation and are forced to stay with a series of friends and/or extended family members.

Students who become homeless and move to a shelter or other facilities outside the school district may continue to attend their school of origin. Transportation **will** be available if they reside within an hour of their school. Please contact the Homeless Education Resource Network (HERN): <https://www.bostonpublicschools.org/Page/6826> or 617-635-8037 to discuss any difficulty a child temporarily without a home may be experiencing.

DISPUTE RESOLUTION:

If a dispute arises over enrollment and/or transportation decision, the local school district must immediately enroll the homeless student in the school in which enrollment is sought – pending resolution of the dispute – and must provide the parent, guardian or unaccompanied youth with both a written statement of the school placement decision and a notice of the right to appeal the decision. The school district must refer the unaccompanied youth, parent or guardian to the homeless education liaison, who will expeditiously carry out the dispute resolution process. The final decision in such a situation resides with the Massachusetts Commissioner of Education.

Reimbursement is available at the City of Boston mileage rate for parents who are sheltered outside of Boston and transport their children back to the school district.

ATTENDANCE WAIVERS:

Students experiencing homelessness may have absences excused and will be assessed on a case-by-case basis.

An absence may be excused for the following reasons:

- Students who are homeless in or out of district and are awaiting transportation
- Students who are tardy due to placement issues
- Please contact HERN for further information (617-505-9344; kharris@bostonpublicschools.org)

SCHOOL ENROLLMENT AND RECORD TRANSFER:

Principals and Headmasters should follow all current procedures for the transfer of academic and health records for students who are experiencing homelessness. Although not mandated, it is helpful if students who are temporarily without homes provide the following documentation at the time of registration:

- Birth certificate
- Immunization and medical records
- Special Education Individual Educational Plan (IEP)

SERVICES FOR STUDENTS WHO ARE HOMELESS AND NOT LIVING IN SHELTERS:

Students *not* living in shelters and are “**doubled-up**” and identify themselves as being homeless, shall have access to all services as outlined in this memorandum.

Curriculum on Homeless Issues/Professional Development

It is important to teach all staff and students about homelessness and its causes and conditions to ensure all students understand that homelessness is caused by lack of affordable housing and not the fault of a child temporarily without a home or his/her parent. The BPS Homeless Education Resource Network (HERN), as well as the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, have a number of videos on homelessness available as well as expertise in workshop and curriculum planning. In addition, training and seminars on homelessness are available through the Homeless Education Resource Network and are free to Boston Public Schools faculty and staff. To arrange for these at your school or to enroll in an upcoming professional development opportunity, contact Kedan Harris, Assistant Director, Opportunity Youth, at 617-505-9344 or via email at kharris@bostonpublicschools.org.

Identification of a School-based Homeless Liaison

Each school in the district must identify one staff member to serve as the main contact point for homeless services (if one does not already exist) – e.g., the school-based homeless liaison – to work in concert with HERN to connect the school and students and families experiencing homelessness, or at risk of homelessness, to city and state resources. The school-based homeless liaison works collaboratively with HERN to ensure that students experiencing homelessness have the necessary individualized resources and support to learn. HERN provides multiple opportunities for school-based homeless liaisons to receive targeted professional development throughout the school year. School-based homeless liaisons serve an essential role in ensuring that all staff and students in their school understand the available services and process to request assistance.

By October 1, school leaders should submit the name, contact information and title of their designated school-based homeless liaison to Brian Marques, Senior Director, Opportunity Youth, via email to bmarques@bostonpublicschools.org.

Identification and Referrals of Students Experiencing Homelessness

Students and families experiencing homelessness or at risk of homelessness may request assistance using the HERN referral form, which is available electronically on the ASPEN Student Information System (SIS). A student or family member may request that any BPS staff member with ASPEN access submit a referral form on their behalf. This process increases access to assistance by allowing the referral to be submitted by a BPS staff member who the student or family member has a trusting relationship with. This process will also increase the identification of students experiencing homelessness by making it easier for students and family members to make the request at the school level. School-based homeless liaisons are expected to inform all staff members in their school of the availability of the form on ASPEN and their role in being able to submit a referral on the student's behalf. Once the form is submitted, HERN will proceed with its normal process of verifying the information. Once information has been verified and the student's service needs have been identified, HERN will contact the designated school-based liaison to work collaboratively to institute a service plan for the student and/or family. The hardcopy version of the HERN referral form will still be accepted and can be submitted directly to the HERN office or any of the three BPS Welcome Centers.

CONFIDENTIALITY;

For many reasons, homeless families may not want to reveal that their living status has changed. While most shelters encourage parents to notify the schools of a change in residence, they cannot mandate it since state and federal laws which regulate confidentiality are very restrictive. Children who are temporarily without homes present many of the same characteristics as other at-risk children. Therefore, the best practice is to strengthen the communications between all parents and school personnel so that procedures are in place to reach out to families and students who are in transition or educationally at-risk. This means, at a minimum, schools should communicate frequently with parents and stress the necessity

of updating the student's emergency information. Schools, and school-based homeless liaisons in particular, are encouraged to maintain update-to-date records of students experiencing homelessness in the ASPEN SIS and communicate with HERN regularly to ensure adequate assistance and provision of services to students and families experiencing homelessness.

In serving students who are homeless, please be mindful of the following:

- Many students and parents who are temporarily without homes prefer to keep their current living situations private.
- Students and their families may feel threatened and/or embarrassed if approached by school staff. Thus, in order to respect their privacy and confidentiality, school staff should not approach students or their families directly to discuss their temporary lack of permanent residence. Rather, students and families should be given the opportunity to raise the issue themselves, if they so choose.
- It may not be necessary for staff members to know that a student is homeless. Thus, school staff should be told this information on an *as needed* basis only.

In the event of an emergency, or when services and information are lacking for a child believed to be homeless, contact Kedan Harris of the Homeless Education Resource Network (HERN) at 617-505-9344 or via email at kharris@bostonpublicschools.org.

Djenny Lobo Lopes, Senior Director of Health Services, 617-635-6788, should be notified if families do not present current immunization records at the time of registration.

Home and Hospital Instruction provides services for students who are homeless and are impaired physically and/or mentally. For additional information, contact Socorro Holland, Home & Hospital Program Coordinator, 617-635-6633.

For more information about this circular, contact:

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