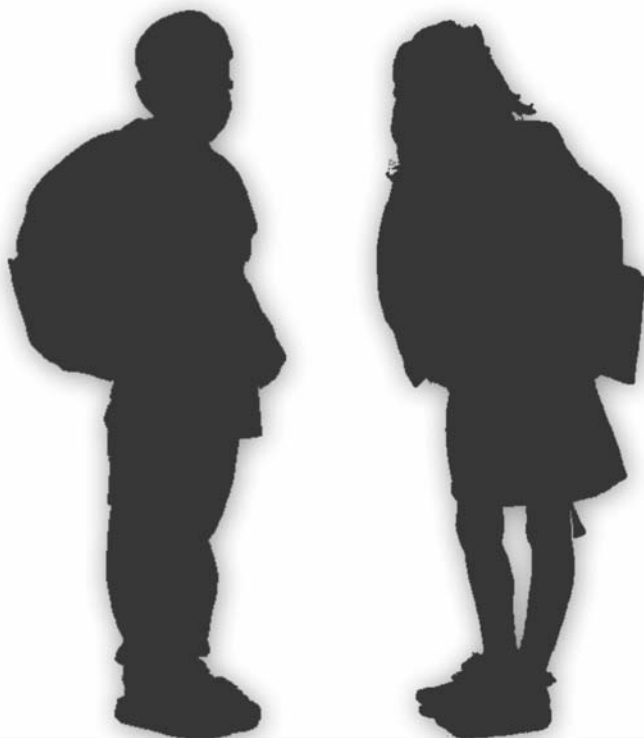


After the Storm: Information for Parents on How Schools Can Help After Disasters

A Handbook for Parents



**Connecting Schools and
Displaced Students Series
Winter 2006**



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For more information on the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Program, contact the U.S. Department of Education, Student Achievement and School Accountability Programs (SASA), Office of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA).

Phone: 202-260-0826

Website: www.ed.gov/programs/homeless/index.html

For additional information on providing assistance for schools serving students displaced by the 2005 Gulf Coast hurricanes, visit Hurricane Help for Schools at <http://hurricanehelpforschools.gov/index.html>.

The National Center for Homeless Education (NCHE) is a national resource center of research and information enabling communities to address the needs of children and their families and of unaccompanied youth in homeless situations.

NCHE is funded by the U.S. Department of Education and is housed at SERVE at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. Phone: 800-308-2145

Website: www.serve.org/nche.

For additional information and resources on providing assistance for schools serving students displaced by the 2005 Gulf Coast hurricanes or other disasters, visit www.serve.org/nche and click on Disaster Relief Efforts.

Introduction

This booklet will provide you with helpful information about how schools can help you and your children get back on your feet after a disaster. It will explain how to enroll in school after a disaster and tell you about some groups that can help you, like FEMA, the Red Cross, and others. For more information on enrolling in school and other available assistance, contact the National Center for Homeless Education (NCHE) at 1-800-308-2145, homeless@serve.org, or visit www.serve.org/nche.

Children who have to leave their homes because of hurricanes, tornadoes, fires, floods, mudslides, earthquakes, or other disasters lose a lot of things. But they do not lose their right to go to school.

And school is more than just a classroom. School is a place where children can find safety, friendship, learning, sports, clubs, nurses, counseling, clothes, free meals, tutoring, fun, and a return to how life was before they left home. School is also a place where parents can find support, information about your new community, and programs and services that can help you get back on your feet.

If you left your home because of a disaster and are staying in a friend's or relative's house, in a shelter, in a temporary or inadequate trailer, in a motel, in a campground, or in another temporary place, your children can go to school close to where you are staying. Even without a permanent address, school records, a legal guardian, a school uniform, or other papers or supplies, children and youth living in temporary situations can go to school.

Help with School

Who can help me enroll my children in school?

Every school district has a person who can help you enroll your children. That person is called the Local Homeless Education Liaison (hereafter called the "local liaison"). Some districts may call this person the McKinney-Vento Project Coordinator or the McKinney-Vento Liaison. A staff member at a school or at the administration office can put you in contact with that person. If you have trouble finding the local liaison, call NCHE at 1-800-308-2145 for help.

Every state also has a person who can help you. That person is called the State Coordinator for Homeless Education (hereafter called the "State Coordinator"). Some states may call this person the McKinney-Vento State Coordinator. You can find your State Coordinator by visiting the NCHE website at www.serve.org/nche/states/state_resources.php or by calling 1-800-308-2145 for a NCHE staff person to help you.

Is it really that easy to enroll my children in school?

Yes. There is a law that says that children and youth who lost their housing and are living in a temporary or inadequate place can go to school, including public preschools. This law is the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act.



Help with School

Q *Does this law help all children who lose their home because of a disaster or for other reasons?*

It helps all children and youth who lose their homes or must leave their homes and are living in a temporary place, or in a place that is not healthy or safe. For example, it helps most children and youth who are living:

- with friends or with relatives because they lost their housing, or because of economic hardship.
- in a motel or a hotel.
- in a campground or in a temporary or inadequate trailer.
- in a shelter.
- in a car.
- in a park, in a bus station or a train station, or in another public place.



Q *Can I enroll my children in school without all the papers that we usually need like proof of address, school records, immunization papers, and birth certificates?*

Yes. Children and youth can start school right away, even with no records. The school will get the records from the old school, if they are available. If your children need immunizations, the school will help you get those.

Some parents in emergency shelters who know they are going to move in a day or two choose to put off school enrollment until after they move. This might be better for the children or youth. But you probably should not wait more than a couple of days to enroll. Going to school gives children a lot of support and resources, helps them reconnect to their life before they left home, and keeps them from falling behind. It also gives them a safe place to be and productive things to do while you are busy looking for food, clothes, housing, health care, and work.

Help with School

Q *There are some teenagers in the shelter without their parents. Can they enroll in school?*

Yes. Teenagers who are separated from their parents can enroll in school right away. They should ask the local liaison for help. They can also get more information from a booklet called *After the Storm: Information for Youth on How Schools Can Help After Disasters*, at www.serve.org/nche/products.php, or by calling NCHE at 1-800-308-2145.

Q *Can I enroll my children in school if we don't have school uniforms or school supplies?*

Yes. The school will provide you with uniforms or appropriate school clothing as well as school supplies. Your children will also be able to participate in the free school meal program right away, if you choose.



Q *What if we lost our housing but are staying close to home? Can my children stay in their old school?*

Yes. Your children can keep going to the same school if that is what you want and that is in their best interest. Usually, it is much better for children to stay in the same school. They are settled in their classes, have friends, know their teachers and counselors, and may be involved in sports or clubs. When children change schools, their grades, emotional comfort, and academic progress often suffer.

But sometimes it might be a better idea for a child to change schools. For example, you might choose to enroll your child in the new school close to where you are staying if it is a long trip to the old school, if the school year just started so a change would be less difficult, if the new school has more appropriate programs or classes, if you think you are going to stay in the new area for a long time, or if you are worried about the child's safety.

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Help with School

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The local liaison can help you decide between staying at the same school or going to a school close to where you are staying.

Q: If my children stay in the same school, how will they get there?

If your children stay at the same school, the school has to make sure there is transportation for them to get to school and home after school. But there probably won't be transportation for sports and other after-school clubs and activities. That might be important when you are thinking about whether your children should stay in the same school or move to a new school.



Q: What if I enroll my children in a new school, and then we move again right away? Can the children stay in the same school, or do they have to change schools again?

As long as your family is living in a temporary place or in a place that is not healthy or safe, your children can keep going to the same school, if that is what you want and that is in their best interest. The school has to make sure there is transportation for your children to and from school during this time. Once you find permanent housing, your children can finish the school year in the same school. Again, the local liaison can help you decide between staying at the same school or going to a school close to your new housing. If your children have only been in the new school for a few days, they might prefer to change schools again, if you think you will stay in the new housing for quite a while. Some children prefer going to the same school as their friends in the neighborhood.



Help with School

Q: What if the school that I choose will not accept my children?

If a school will not enroll your children, or if you and the school don't agree about which school is best for your children, you have the right to have that dispute settled in a fair way. Usually, the local liaison will make the first decision. If you don't agree with that decision, then the State Coordinator can help settle the problem. While all that is happening, your children can go to the school where you want them to go. Contact NCHE at 1-800-308-2145 if you have problems getting a dispute settled.

Q: What if my children have special needs?

The school is required to set up appropriate services for children with special needs. That might mean help for children who are blind or deaf or have other physical problems, or it might mean special education for children who need extra help or support in the classroom. Be sure to tell the school staff, teachers, and the local liaison what your child needs and if your child received special education services at the last school.

Q: What can I do to help my children feel safe and do well in school?

You know your children better than anyone. You can help your children do well in school by:

- Telling school staff, teachers, and the local liaison about any special needs or circumstances that your children have. Schools need to know about your children's interests, fears, strengths, and needs, and any other information that would help them place your children in the appropriate classes and services.
- Visiting the school with your children or meeting teachers and other staff.

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Help with School

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- Encouraging your children to make friends at school, get to know their teachers and other school staff, and talk to you about how they are feeling and what their day was like.
- Helping your children find a quiet place and time for homework, either where you are staying or in a library or other place.
- Asking the school for a folder or envelope where you can keep your children's homework, tests, and other school records. That way you will have them available if your children need to change schools again.
- Telling the school if you are planning to move again, so they can prepare school records and give you information to help you decide between staying at the same school or going to a school close to your new housing.



Q: My children are angry about what has happened to us and got into a fight at school. What can I do to help them?

It is normal for your children to feel angry and confused. You can help them by:

- Letting your children know that it is normal for them to feel afraid, angry, anxious, or confused.
- Encouraging them to talk about their feelings with you, school counselors, mentors, and teachers.
- Spending as much time as possible with your children. Give them more hugs than usual, and reassure them that you love them and will take care of them.
- Helping your children to feel in control by letting them make some decisions about what to eat, what to wear, etc.
- Asking their teachers or school counselors to give them an adult mentor at school who can be a safe person for them to talk to.

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Help with School

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- Asking their teachers or school counselors to give them a student buddy to help them feel less alone and more accepted at school.
- Finding out about counseling resources in the community and going with your children to talk to a counselor.
- Returning to as many of your family routines as possible. For example, do something simple as a family that you have all enjoyed in the past like playing a game or going for a walk.
- Taking good care of yourself, so you can take good care of your children.

Q: If my children missed a lot of school because of the disaster or our housing situation, can they still enroll in school? Can they get help to catch up?

Yes, they can definitely enroll in school, and the school must help them catch up with the work they missed. Many schools offer tutoring and after-school programs. The local liaison can explain to you what services the school offers to help. For example, your child may have to do extra work or receive partial credit instead of full credit.

Q: Can my high school age children still graduate on time?

Yes. Different states have different ways to make sure high school students can graduate on time. The local liaison can explain to you what your child needs to do to graduate.



Q: What if my children are too young for regular school?

The local liaison will help you find a preschool program for your young children.

The McKinney-Vento Act

The McKinney-Vento Act gives your children the right to:

- Go to school, no matter where you live or how long you have lived there. They must be given access to the same public education, including preschool education, provided to other children.
- Continue in the school they attended before you became homeless or the school they last attended, if that is your choice and is feasible. If a school sends your child to a school other than the one you request, the school must provide you with a written explanation and offer you the right to appeal the decision.
- Receive transportation to and from the school they attended before your family became homeless or the school they last attended, if you request such transportation.
- Attend a school and participate in school programs with children who are not homeless. Children cannot be separated from the regular school program because they are homeless.
- Enroll in school without giving a permanent address. Schools cannot require proof of residency that might prevent or delay school enrollment.
- Enroll and attend classes while the school arranges for the transfer of school and immunization records or any other documents required for enrollment.
- Enroll and attend classes in the school of your choice, even while you and the school seek to resolve a dispute over enrolling your children.
- Receive the same special programs and services, if needed, as provided to all other children served in these programs.



The McKinney-Vento Act

How else can the school or local liaison help my family?

The school offers your children safety, friendship, learning, sports, clubs, nurses, counseling, clothes, meals, school supplies, tutoring, fun, and a return to how life was before they left home. The school can also offer you support, information about the new community, counseling, adult education programs, and other services that can help you support your children and get back on your feet. And the school can put you in contact with other agencies like FEMA and the Red Cross.



We still have questions about enrolling our children in school. Who can help us?

Contact your local liaison or State Coordinator for Homeless Education. The National Center for Homeless Education can also help. Call 1-800-308-2145, email homeless@serve.org, or visit the website at www.serve.org/nche.

Other Help

How can FEMA help us?

FEMA, the Federal Emergency Management Agency, is a part of the federal government. It provides many different kinds of services, like:

- Shelters, trailers, and money for motels.
- Help paying for rent after a disaster.
- Help for medical, dental, funeral, and transportation costs.
- Help if you lost your job (Disaster Unemployment Assistance).
- Free help from an attorney.
- Counseling and mental health services.

You can contact FEMA at 1-800-621-FEMA (3362) or at www.fema.gov.

How can the Red Cross help us?

The Red Cross can help you with food, water, short-term shelter, counseling support, and finding your family. You can get more information at www.redcross.org.

Who else can help us?

You can find help and support from the Salvation Army, the United Way, and other groups like shelters and motels; churches and temples; health clinics; housing, employment, social security, and public benefits offices; civic clubs, like Lions and Rotary; and soup kitchens and food pantries.



Other Help

We don't know this town. How can we find these groups?

The local liaison can give you information about resources in the community. For example, ask the liaison any questions you have about public buses, shelters and motels, health clinics, housing agencies, employment offices, and where to find laundromats, grocery stores, pharmacies, clothing stores, and discount stores. You can also ask other parents, or ask at churches, temples, community centers, libraries, shelters, food pantries, or other places.



NCHE Product Highlight

Parent Pack Pocket Folder

This sturdy, laminated folder provides a place to keep important records and documents related to your children's education. The folder also includes information on the rights of children and youth experiencing homelessness and helpful tips about enrollment and disenrollment. These posters are available in Spanish and English at no charge and can be ordered by calling 800-308-2145 or by visiting www.serve.org/nche/online_order.php.



Parent Pack
Pocket Folder

Helpful Contacts

Store useful contact information here so that you can find it easily.

Local Liaison for Homeless Education

State Coordinator for Homeless Education

School Front Office

Local Red Cross

Local Health Clinic

Public Transportation

City/County Office(s)

Your Place of Residence (shelter, motel, or other housing)

Other Useful Contacts

NCHE Toll-free HelpLine

800-308-2145

FEMA

1-800-621-FEMA (3362)

Other Help

National Partners in Homeless Education

National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth (NAEHCY)

www.naehcy.org

National Center on Homeless Education (NCHE)

www.serve.org/nche

National Law Center on Homelessness & Poverty (NLCHP)

www.nlchp.org

Local Liaison Contact Information

State Coordinator Contact Information



National Center for Homeless Education

P.O. Box 2367

Greensboro, NC 27435

Toll-free HelpLine: 800-308-2145

www.serve.org/nche

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