

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

A Handbook for Parents



Connecting Schools and  
Displaced Students Series  
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The National Center for Homeless Education (NCHE) operates a national resource center with 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 the SERVE Center at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. Phone: 800-308-2145 Website: <https://nche.ed.gov>

For additional information and resources on providing assistance for schools serving students affected by disasters, visit <https://nche.ed.gov/disaster-preparation-and-response/>

## Introduction

Natural disasters can strike anywhere at any time, affecting a few households or entire communities and can include hurricanes, tornadoes, fires, floods, mudslides, earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, etc. Although the type of disaster may vary, all have the potential to cause children and families to lose their homes, possessions, and sense of security. In addition to leaving a path of destruction in their wake, disasters often generate many questions for parents about how their children can continue to attend school.

This booklet is for parents who have lost their housing in the wake of a disaster or other disruptive event. It explains how to enroll children and youth in school during the aftermath and provides information about how schools can help.

The McKinney-Vento Act is a federal law that ensures educational protections for children and youth in homeless situations (defined as lacking fixed, regular, and adequate housing). This includes many who have lost their housing due to disasters. The law provides educational stability and support by requiring all public schools to enroll eligible students immediately, assess their needs, and provide or refer them to additional services as needed.

After a disaster, schools cannot rebuild housing or bring back a child's favorite possession, but they can provide safety, friends, sports, clubs, nurses, counselors, clothes, free school meals, tutoring, fun, and a sense of normalcy. School is also a place where parents can find support, information about their new community, and programs and services to help them get back on their feet.

Even without a permanent address, school records, legal guardian, school uniform, or school supplies, children and youth displaced by a disaster can go to school.

## Help with School

### ***Where can my child go to school?***

If you are temporarily staying somewhere because you can no longer live in your home as a result of a disaster, your child can either enroll in the school district where you are staying or continue in the school where he or she was attending when the disaster occurred (called the school of origin), whichever is in your child's best interest.

### ***How do I decide where my child should go to school?***

If the school your child attended before the disaster is open, it is usually better to remain enrolled there. The routine, friends, school activities, and school staff will provide a sense of stability. Changing schools can sometimes negatively impact a child's grades, emotional comfort, and academic progress, but here are some situations when it is better for a child to change schools:

- The previous school is closed due to the disaster;
- It is a long trip to their old school;
- The school year just started, so a change would be less difficult;
- The new school has programs or classes that are a better fit for your child;
- You plan to stay in the new area for a long time; or
- You are worried about your child's safety.

The local liaison can help you decide whether it is better for your child to stay at the same school or go to a school close to where you are staying. This decision will be made based on your wishes and the best interest of your child.

## Help with School

### **Q: Who can help me enroll my child in school?**

Every school district has a local homeless liaison who can help enroll your child. The rest of this booklet will refer to that person as the local liaison, but some school districts may call them the McKinney-Vento liaison, the kids in transition (KIT) coordinator, or the families in transition (FIT) coordinator.

It's very important to talk to the local liaison for the school district. The front office staff can typically assist with enrollment and also refer you to the liaison for the school district. You may also find the local liaison's contact information on the school district website. Additionally, you can contact the National Center for Homeless Education (NCHE) at 1-800-308-2145 or [homeless@serve.org](mailto:homeless@serve.org) for help identifying the local liaison.



### **Q: Is it really that easy to enroll my child in school?**

Yes. A federal law called the McKinney-Vento Act says that children and youth who have lost their housing and are living in a temporary or inadequate place can go to school, including public preschools. This law allows students in qualifying housing situations to enroll in school immediately.

## Help with School



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

The McKinney-Vento Act helps all children and youth who lose their homes and no longer have fixed, regular, and adequate housing. 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 campground, trailer, hotel or motel because they have no other adequate housing;
- in a shelter;
- in a public or private place not designed for or ordinarily used as a regular sleeping accommodation for human beings; or
- in a park, in a bus station or a train station, or in another public place.



***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 enroll in school and the school will help them catch up with the work they missed. Many schools offer tutoring, before- and after-school programs, and credit recovery programs. Your children may also be able to make up for lost time in school during summer school or through other enrichment programs.

The local liaison can explain what services the school offers and help you explore ways to ensure your children don't continue to miss school if they're still struggling to attend.

## Help with School



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

Yes. Children and youth can start school right away, even without records. The school will get the records from the old school, if they are available. If your child needs immunizations, the school will help you get those too.

Some parents 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, work, etc.



***Can my high school age child still graduate on time?***

Most likely. States and school districts have ways to ensure that high school students can graduate on time. The local liaison can explain what your child needs to do to graduate.



***What if my child is too young for regular school?***

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



## Help with School

issues. 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 must make sure they have transportation to and from school. Be sure to ask the local liaison to help you set up a transportation plan for your children.



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

As long as your children are living somewhere that is not fixed, regular, and adequate, they can keep going to the same school. If you move again, talk with the liaison about whether you would like your children to remain in the school if that continues to be in their best interest. Be sure to let the local liaison know if your children need school transportation.

Once you find permanent housing, your children can finish the school year in the same school and continue to receive transportation there. Again, the local liaison can help you decide if your children should remain at the same school or go to a school close to your new housing.

## Help with School



### ***What if the school that I choose will not accept my children?***

If a school either disagrees with you about which school is best for your children or will not enroll your children, they must provide you with a written statement of how they made their decision, what steps you can take to appeal their decision, and the contact information of the local liaison. Just as every school district has a local liaison, every state has a state coordinator who can answer questions about your rights. Your state coordinator's contact information will be included in the school's written explanation.

Usually, the local liaison will make the first decision regarding your appeal. If you don't agree with that decision, you can appeal the decision to the state coordinator. While that is happening, your children can go to the school where you want them to go (either the school they were attending before losing housing or the local school) and receive school services like transportation and free school meals.



### ***What if my child has special needs?***

The school is required to set up appropriate services for children with special needs. Be sure to tell the local liaison, your child's teacher, or the special education director what your child needs and if your child received special education services at the last school. They will get the individualized education program (IEP) from the previous school. The school will also implement your child's IEP until you can have a case conference committee meeting, which should happen within 10 days of enrolling in a new school. During that meeting, you will be able to update the plan based on your child's current needs and the resources available at the school.

If your child did not receive special education services at the previous school but you think your child may need them, be sure to talk to your child's teacher, the local liaison, or the director of special education.

## Help with School

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.



### ***What can I do to help my child feel safe and do well in school?***

You know your child better than anyone. Here are some ideas to help your child do well in school:

- Tell your child's teachers and the local liaison about your child's interests, concerns, strengths, needs, and any other information that would help them place your child in the appropriate classes and services.
- Visit the school with your child to meet the staff and reassure the child that the new school is a safe place to learn and have fun.
- Encourage your child to make friends at school, to get to know teachers and other school staff, and to talk to you about how they are feeling and what their day was like.
- Help your child find a quiet place and time for homework, either where you are staying or in a library or other place.
- Ask the school for a folder or envelope where you can keep your child's homework, tests, and other school records so they are available if your child needs to change schools again.
- Tell the school if you are planning to move again, so they can help you decide between staying at the same school or going to a school close to your new housing. They can also prepare school records for you to give the next school if you decide your child should change schools.

## Help with School



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

It is normal for children to feel angry and confused after losing their housing. You can help by:

- Letting your children know that it is normal to feel afraid, angry, anxious, and/or confused, and discussing alternatives to fighting.
- Encouraging them to talk about their feelings with you, school counselors, school social workers, mentors, coaches, or teachers.
- Helping your children feel in control by letting them make some decisions about what to eat, what to wear, etc.
- Asking their teachers, school counselors, or school social workers to suggest an adult mentor at school who can be a safe person with whom they can talk.
- Asking their teachers, school counselors, or school social workers to give them a peer 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.
- Quickly returning to as many of your family routines as possible.

## Overview of the McKinney-Vento Act

### ***The McKinney-Vento Act gives children and youth the right to:***

- Go to school, no matter where they live or how long they have lived there. They must be given access to the same public education (including public preschools) as other children, even if they do not have proof of residency.
- Continue in the school they attended before they became homeless or the school they last attended, if that is your choice and it is in their best interest and receive transportation to and from that school if you request it.
- 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, even while you and the school seek to resolve a dispute over enrollment. If a school sends your child to a school other than the one you request under the McKinney-Vento Act, the school must provide you with a written explanation and offer you the right to appeal the decision.
- Receive free school meals.
- Attend school and participate in school programs with children who are permanently housed. Children cannot be separated from the regular school program because they are in temporary or inadequate housing.
- Receive the same 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 children safety, friendship, learning, sports, clubs, nurses, counseling, clothes, free meals, school supplies, tutoring, fun, and a similar structure and environment as they had prior to the disaster. The school can also provide or refer you to 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 connect you with other agencies for assistance with housing, food, medical, dental, and mental health services.



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

Contact your local liaison or state coordinator. The National Center for Homeless Education can also help. Call 1-800-308-2145, email [homeless@serve.org](mailto:homeless@serve.org), or visit the website at <https://nche.ed.gov/>.

## Other Help

### **What is FEMA and how can it help us?**

FEMA, the Federal Emergency Management Agency, is part of the federal government and provides services such as:

- Reimbursement for short stays in hotels, motels, or other short-term lodging;
- Rental assistance;
- Home repair assistance; and
- Home replacement assistance

You can contact FEMA at 1-800-621-3362 or <https://www.fema.gov/>. Video relay service or 711 is also available.

### **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 <https://www.redcross.org/>.



**American  
Red Cross**

### **How can we apply for federal disaster assistance?**

You can apply online at <https://www.disasterassistance.gov/>. The website explain the different types of assistance available. It also allows you to search for local resources and check the status of your application after you submit.

## Other Help



***We don't know this area. How can we find help here?***

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 serving those who have been impacted by disasters. Local resources can also be found at <https://www.disasterassistance.gov/>.



## NCHE Product Highlight

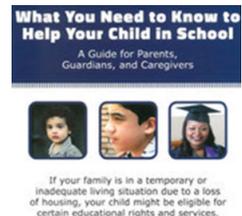
### Parent Pack Pocket Folder

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 changing schools.



### Parent Booklet (English and Spanish)

This brochure explains the educational rights of children and youth experiencing homelessness and provides strategies to help parents support their children's education during times of mobility.



Items can be ordered for no cost at <https://nche.ed.gov/resources/>.

## Helpful Contacts

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

<b>Local Liaison</b>
<b>State Coordinator</b>
<b>School Office</b>
<b>Local Red Cross</b>
<b>Local Health Clinic</b>
<b>Public Transportation</b>
<b>City/County Office(s)</b>
<b>Your Place of Residence (shelter, motel, or other housing)</b>
<b>Other Useful Contacts</b>
<b>NCHE Toll-free Helpline</b> 800-308-2145
<b>FEMA</b> 1-800-621-FEMA (3362) or 1-800-462-7585 (TTY) Video relay service or 711 is also available.



National Center for Homeless Education  
5900 Summit Avenue, #201  
Browns Summit, NC 27214  
Helpline: 800-308-2145 or [homeless@serve.org](mailto:homeless@serve.org)  
<https://nche.ed.gov/>