

Maximizing Credit Accrual and Recovery for Homeless Students

Introduction

Middle and high school students experiencing homelessness often face challenges in accruing credits. Class offerings, methods of calculating credits, and graduation requirements can vary greatly among school districts. Students who change schools late in high school can find themselves suddenly in danger of not graduating due to differing class and credit requirements. Further, high schools often have "seat-time" rules that prevent youth from earning credits if they enter the district late in the semester or leave early. These various policies and requirements have a negative impact on youth whose homelessness forces them to change schools mid-year; students' mobility may prevent them from earning full or even partial credit and accruing the credits they need to graduate.

In addition to high mobility, the physical and mental stress caused by homelessness also affects students' ability to earn credits. Many students experiencing homelessness, particularly unaccompanied homeless youth, must balance school with other pressing responsibilities, including the need to work to ensure their economic survival. Students may miss school due to employment obligations or moving, struggle to concentrate on school due to lack of sleep or concerns about meeting their basic needs, or be unable to complete assignments due to lack of a quiet place to study or resources to purchase needed school supplies.

Expecting a youth to attend school without earning credits is similar to expecting an employee to attend work without earning a salary; without the possibility of earning credit, the motivation and payoff for attending school is effectively nullified. Young people who are homeless have many demands on their time as they struggle to meet their basic needs. The ability to accrue credits is critical to keeping students in school and advancing toward graduation, higher education, and eventual financial stability and independence. This brief is designed to help teachers, administrators, and local homeless education liaisons maximize opportunities for students experiencing homelessness to accrue and recover credits and graduate from high school in a timely manner.



Who is homeless?

(McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act of 2001 – Title X, Part C of the No Child Left Behind Act – Sec 725)

The term "homeless children and youth"—

- A. means individuals who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence...; and
- B. includes —
 1. children and youths who are sharing the housing of other persons due to loss of housing, economic hardship, or similar reason; are living in motels, hotels, trailer parks, or camping grounds due to the lack of alternative accommodations; are living in emergency or transitional shelters; are abandoned in hospitals; or are awaiting foster care placement;
 2. children and youths 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...
 3. children and youths who are living in cars, parks, public spaces, abandoned buildings, substandard housing, bus or train stations, or similar settings; and
 4. migratory children who qualify as homeless for the purposes of this subtitle because the children are living in circumstances described in clauses (i) through (iii).

District Responsibilities Under the Law

The McKinney-Vento Act requires school districts to implement policies and practices to ensure that students experiencing homelessness can earn credits. Specifically, the Act requires schools to enroll students experiencing homelessness immediately.¹ Enrollment is defined as attending classes and participating fully in school activities.² When students attend school without the ability to earn credits, their full school participation is effectively denied. Further, the McKinney-Vento Act requires states and school districts to eliminate barriers to students' enrollment and retention in school.³ Barriers to earning credits are barriers to enrollment and retention. As such, states and districts must revise seat-time and credit policies that create barriers, and local liaisons must assist homeless students in accruing and recovering credits.

Credit Accrual and Recovery Strategies

The following strategies can support students experiencing homelessness in accruing and recovering credits.

1. Work to keep students in their schools of origin so they can avoid the challenges of school mobility.

Helping youth remain in one school is the first strategy to helping students accrue credits. The McKinney-Vento Act guarantees students who are homeless the right to continue attending their school of origin, if this is in their best interest, even if they move outside of the school of origin's residential zone. The ability to accrue credits and graduate on time is an important best interest consideration. The Act further requires school districts to provide transportation to and from the school of origin. The NCHE publication, *Increasing School Stability for Students Experiencing Homelessness*, provides strategies for overcoming challenges in providing transportation to the school of origin; download the publication at http://www.serve.org/nche/downloads/nche_transp_full.pdf.

On Target: Uniting to House Unaccompanied Youth

Some school districts have partnered with local agencies to increase the availability of stable housing options for youth. Such housing allows students to remain in one school, which helps them progress academically and graduate on time. For more information about these programs and tips for starting a similar program in your area, download *Housing + High School = Success: Schools and Communities Uniting to House Unaccompanied Youth* from the National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth at <http://www.naehcy.org/housingyouth.html>.



1 42 U.S.C. 11432(g)(3)(C).

2 42 U.S.C. 11434a.

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

2. Provide support to enable students to attend school consistently and progress academically.

Some strategies for supporting school attendance and success include:

- Work with community agencies to ensure that youths' basic needs are met so they can focus on school;
- Help youth find quiet, supportive environments in which to study; some options include providing a study space on-site at the school during afterschool hours, and providing access to Saturday schools or afterschool classes to make up seat time;
- Assign youth consistent peer and adult mentors who will provide guidance, encouragement, and assistance with challenges;
- Develop "success plans" or Student Learning Plans with youth, outlining goals, specifying concrete steps and services needed to reach them, and building in accountability for the school and student;
- Ask the student about his or her interests and needs, and ensure that his or her school program, including classes and extra-curricular activities, matches these interests and needs; and
- Provide teachers, administrators, counselors, and other staff with information about the challenges of homelessness so they are equipped with the knowledge and understanding needed to offer their homeless students extra support in earning credits.

For more information on effective teaching strategies for highly mobile children and youth, download NCHC's *Students on the Move: Reaching and Teaching Highly Mobile Children and Youth and Classrooms with Revolving Doors: Recommended Practices for Middle Level and High School Teachers of At-Risk and Highly Mobile Students* at http://www.serve.org/nche/ibt/educ_mobile.php

3. Award students partial credit for work completed.

State education agencies should develop policies and procedures for awarding partial credit and ensuring that school districts recognize credits awarded by other districts. School districts can prorate credits to award students partial credit if they enter the district late or leave early. Databases such as PowerSchool⁴ that track attendance, homework, and test scores can facilitate the awarding of partial credit. Partial credit must be accompanied by opportunities for youth to earn the credits they are lacking, such as those outlined below; this will ensure that these students are able to continue advancing academically.

On Target: Partnerships for Credit Accrual in California

California state law requires school districts to accept credit for full or partial coursework completed satisfactorily by a student in another school. The California Department of Education (CDE) has issued a policy to help school districts implement the law. For more information about the state law, visit <http://www.abanet.org/child/rc/lji/education/ab490.html>; download CDE's policy at <http://www.cde.ca.gov/ls/pf/fy/partialcredit.asp>.



Districts across the state have risen to the challenge; for example, Project Access, Fresno Unified School District's homeless education program, has been using PowerSchool successfully for years to award partial credit to highly mobile students. For more information about Project Access, visit <http://www.fresno.k12.ca.us/divdept/stafed/projectaccess/>.

⁴ PowerSchool is only one of many databases capable of tracking student attendance, assignments, grades, etc. More information on PowerSchool is available at <http://www.pearsonschools.com/>.

4. Complement regular classes with independent study programs, including learning labs, online learning, and computerized modules.

The academic progress of students experiencing homelessness often fluctuates. Their schoolwork is likely to suffer during periods of greater instability and stress, while they may be able to make up work and progress more rapidly during times of relative stability. During these times, schools should maximize students' opportunities for progress by allowing them to earn extra credits via independent study programs. Independent study programs can cater to a student's interests and target specific gaps in credits. They can be intensive and project-based, allowing a student to recover credits in a matter of weeks. For example, a student lacking English credits may write a series of poems or essays, while a report on a particular historical event or scientific principle could earn a partial credit in social studies or science.

Youth can study independently during off-hours in class and other times in the school day, such as lunch and study hall, as well as after school and on weekends. Technology can facilitate such programs, as online learning and computerized modules have been extremely valuable to older youth seeking to fill gaps in credits for high school graduation. The supervision and guidance of a certified teacher is critical to ensure a quality learning experience and the validity of credits earned in these environments.

Local liaisons and school counselors should work together to ensure that students experiencing homelessness can access online learning programs and other independent study programs, as needed. For example, many programs and school districts waive online learning fees for students experiencing homelessness. McKinney-Vento subgrants and Title I, Part A funds also can help defray the costs of online learning and related transportation costs. Ensuring access to credit recovery programs so youth can graduate from high school is part of the McKinney-Vento Act's mandate to remove barriers to enrollment and retention in school.⁵

5. Ensure that students experiencing homelessness can enroll in appropriate innovative and/or alternative programs.

Students who are homeless may face challenges in accessing innovative and/or alternative programs, particularly when they are not administered by the school district. Local liaisons should work with community agencies to ensure that document requirements, registration deadlines, and fees do not prevent these students from participating in appropriate programs, which may include:

- Work Experience programs: Provide students with paid or unpaid on-the-job experience through training agreements with employers.
- Middle College High Schools: Allow students to attend classes at flexible hours and earn high school and community college credits simultaneously in a personalized environment, generally located on college campuses.⁶
- Running Start: Allows high school students to earn college credits while completing their high school educations.⁷
- Upward Bound: Supports youth in completing high school and graduating from higher education through academic instruction, counseling, mentoring, cultural enrichment, and work-study programs.⁸
- GEAR UP: Serves a cohort of students through middle and high school, seeking to increase rates of college enrollment and success.⁹

⁵ 42 U.S.C. 11432(g)(1)(I). Further, an online learning center can be considered a school of origin under the McKinney-Vento Act if it is the school the youth attended when permanently housed or the school in which the youth was last enrolled. 42 U.S.C. 11432(g)(3)(G).

⁶ More information about Middle College High Schools is available at <http://www.mcnc.us/>.

⁷ More information about Running Start is available at http://www.sbctc.ctc.edu/college/s_runningstart.aspx.

⁸ More information about Upward Bound is available at <http://www2.ed.gov/programs/trioupbound/index.html>.

⁹ More information about GEAR UP is available at <http://www2.ed.gov/programs/gearup/index.html>.

- Dropout prevention and recovery programs
- Career and Technical Education, including Perkins Act programs: Teach youth skills that can help them find stable employment.¹⁰

On Target: Washington's Digital Learning Department

Washington State's Superintendent of Public Instruction's newly created Digital Learning Department (DLD) provides every school statewide with access to online courses and free teaching and learning resources. DLD instituted a quality review process to ensure that all their online courses meet Washington's learning standards and are taught by state certified teachers. In addition to the online teachers, every school site offering online courses must designate an on-site teacher mentor to provide support to students. DLD trains these teachers to keep students engaged in their courses and guide them toward the successful completion of each class. Each online course begins with diagnostic testing and is subsequently adapted to conform to the student's academic level. This "mastery-based" approach maximizes students' efficiency, as they can earn credits very rapidly in courses that are easy for them. In turn, this success motivates students to continue studying.



By August 31, 2010, all Washington school districts will have adopted policies and procedures regarding student access to online courses and learning programs. While online courses entail an enrollment fee, Washington school districts cover the fee when the course is part of the public education program to which all students are entitled. For more information on Washington's Digital Learning Department, visit <http://www.digitallearning.k12.wa.us/>.

Conclusion

Maximizing credit accrual and recovery for all homeless students will require combining the various strategies listed here, along with others, to meet the needs of individual students. However, these efforts are essential, not only to comply with the McKinney-Vento Act, but also to increase overall academic achievement, reduce dropout rates, and support all students in achieving their aspirations for higher education and future success.

For additional information on supporting the education of children and youth experiencing homelessness, visit the National Center for Homeless Education online at <http://www.serve.org/nche>.

¹⁰ More information about the Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education Act is available at <http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ovae/pi/cte/index.html>.

On Target: Getting Started in Your District

Consider the following strategies for boosting credit accrual and recovery offerings in your school district:



1. Provide training and information to teachers and curriculum coordinators about homeless students' needs and seek their support and partnership in facilitating credit accrual;
2. Review and revise policies that act as a barrier to youth attaining credits;
3. Explore the credit recovery resources and strategies available in your district and community and address barriers to homeless students' access to these programs; and
4. Talk to youth about their interests and needs and seek their help in developing credit accrual and recovery strategies.

This brief was developed by:

National Center for Homeless Education
800-308-2145 (Toll-free Helpline)
<http://www.serve.org/nche>

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Every state is required to have a State Coordinator for Homeless Education, and every school district is required to have a local homeless education liaison. These individuals will assist you with the implementation of the McKinney-Vento Act. To find out who your State Coordinator is, visit the NCHE website at http://www.serve.org/nche/states/state_resources.php.



For more information on the McKinney-Vento Act and resources for implementation, call the NCHE Helpline at 800-308-2145 or e-mail homeless@serve.org.



Local Contact Information:

A large, empty rounded rectangular box is provided for local contact information.