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NEWS

# ACT HELPS HOMELESS CHILDREN SUCCEED IN SCHOOL

By Amber Nesbitt

**E**arlier this year, Congress reauthorized the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act (“Act”) as part of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2002. 42 U.S.C. §11431 et seq. (2002). The revised Act makes both procedural and substantive changes to the original Act of 1987 in an attempt to reach needy children more effectively.

Congress passed the original Act in 1987 because they recognized that instability at home had a negative impact on school attendance and performance. At the time of the original Act, approximately 50 percent of homeless children were regularly attending school. By 1995, that figure had improved to roughly 86 percent. While this is a significant improvement, there were still certain issues that created an impediment to consistent school attendance.

The revised Act of 2001 began by expanding the definition of “homeless child and youth” to include migratory children and unaccompanied youths (those who are runaways or not in regular contact with their parents). 42 U.S.C. § 11434a (2002). The original definition was already quite broad, and included children who are camping, living in hotels, cars, abandoned buildings, and substandard housing, or are living with another family.

One of the most notable changes to the Act is that every school district or local education agency must designate a liaison for homeless children. This liaison

identifies homeless children within their district, assists them in obtaining educational support services, coordinates federal and state programs, and informs them of their rights. Buzz Calvert, the McKinney Project Coordinator from Berrien County Intermediate School District in Michigan has cited this as being “[t]he most powerful, new component of the recently reauthorized McKinney-Vento Act. For the first time ... we now have a network of individuals who are working with the same focus. ... We believe that by sharing information, communicating about the special problems that we’ve encountered, and how we solved those problems, that we can develop a body of collective experience that will enable us to ensure that youth in transition are not left behind – socially or academically.”

*Congress passed the original [McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance] Act ... because they recognized that instability at home had a negative impact on school attendance and performance.*

Under the revised Act, schools are to promote academic and social success by allowing

students to continue attending their school of origin (the school they attended while their family had permanent housing) for the duration of their homelessness. 42 U.S.C. §11432 (2002). Even if their family finds permanent housing in another school district, the students may remain in their original school for the remainder of that year. In order to make this possible, the revised Act also requires the liaison to provide transportation for the children to their school. If the district where the children live is different from the one where they attend school, the two liaisons must coordinate their efforts and funding to ensure that the children can get to school each day.

When homeless children do change schools, the new Act has provisions that make the transition as easy as possible. For instance, children without immunization academic records are still entitled to enroll immediately, and their new school must contact their old school to obtain the necessary records. Additionally, the United States Department of Agriculture is now allowing all liaisons and directors of shelters, in addition to parents, to verify a student’s homelessness and expedite access to free meals. These new provisions attempt to minimize any chance of an interruption in the student’s attendance and to ensure that the student becomes involved in the new school community as soon as possible.

*Continued on Page 19.*