Cocke County Schools
Moving Mountains. Achieving Success.

McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act:

Frequently Asked Questions

What is McKinney-Vento?

The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act is a federal law that protects the educational rights of children and youth experiencing homelessness. It ensures that students without a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence have equal access to the same free, appropriate public education - including public preschool education - as their housed peers. The law removes barriers to school enrollment, attendance, and academic success.

What is the McKinney-Vento definition of homelessness?

Under the McKinney-Vento Act, children and youth are considered homeless if they lack a **fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence**. This includes students who are:

- Sharing the housing of other persons due to loss of housing, economic hardship, or a similar reason (often referred to as "doubled-up").
- Living in motels, hotels, trailer parks, or camping grounds due to the lack of alternative adequate accommodations.
- Living in emergency or transitional shelters, or abandoned in hospitals.
- Living in 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 (such as cars, parks, public spaces, abandoned buildings, substandard housing, or bus/train stations).
- Migratory children living in any of the circumstances described above.

What are my school selection rights, including the school of origin and local attendance area school options?

Parents, guardians, and unaccompanied youth have the right to choose between two school options based on what is in the student's best interest:

- **School of Origin:** The school the child attended when permanently housed, or the school in which the child was last enrolled (including a public preschool). Students have the right to remain in their school of origin for the entire duration of their homelessness, and until the end of the academic year in which they move into permanent housing.
- **Local Attendance Area School:** Any public school that non-homeless students who live in the attendance area where the child is actually living are eligible to attend.
  In determining the student's best interest, the school district must presume that keeping the student in the school of origin is in their best interest, unless doing so is contrary to the request of the parent, guardian, or unaccompanied youth.

What are my child's immediate enrollment rights, even when typically required records are unavailable?

Your child has the right to **immediate enrollment** in school, even if they do not have the documents normally required for registration. "Enrollment" means attending classes and participating fully in school activities right away. A school cannot delay or deny enrollment due to missing:

- Proof of residency or guardianship
- Birth certificates
- Previous school or academic records
- Immunization records or other required health and medical documents
- Uniforms or school fees

Once your child is enrolled and attending classes, the enrolling school will immediately contact their previous school to obtain academic records and will connect you with our district liaison or school nurse to help obtain required immunizations or health records.

What are my child's transportation rights?

If your child continues to attend their **school of origin**, the school district must provide free transportation to and from that school upon request—even if you are temporarily staying outside of the school's normal attendance boundaries or in a neighboring district.

- If you move into permanent housing during the school year, your child is still entitled to transportation to the school of origin through the end of that academic year.
- If your child attends the **local attendance area school**, they are entitled to the same transportation services provided to all other students living in that area.

What are my rights for my child to remain enrolled pending the dispute resolution process?

If a disagreement arises between you (or an unaccompanied youth) and the school district regarding eligibility, school selection, or enrollment:

- **Right to Remain Enrolled:** Your child has the right to immediately enroll in or remain enrolled in the school in which enrollment is sought—and receive all applicable transportation and services—until the dispute is fully resolved, including all available appeals.
- **Written Explanation:** The school district must provide you with a written explanation of its decision, including information about your right to appeal, in a manner and form understandable to you.
- **Liaison Assistance:** The district's homeless liaison will guide you through the dispute resolution process and ensure your child's rights are protected throughout the review.

What are my rights and supports available to unaccompanied homeless youth?

An **unaccompanied homeless youth** is a student who meets the McKinney-Vento definition of homelessness and is not in the physical custody of a parent or legal guardian. Unaccompanied youth have all the same educational rights as other McKinney-Vento students, plus specific protections:

- **Independent Enrollment:** You have the right to enroll yourself in school without a parent or legal guardian present, and without needing proof of guardianship.
- **School Selection & Appeals:** You have the right to make decisions regarding your school of origin vs. local attendance area school, receive transportation, and initiate the dispute resolution process independently with the support of the district liaison.

- **Additional Supports:** You are automatically eligible for free school meals, fee waivers (for AP/IB exams, college applications, and extracurriculars), school supplies, and assistance with FAFSA verification for independent student status when applying for college financial aid.

Who is the LEA district homeless liaison I can contact for help?

Every school district (Local Educational Agency) designates a McKinney-Vento Homeless Liaison to ensure students in transition receive the support and services they need. If you have questions about your rights or need assistance with enrollment, transportation, or community resources, please contact our district liaison:

- **Name:** Patrick O'Neil
- **Title:** District McKinney-Vento Homeless Liaison / Attendance Supervisor
- **Phone:**423-623-7821 Ext: 2015
- **Email:** oneilp@cocke.k12.tn.us
- **Office Location:** Cocke County Central Office located at 305 Hedrick Dr./ Newport, TN 37821

Who is the state McKinney-Vento Coordinator I can contact for help?

- **Name:** Vanessa Waters
- **Title:** McKinney-Vento State Coordinator
- **Phone:**615-253-3101
- **Email:** Vanessa.Waters@tn.gov
- **Office Location:** Tennessee Department of Education/ 710 James Robertson Parkway; Andrew Johnson Tower; 12th Floor; Nashville, TN 37243

(Note: You can also reach out to your child's school counselor, principal, or front office staff, who will connect you directly with our district liaison.)