

Montana Office of Public Instruction

Guidance for Assisting Students Impacted by Natural Disasters

This guidance is for homeless liaisons and other school district personnel working with families and students who have been impacted by natural disasters, including wildfires and flooding, which could result in displacement and loss of housing. Daily attendance in school is critical for student success and should be the goal of every Montana educator. Schools must consider the best interests of students and should work closely with students and families when determining placement. Schools must immediately enroll students even without documentation, such as school records, or proof of immunization. Students wishing to participate in athletics should work with the coaching staff to request a McKinney-Vento waiver from the Montana High School Association.

The federal McKinney-Vento Act allows homeless students to either remain in the school of origin (where the student attended when he/she became homeless or the last school he/she attended) or to enroll immediately in the public school that serves the attendance area where the student is currently living. Families and students experiencing the trauma of a disaster may need some additional time and guidance to assess their circumstances, in order to make an informed school selection decision. School personnel should assist parents and youth to make a student-centered, best interest determination regarding school selection in a timely manner to lessen the impact of missed days of school.

The following circumstances may result in a family or student living in a qualifying homeless situation: in a shelter, in a hotel/motel, doubled up (couch surfing) with another person or family, or living in an unsheltered situation (e.g. camping out). These unstable living situations may be precipitated by the following reasons for displacement:

- 1. Total loss of home:** If a home is destroyed, or considered uninhabitable, the student is eligible for all services as a homeless student for the remainder of the school year. At the start of the new school year the living situation should be re-evaluated to determine eligibility. The student's status will remain "homeless" if the family/student continues to live in a qualifying situation.
- 2. Minor damage to home:** The family/student may be eligible as a homeless student if a home has minor damage due to a natural disaster that requires the family or student to seek temporary shelter elsewhere during the repair.
- 3. Evacuation:** Families or students impacted by an evacuation order due to wildfire or flooding may be eligible for McKinney-Vento status.
- 4. Air Quality Hazards:** Families or students who relocate temporarily during wildfire conditions due to the health impacts of poor air quality may be McKinney-Vento eligible for education supports and services. Air quality that has been rated as "unhealthy," "very unhealthy," or "hazardous" may present unreasonable dangers and create substandard living condition or lead to temporary loss of housing. Districts may request that families provide evidence of a medical condition impacting the student, or a family member with whom the child resides, resulting in the family seeking safer air quality levels.

https://www.airnow.gov/index.cfm?action=airnow.local_state



Resources for Disaster Response:

https://nche.ed.gov/ibt/dis_prep.php?utm_source=BenchmarkEmail&utm_campaign=hurricane-harvey-08282017&utm_medium=email

<https://www.schoolhouseconnection.org/supporting-children-and-youth-displaced-by-disasters-five-key-policies-for-schools/>

https://www.nlchp.org/documents/Homeless_Education_Advocacy_Manual_Disaster_Edition

For questions contact the Interim State Coordinator for Homeless Education, Jack O'Connor, joconnor2@mt.gov, 406-444-3083