



Episode 13: Trauma- and Culturally-Informed Communication for Students and Families Experiencing Homelessness

#REMSontheAir Podcast Intro (Recorded): [00:00:00] Welcome to the #REMSontheAir Podcast, hosted by your partners at the U.S. Department of Education’s Office of Safe and Supportive Schools and its Readiness and Emergency Management for Schools Technical Assistance Center. If you’re an old friend, you know us as the REMS TA Center, your national school safety center.

Join us as we chat about key topics in school and campus safety, security, and emergency management with experts and partners from the field.

Janelle Hughes: Hello and welcome back for another episode of #REMSontheAir. We are excited to bring to you another podcast episode. For those of you who are new here, my name is Janelle Hughes. I serve as the Project Director for the REMS TA Center, and I am joined by Amanda [00:01:00] Everett, our Training Manager. Together, Amanda and I are just short of—more than 16 years of experience providing technical assistance in the field of readiness and emergency management for schools.

Amanda Everett: Thanks for that introduction, Janelle. I’m excited to dive into our discussion on properly supporting students who may be facing homelessness or displacement. Throughout today’s podcast, we will define homelessness and how to address it through proper action and planning laid out by the McKinney-Vento Act.

Janelle Hughes: Thanks, Amanda. As Amanda mentioned, during our time together today, we hope to lay the groundwork and foundation for understanding what homelessness and displacement among students and families during and after emergencies may look like.

We will also provide a basic overview of this topic and insight that can help state and local education and emergency management agencies understand how to best support students and their families [00:02:00] who have been displaced from their homes, their communities, and their school settings as a result of natural disasters or other emergencies. In addition, we will touch on Federal legislation designed to help protect students who are facing this dire issue.

Here’s an audio from a recent webinar we hosted that provides an overview of existing legislation on this topic.

Janelle Hughes (Recorded): Additional Federal legislation exists with those featured on this slide—intersects with those featured on this slide to protect the rights of displaced students and families, including the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, the Runaway and Homeless Act, the Trafficking Victims Protection Act, and the Food Stamp Act, among others.

You may access the full list of Federal legislation designed to protect homeless and displaced students and their families via the National Center for Homeless Education site.

Amanda Everett: Thanks for kicking us [00:03:00] off and sharing that excerpt, Janelle. I wanted to open our discussion by talking about communication. And for some, this topic is uncharted territory, especially after an unforeseen incident.

Regardless of the cause of displacement or homelessness, it is important to take a trauma-informed and culturally sensitive approach when engaging with affected families or students. This can be a scary and sensitive topic to unpack with families, as they may have been displaced from their homes due to a lack of general safety.

The first step in proper engagement with families is to avoid using the term “homelessness.” Instead, the U.S. Department of Education recommends using the term “displaced” when describing student and family homelessness. This helps mitigate the chances of inadvertently deterring families seeking support or looking to enroll their students in a new school in response to their new circumstances.

Janelle Hughes: I am [00:04:00] so glad that you led with this, Amanda. Understanding this breakdown of verbiage is vital when communicating properly with both school staff and impacted families. There are many variations around the definition of homelessness versus displacement in terms of Federal, state, and local legislation, and it is important to understand that displacement does not always equate to homelessness.

We recently, again, hosted a webinar with our partners from the National Center for Homeless Education that shared excellent examples for how to guide conversations in person and on paper when addressing this topic. Here’s a snippet of that feedback.

Janelle Hughes (Recorded): The Department of Education does not recommend using the word *homeless* on enrollment forms or in communication with family. You are not required to use the term *homeless* on any forms. Instead, we suggest using phrasing such as “in a temporary housing arrangement” or something similar.

Another option is [00:05:00] to use the phrasing in the McKinney-Vento Act’s definition of homeless. For example, you might ask on an enrollment form, “Are you sharing someone else’s housing because you have nowhere else to stay?” Or “Are you sharing someone else’s housing due to loss of housing or similar reasons?”

Whenever possible, it is best to use person-first language in which you describe and not label the person.

Another key planning consideration is to develop family engagement initiatives. Engaging with families during this time is so important. We recommend that education agencies work with

their family engagement office, public information officer, and other partners to ensure that interactions are trauma informed and culturally sensitive.

Amanda Everett: Describe, not label. That is so well said. I do want to piggyback on that snippet and dig a little deeper into the McKinney-Vento Act.

This piece of legislation established the definition of homelessness as children or youth [00:06:00] who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence.

This definition is considerably multifaceted, as it includes a wide array of circumstances. The following fall under the umbrella: sharing housing with others due to loss of own housing; living in hotels, campgrounds, cars, or shelters; living in public spaces such as parks and abandoned buildings; or children living physically unaccompanied by a parental guardian figure.

Janelle Hughes: You know, Amanda, that last circumstance especially is often forgotten when thinking about the traditional definition of homelessness. Not only does the McKinney-Vento Act shed light on those different circumstances that fall under this topic, but it also established educational rights for those experiencing it.

Highlighting these educational rights provides guidance and direction on best practices for schools and whole school communities when creating emergency operations plans. [00:07:00] This next audio clip lists some of those rights that are included within that legislation.

Kenya Haynes (Recorded): A quick primer on the rights of McKinney-Vento–eligible students against students who have been deemed to meet the McKinney-Vento Act’s definition of *homeless*. Eligible students have the right to enroll in school immediately even if lacking documents normally required for enrollment. They also can enroll in the local school or continue attending the school of origin, according to the student’s best interest.

This is the—what you may hear referred to as the school selection provision of the McKinney-Vento Act. Both of those terms, the *local school* and the *school of origin*, are defined in statute. Local school is any school—usually it’s what we think of sort of commonly as the neighborhood school, but technically the statutory definition refers to any public school that non-homeless children who are living in the same area as the homeless child are eligible [00:08:00] to attend.

Usually that’s the neighborhood school, although it could include other schools if they’re in a school choice district or open-enrollment type of environment. The school of origin is the school the student attended when permanently housed or the school in which the student was last enrolled.

Again, you probably don’t need to dig too deeply into those weeds. Just think of this as the provision in the McKinney-Vento Act that seeks to provide educational continuity. Whenever

possible, even when a student may be displaced from his or her residence because they have become homeless. If it is deemed in the student's best interest to continue attending the school of origin, the district must provide transportation to and from the school of origin if requested.

And then this is probably something you would assume anyway, but our statute makes it clear that homeless students or students experiencing homelessness should be receiving services that are comparable to those provided to other students, to non-homeless students, according to each student's needs. [00:09:00]

Also, under the School Nutrition Act, homeless students should receive free school meals, and that means that they don't need to fill out the household application and await for a determination of eligibility, but rather once the student has been deemed as experiencing homelessness, right away they can begin receiving free school meals.

And then as Janelle referred to earlier, McKinney-Vento students are categorically eligible to receive Title I supports and if they have a special education need, of course, to receive those supports, as well.

Amanda Everett: While the school and school district have the same goal of upholding these rights, they play different roles.

At the school level, the primary responsibility is ensuring enrollment and continuity of education. While at the school district, it's tasked with facilitating information and stimulating a partnership between the school and the community for further assistance with necessary aid. [00:10:00]

Janelle Hughes: Also, every state has a state coordinator and every district has a local liaison in homeless education.

The National Center for Homeless Education also provides a helpline, webinars, or free virtual and hardcopy resources by request. And we really encourage everyone to reach out to them for those resources to get an understanding of the types of support and to really take advantage of that and opportunities to collaborate with state and local experts when creating EOPs [emergency operations plans].

A link to help you identify your local or state homeless education expert, as well as additional key resources for emergency planning on this topic, can be found on our *#REMSontheAir* Website page. And if you have any questions regarding these topics or any school safety or preparedness topics, please do not hesitate to reach out to us via our toll-free phone line:

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[00:11:00] 1-855-781-7367. Or send us an email to info@remstacenter.org, and we will be more than happy to provide technical assistance in response to your inquiry.

Just a few closing notes. As a reminder, every state has a state coordinator for homeless education, and every district has a local homeless education liaison. Visit the National Center for Homeless Education's Website for more information, and you can find a link to that site via the REMS TA Center's *#REMSontheAir* Podcast page.

We also encourage you to call the National Center for Homeless Education's helpline at 1-800-308-2145 or send them an email at homeless@serve.org. Thank you so much for tuning in to today's episode. [00:12:00]