

## Relocating to a New School: Tips for Families

Families can find themselves in new communities for many reasons. Most challenging is when the move is sudden, with little or no preparation, when the family relocates to an unfamiliar area, and particularly when the family has been uprooted without resources. Such circumstances are common among families who must evacuate for extended time period as the result of a natural disaster. Many face the dilemmas of school enrollment for their children, which for some include the additional challenges of meeting the needs of children with disabilities or special learning needs.

### **ALL CHILDREN HAVE A RIGHT TO AN EDUCATION**

Regardless of the community you are from, or the community to which you have relocated, all children of school age have the right to a free and public education in the local school system. Even if you have no permanent residence, state and federal laws guarantee school attendance under the McKinney-Vento Act, which protects homeless children. Children who have no permanent address are guaranteed the same educational rights as all other children, including the right to special education services, having a 504 plan, and school transportation. This includes being able to register for a new school without having the typical records needed when registering at a new school district (e.g. birth certificate, documents verifying residency, etc.) Additionally, state and federal laws guarantee a free and appropriate education to every child with a disability, age 3–21, and specific sections of federal special education law (IDEA) guarantee a continuation of special education services when students move to new schools. Additional information about the McKinney-Vento Act can be found [here](#).

### **ENROLL CHILDREN AS SOON AS POSSIBLE**

In communities with a large number of relocated families, local agencies should be available to make it easier for you to obtain information about nearby schools and registration information. Even if you are on your own in a new city, you can obtain the information you need by visiting a public school near you. School office staff should have information about how to enroll your children as well as information about the programs and services available. The very first step is to **enroll your children** so that they can begin to attend school!

### **COLLECT AND RECONSTRUCT SCHOOL AND HEALTH INFORMATION**

Depending on the condition of your child's former school, it may not be possible to quickly obtain school and health records at this time. If not, check to see if you have any of the following, and bring to the school when you go to enroll your child:

- Birth certificate (many schools require a birth certificate for enrollment, although there are other ways to prove age)
- Immunization records
- Health records (reports of physical examinations, medications, surgeries, etc.)
- All Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) and all other special education records (including assessment reports if available and descriptions of accommodations)
- All Section 504 plan records (including assessment reports if available and descriptions of accommodations)
- Report cards
- Any reports of district or state test results

If you do not have documents of your child's school and health history, take a few minutes to write down what you (and your child) remember, and bring these notes to the school. Remember that if you do not have the records and you qualify for homeless status under the McKinney-Vento Act, the school cannot deny your child's right to attend school. Don't worry if you don't remember every detail in your child's educational history; the staff at your child's new school will work with you to plan an appropriate educational program. Ask yourself (or your child if old enough) the following questions:

- Where did my child attend school (starting with kindergarten)—note name of school(s) and city.
- Has my child ever been retained in grade? When?
- Did my child receive any specialized instruction? This could include interventions (i.e. reading, math, writing, counseling, etc.), gifted or enrichment services, and/or special education services.
- If your child qualified for special education services, when did my child first start to receive special education services?
- Did my child have a Section 504 Plan?
- In what areas did my child receive help or interventions at school? (Reading, math, speech therapy, physical therapy, behavior, counseling, etc.)
- If my child qualified for special education, under what category did my child qualify? (Learning Disabled, Emotional Behavioral Disorder, Speech Disorder, etc.)
- How did my child receive special education or 504 Plan services? (In a special class, special school, with a tutor in a small group, individually with a tutor?)
- About how much time per day did my child receive special education help?
- What can I recall about the results of my child's most recent evaluation or review? About how long ago was it?
- What can I recall about the goals on my child's most recent IEP or 504 plan? What was he/she working on?
- How much time did my child receive instruction in the regular education classroom?
- What curriculum materials were used with my child in either regular or special education? (Do I remember the name of the reading or math program?)
- Did my child have a behavior plan? What behaviors were of concern? What was the plan?
- Did my child receive any accommodations or modifications—in the classroom such as special seating or devices, or on tests such as extra time?

## **PROMOTE RESILANCE AND ADJUSTMENT**

The need to relocate suddenly creates unique coping challenges. It may contribute to the social, environmental, and psychological stress experienced by your children and family. Children will be

most affected by the reactions of their parents and other family members, the duration of the relocation, their natural coping styles and emotional reactivity, and their ability to stay connected with friends and other familiar people and activities. To the extent possible, parents and other caregivers should:

- Provide opportunities for children to see or connect with old friends, as well as develop new friendships.
- Allow your child to take items that bring comfort to school if this helps relieve anxiety.
- Establish some daily routines so that the child is able to have a sense of what to expect (including returning to school as soon as possible).
- Provide opportunities for your child to share ideas, and listen carefully to their concerns or fears.
- Emphasize your child's resiliency and competencies. Help them identify what they have done in the past that helped them cope when they were frightened or upset. Bring their attention to other communities that have experienced natural disasters and recovered.
- Be sensitive to the disruption that relocation may cause, and be responsive to your child's needs.
- Consider the developmental level and unique experiences of each child; it is important to remember that as children vary, so will their responses to the disruption of relocation.
- Encourage your child to participate in extra-curricular activities, if this is something they enjoy.
- Talk to the school about opportunities for before- and after-school child care.
- Participate in school-family activities and get to know your child's teachers and other significant adults.

## **ADVOCATE FOR SERVICES FOR YOUR CHILD**

It is important that schools provide appropriate instruction for all children, and that includes children with disabilities. If your child needs specialized instruction, efforts to determine what services your child needs should begin as soon as you enroll the child, but it might take a while to develop a formal IEP or a 504 plan. It may be necessary to conduct screening (brief assessments) or even a new comprehensive assessment in order to determine what services are appropriate for your child. In the meantime, your child should be placed in a classroom or program that seems most likely to meet his or her needs, so that instruction can begin and so that the school can start collecting information about his or her skills. Sometimes schools will be able to quickly write a temporary or "interim" IEP or 504 plan based on the information you provide. Sometimes the child will be placed in a program that is a "best guess" and then staff will begin to observe, screen and possibly conduct more assessment and make any changes necessary to give your child appropriate instruction in the least restrictive educational setting. Although there are state and federal rules regarding the delivery of special education services, in unusual circumstances, it is important that all involved approach the situation with patience and flexibility to ensure that every child has the opportunity to learn in an appropriate school setting.

As you make contacts with school personnel and agencies or advocates in the community, be sure to keep a log of all individuals you interact with. Write down names and phone numbers so that you can get back to the right person.

If you have particular concerns about your child or your family's emotional reaction to the disaster or to relocation, the school psychologist or social worker can help determine if other services are appropriate. Please be aware that trauma experienced from the crisis event can have an emotional impact on the child and family at home, school, and work. The school psychologist or another

school-based mental health practitioner will likely know of community organizations and agencies that can provide a variety of resources to help relocated families. If your child or yourself has a disability, ask if there are disability support agencies or groups for parents and for students. These groups will be able to offer advice for obtaining appropriate services and help explain local and state regulations, procedures and resources.

Remember, relocation does not change your child's right to an education or right to due process. All section 504 or special education safeguards still apply. Parents have the right to be part of all decisions regarding their child's education. Finally, be an active partner with your child's new school staff. Everyone, especially your child, will benefit from close teamwork between parents and school.

### **Additional Resources**

See helpful resources on responding to natural disasters for parents, educators, mental health professionals and crisis teams: [http://www.nasponline.org/resources/crisis\\_safety](http://www.nasponline.org/resources/crisis_safety)

- Helping Children Cope After a Natural Disaster: Information for Families and Educators
- Coping With Crisis and Children With Special Needs
- Natural Disasters and Relocated Students With Special Needs: Recommendations for Receiving Schools

*Adapted from a handout written by NASP after Hurricane Katrina.*

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Please cite this document as:

National Association of School Psychologists. (2017). *New schools for students: Tips for relocated families*. [handout]. Bethesda, MD: Author.

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