

A PATH to a Better Life: How BISD Helps Students in Transition

November is National Homeless Youth Awareness Month. During the past 30 days, a network of agencies has shone a light on a growing epidemic across the country. According to the National Child Traumatic Stress Network, as many as 2.5 million youths experience homelessness in some capacity throughout the year. As the number of homeless youths evolves, so does the definition of homelessness, a concept that is often misunderstood.

The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, which is a federal program established in 1987, provides services and resources for youths in transition, such as those who are:

- Temporarily sharing housing with another family, called “doubling up”;
- Living in a motel, hotel, trailer park, or campground due to lack of alternative adequate accommodations;
- Living in an emergency or transitional shelter;
- Awaiting foster care placement; or
- Living in a car, park, public space, abandoned building, bus or train station, or similar setting.

“Under McKinney-Vento, the definition of homelessness is quite broad,” said Norma Mercado, Homeless and Foster Care Liaison for Bastrop ISD. “About 80% of the students in Bastrop ISD who are identified as homeless are students whose families are temporarily doubling up with another family for economic reasons.”

Because there is often a stigma to being homeless, it can be difficult for students to seek help, a scenario Mercado knows all too well given that she works directly with more than 300 students. In BISD, students identified as homeless are part of the PATHS program, which stands for *Planned Approach To Helping Students*. In the PATHS program, barriers to education are removed so that homeless students receive the assistance they need to maintain stability and continue their education.

“The purpose of the law is to ensure some stability while the student finds permanency in their life. For example, students get to remain at the school they were attending when they lost housing so transportation is coordinated between districts in those cases where a student is temporarily living in a different district that’s not their original school” said Mercado. “You know, homelessness could happen to any of us. Many people are just one significant illness or natural disaster away from being homeless.”

No one knows that better than Monica, a parent with two children in Bastrop ISD. She and her children became homeless August 25, right after school started, even though she was working full time and still is. Since then she has moved eight times. If not for the support of her children, the McKinney-Vento Act, and BISD, she’s not sure what she would have done.

“If not for this help and people like Miss Norma, my kids would have been in eight different schools. My daughter is a sophomore, and she could have fallen behind and lost credits.”

Monica and her children currently live in a shelter, and though the past few months have been a struggle, she says the stability the school district has provided her children helped all of them. She anticipates getting her own apartment in the next month.

“It’s been a good turnaround for us. My kids were able to stay in their schools and focus on their school work and sports and keep their minds off of what was happening outside. I could focus on getting everything back together,” she said.

It’s stories like these that give Norma Mercado appreciation for the hard work she does. It pays off, especially for the students who need the help.

“It gives me hope. I don’t see them only as students. I see them as community members, so the work we do now is so important, especially knowing what some of these kids have been through,” said Mercado. “It’s a big deal for them to finish high school against some of the odds. I feel really proud of the students when they have that moment.”

To learn more about the homeless and foster care services or the BISD PATHS program, contact Norma Mercado at nmercado@bisdtx.org or call 512-772-7133. If you’d like to serve as a mentor in Bastrop ISD, contact Lauri Anzaldua at lanzaldua@bisdtx.org or call 512-772-7177. You can get more information about mentoring and download a mentor application from our [Partners in Education](#) page.