

## McKenny Vento funds give students without homes a chance at success

Written by By Molly Ann Howell Managing Editor  
Friday, 13 October 2023 06:30

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According to the Department of Housing and Urban Development, over 2,500 people were homeless in New Mexico in 2022.

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A child without a home still has to go to school, though, and Gallup McKinley County Schools has a program to help kids stay focused on their studies by providing them with the tools to combat their situations, whether it's complete homelessness or housing insecurity.

Faith Kline, the district's coordinator for counseling and general education, said that about 2% of the district's population was homeless during the 2022-2023 school year. That's roughly 259 students.

The McKenny Vento Act, which President Ronald Reagan signed into law in 1987, helps the district support those students who are facing homelessness. GMCS receives \$24,000 each school year through the McKenny Vento program. This money helps support the students and gives them the supplies they need to be successful in school.

Additionally, the district received almost \$353,000 in American Rescue Plan money during the 2021-2022 and 2022-2023 school years, but this funding source will dry up at the end of the school year.

"So we're able to provide students with necessities and things through this program to ensure that even if they're struggling in their home life and experiencing some type of homelessness that we still try to give them some resources to access their education and be in school as much as possible," Kline explained.

The district provides students with necessities, such as hygiene supplies, clothing, and feminine products. A local food pantry supplies kids with fruits, vegetables, nonperishable items, and frozen foods. Students also have access to laundry detergent.

Besides a lack of food or clean clothes, poor vision impacts a student's ability to learn. The district sets up optometrist appointments for students to get their eyes checked, and they'll even pay for the glasses.

The McKinney-Vento model features a diverse list of circumstances that describe homelessness, such as: individuals who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime

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residence; students who may share housing with other people due to a loss of housing or economic hardship; students who are living in hotels, motels, trailer parks, or camping grounds due to a lack of alternative adequate accommodations; and/or students who are living in emergency or transitional housing.

Tiffany Harper, a GMCS general education social worker, says her department assists foster children under this program. In addition to being unhoused, children suffer from a multitude of issues due to the lack of quality housing.

“... Inadequate housing could mean things such as no electricity, no running water,” she said. “If you’re having problems with bed bugs, if you’re having problems with lice, there’s just a lot of things that can qualify a student and his or her family for this program that we want to get out to the public.”

In order to apply for the program, every GMCS family fills out a residence questionnaire at the beginning of the school year. Parents may indicate that they’re in shared housing at this time, or that they’re experiencing some form of homelessness.

But social workers keep their eyes and ears out for students in need of secure housing. It could be that student’s friend, a teacher, or staff member who reaches out to the district’s social workers.

It’s the ultimate goal for social workers to get a student help no matter how they found out about the student’s situation.

From there, the family is notified and the type of help they need is addressed during a meeting. Forms are filled out, and it goes from the school to Kline, who is the homeless liaison.

If a family qualifies, she passes along their information, and approval, to a specialist who fills a bag with hygiene products, clothing, and other items the family may need.

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But this isn't a one-time thing. Kline and the social workers check in with the families every two to three months.

"Obviously we do our best to never turn down a family, especially those in need," she said. "So with the additional ARP funding we received we've been able to support even more families over the past couple of years."

Homelessness is a tricky subject, Kline and Harper admit. Communicating with the families in a sensitive and culturally appropriate manner is the key to success.

"We serve a large population of Native American students and sometimes in their culture, houses not having running water is normal," Kline said. "So we also have to ensure that when we're qualifying students for McKinney Vento that we stay culturally appropriate and make sure that these families know why we're qualifying them and [see] if they would really like the support."

Harper expressed the importance of the program, stating that if a student's basic needs aren't met, they're not going to succeed in school. Educators can't expect students to excel academically when their living situation is less than adequate and their social-emotional needs aren't being met.

"[This program is important] because if a student or family environment isn't at a capacity to where the student can learn, then how can we expect them to excel?" she said. "They have to be able to have food in their tummies, they have to be able to stay warm, they have to be able to have a good night's sleep, they have to be able to be comfortable wherever they are in order to function and focus on schoolwork the next day."

Kline said when hard times arise — and yes it's a sensitive topic — at the end of the day the district needs to support students in all capacities.

"... This program has really helped [with] ensuring that students experiencing any form of homelessness or hard time ... are supported," she said.

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***Organizations interested in donating to the district's homeless students' program, email Faith Kline: [fkline@gmcs.org](mailto:fkline@gmcs.org) or Tiffany Harper: [thsu@gmcs.org](mailto:thsu@gmcs.org)***

By Molly Ann Howell

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