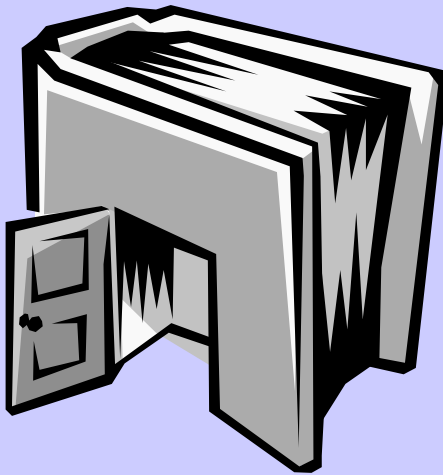


**Arkansas Homeless Children & Youth
Education Project**



Final Report to Southern Poverty Law Center

September 2000

Arkansas Advocates for Children & Families



Homeless children and youth face barriers to enrollment, attendance, and success in school that other children do not confront. These barriers include transportation, official records requirements, and access to special programs.

The Stewart B. McKinney Act of 1987 mandates that states receiving federal McKinney funds eliminate these educational barriers so that homeless children and youth have the same access to free, appropriate public education as non homeless children and youth. Arkansas is among the states now receiving McKinney funds.

At the request of the Southern Poverty Law Center, Arkansas Advocates for Children & Families conducted a study in the spring to determine if Arkansas is in compliance with the provisions of the McKinney Act and, if not, to identify and address compliance deficiencies. This was done by surveying service providers about the barriers to education faced by homeless children and youth in their area. The results of this survey, and recommendations for improvement, are presented in this report.

ARKANSAS' DEFINITION OF HOMELESSNESS

The Arkansas Office for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth defines a homeless child or youth as someone who lacks a fixed, regular and adequate place of residence. Homeless children and youth include those who:

- live in transitional or emergency shelters;
- live in trailer parks and camping grounds;
- share housing due to a loss of housing or similar situation;
- are in the care of a public agency awaiting foster care placement;
- are incarcerated;
- are migratory;
- are runaways;
- live in homes for unwed mothers with no other available accommodations;
- remain in a hospital beyond the time they would normally stay for health reasons because they have been abandoned by their families; or
- are “throwaways” whose parents or guardians will not permit them to live at home.

The stereotypical view of a homeless person is an adult who is dirty, hungry and living on the streets. This stereotype does not accurately reflect the reality of homelessness for many Arkansans,

and Arkansas' definition goes well beyond the stereotype of the homeless as people living on the streets.

THE STEWART B. MCKINNEY ACT

Federal Statutory Requirements

Under the McKinney Act, states can apply for federal grants to ensure that homeless children and youth are provided equal access to educational programs. Participating states are required to identify and remove barriers to the enrollment, attendance, and success of homeless children and youth in public schools.

Once granted funds, each state must appoint a Coordinator for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth who must develop and carry out the state's plan for overcoming barriers. The state coordinator must facilitate coordination between the agencies that serve the homeless as well as develop relationships with homeless service agencies to improve the provisions of services to homeless children and families.

One of the conditions of the McKinney Act is that each local educational agency (LEA) make school placement determinations on a case-by-case basis in the "best interests" of the child or youth. School placement could include the school of origin or a school in the area of the shelter where youth are temporarily residing. Under the amendments of the McKinney Act, the wishes of parents or unaccompanied youth should also be considered by school officials in making school placement decisions.

Federal Funding in Arkansas Under the McKinney Act

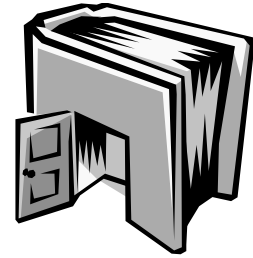
During the 1999 fiscal year, a total of \$28 million was designated nationwide for state grants under the McKinney Act. Arkansas was allocated \$289,717. Of this, \$50,000 was set aside to fund the office of the state coordinator. The remaining \$239,717 was awarded, based on need, to local educational agencies (LEAs) through competitive grants.

Arkansas has 311 school districts. Twenty-five districts applied for McKinney funding, and 17 were awarded funding. Arkansas school districts receiving funding include:

- Conway
- Dollarway
- Earle
- Fayetteville
- Fort Smith
- Gould
- Hope
- Hot Springs
- Little Rock
- Marion



- Mountain Home
- Nettleton
- North Little Rock
- Pulaski County
- Russellville
- Stuttgart
- Vilonia.



Arkansas' Requirements for Homeless Education

According to the Arkansas Department of Education, there were approximately 7,876 school-age homeless children in Arkansas in 1997. On any given day in Arkansas, only 40 percent of homeless children and youth, ages 5-16 residing in shelters, are enrolled in school. As a McKinney fund recipient, Arkansas is required to reduce barriers to education for homeless children and youth. And, as required, Arkansas has a state plan for educating homeless children and youth.

According to this plan, the Office of Coordinator for the Education for Homeless Children and Youth is responsible for:

- estimating the number of homeless children and youth in the state;
- gathering information on the nature and extent of the problems homeless children have in gaining access to public educational programs; and
- facilitating coordination between state educational agencies and other service providers.

According to the state plan, the LEA facilitates the enrollment, attendance, and the success of homeless children and youth in school. This includes:

- making school placement determinations based on the best interest of the homeless child or youth;
- considering the requests of parents regarding school placement; and
- ensuring that homeless children and youth receive services comparable to those provided to the non homeless children and youth.

In addition, the LEA maintains all required records and makes them available when a child enters a new school district. A homeless liaison is designated by the LEA to ensure that homeless children and youth enroll and succeed in school. The liaison also makes referrals to other appropriate services when necessary. All 17 districts in Arkansas receiving McKinney funds have designated homeless liaisons.

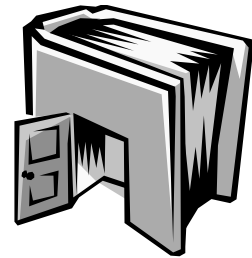
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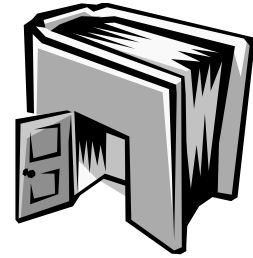
The Arkansas study of homeless youth was developed with guidance from the Southern Poverty Law Center's "Alabama Homeless Education Project" and "A Report on the Education of Kentucky's Homeless Children" conducted by the Children's Law Center. The survey used in this study (see Appendix 1) was adapted from a survey developed by the National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty. The changes were made with the Law Center's permission and guidance.

A list of homeless, youth, and battered women's shelters was provided by the Arkansas Department of Human Services. From this list, Arkansas Advocates for Children & Families identified 69 shelters providing services to children and youth. AACF then sent a letter to the directors of the 69 shelters informing them of the upcoming survey and asking them to provide a day and time when they preferred to be called. Of the 69 shelters initially identified, one did not provide services to homeless children and youth and three were no longer in operation. Therefore, a total of 65 shelters were queried.

In addition to the shelters that requested an appointment, the surveyors contacted the other shelters to schedule an appointment for the survey. A total of 40 shelters completed the survey by phone and three elected to complete the survey themselves and send it in. Therefore, a total of 43 of the 65 shelters (66.2%) completed the survey. Of the remaining 22 shelters, two refused to participate and the other 20 shelters did not participate after a minimum of three contacts by project staff. Data analysis was conducted on the 43 surveys using frequency distributions.

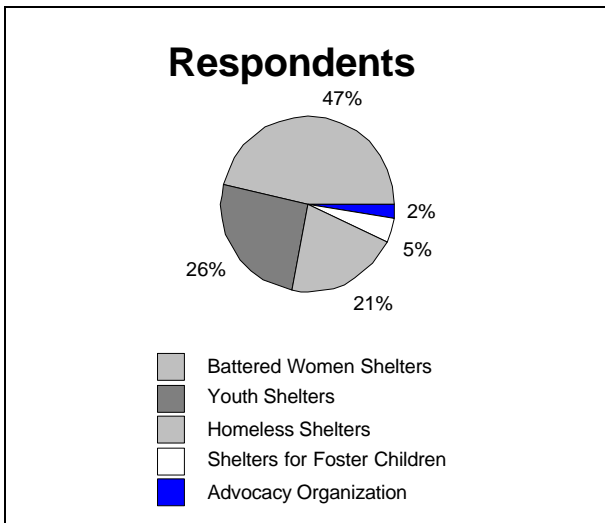
NOTE: Percentages may not equal 100 due to rounding.





A Profile of Respondents

Of the 65 identified shelters, 43 completed surveys. The majority of the respondents were battered women's shelters, followed by youth shelters, homeless shelters, and residential facilities for children awaiting foster care, as well as a homeless advocacy organization.

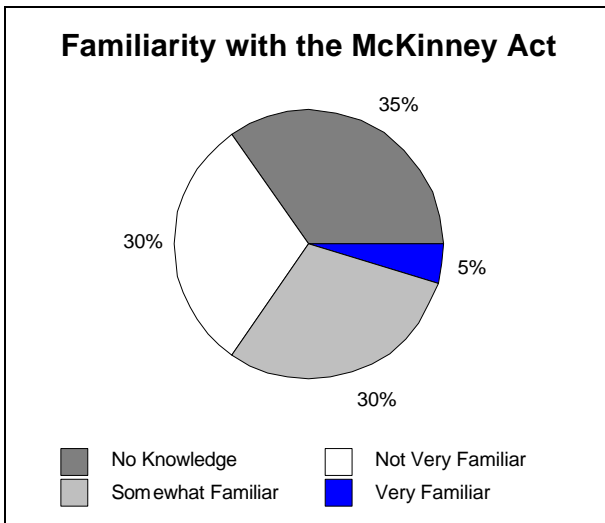


Contacted shelters were geographically dispersed across the state, however the majority were located in Northwest Arkansas. The Delta

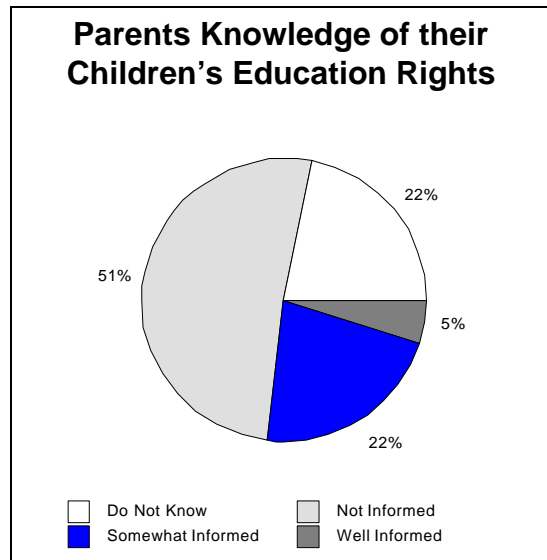
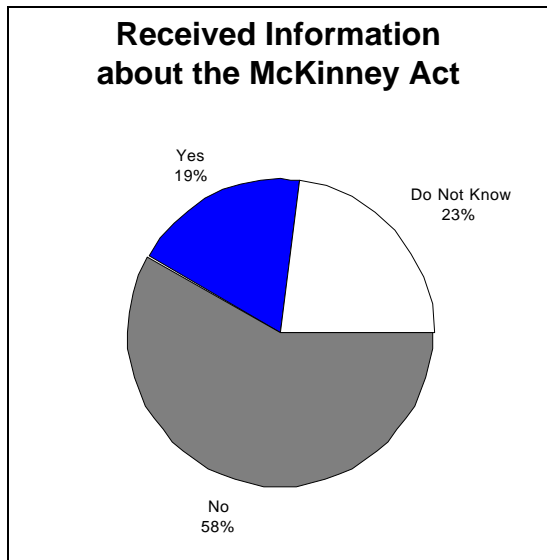
in Southeast Arkansas, which is the poorest area of the state, comprised only a small percentage of shelters in this study.

Familiarity With the McKinney Act

Of the 43 respondents, 35 percent said they had never heard of the McKinney Act. Thirty percent said they were not very familiar with it, and 30 percent said they were somewhat familiar. Only 5 percent of respondents indicated that they were very familiar with the McKinney Act.



Fifty-eight percent of respondents indicated that they had not received any information from the state or their local educa-



tional agency concerning the rights of homeless children and youth to have equal access to public school education. Only 19 percent said they did receive information, which included printed materials, letters, phone calls, and McKinney grant information. Twenty-three percent did not know whether or not they received such information.

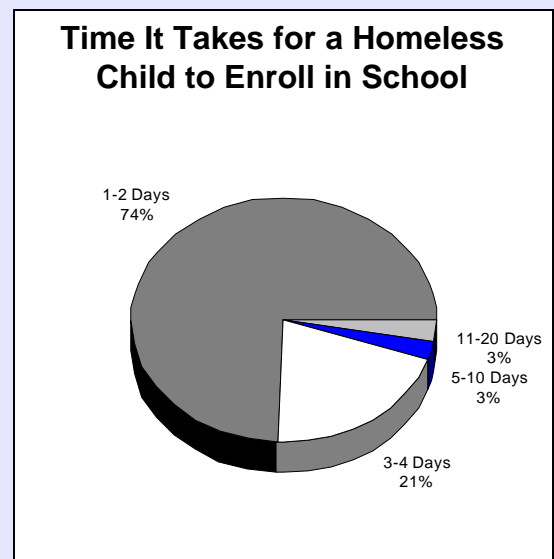
Thirty-three percent of respondents knew the identity of the person at their local school district who is responsible for assisting homeless children and youth. No one in the sample could identify the State Coordinator for the Education for Homeless Children and Youth programs. However, this was expected since the State Coordinator was only recently hired.

Fifty-one percent of the respondents said that parents are not at all informed about the educational rights of their children. Twenty-two percent replied that parents are somewhat informed, and only 5 percent said parents are well informed. Twenty-two percent did not know how informed parents are.

Homeless Students Enrolled in New School Quickly

Seventy-four percent of the respondents said that children and youth are enrolled in their new school within one to two days, and 21 percent said they were enrolled within three to four days. Three percent replied that enrollment took eight to nine days and 3 percent replied that enrollment took about 20 days.

Of the 21 shelters who provide educational services to children and youth, five provided certified teachers for children and youth who were unable to attend school due to inappropriate behavior or safety reasons. Fourteen provided tutoring services, and two provided both certified teachers and tutoring. None of the respondents identified any separate schools specifically for homeless children and youth in Arkansas.



School Placement

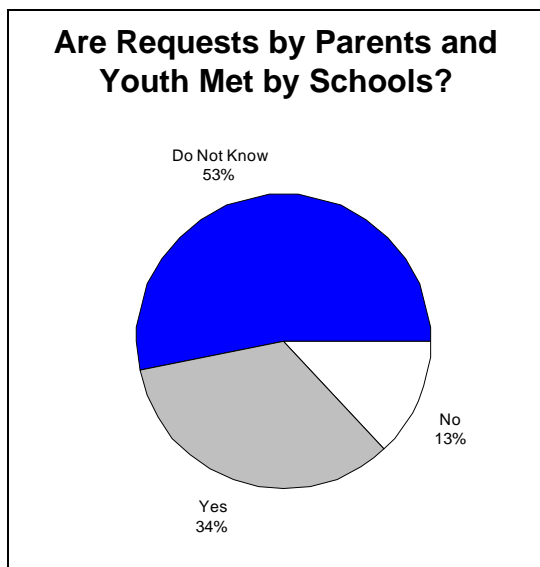
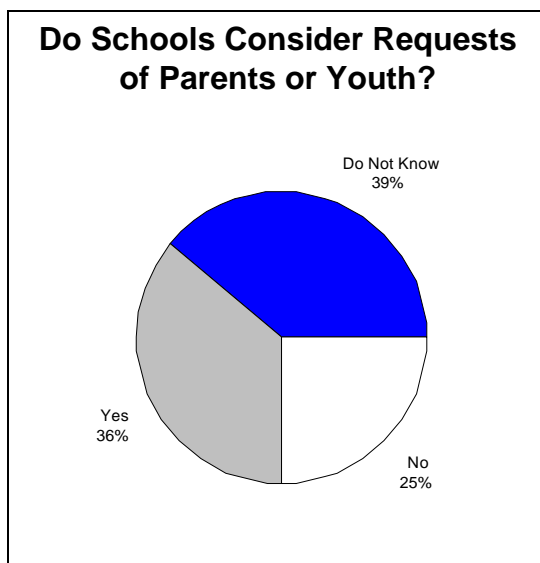
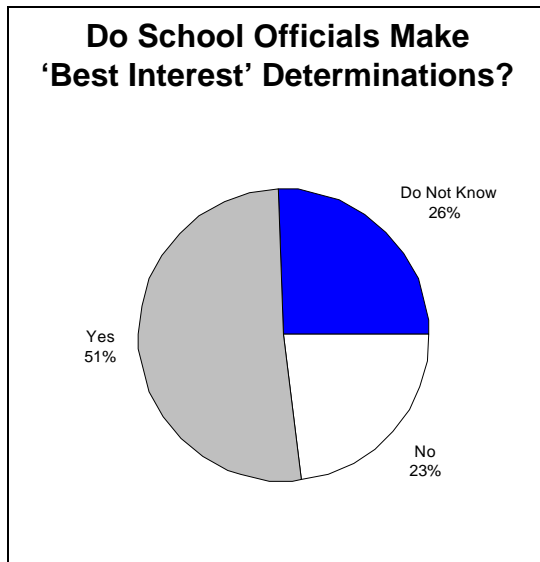
As mentioned earlier, the McKinney Act requires school officials to consider the “best interest” of a child or youth when making a school placement decision. School officials are also required to consider the requests of parents when making this decision.

Fifty-one percent of the respondents indicated that their school officials consistently make “best interest” determinations regarding school placement. Of the 23 percent who replied that school officials did not consistently make “best interest” determinations, three shelters said that school officials never make “best interest” determinations, and one said officials make “best interest” decisions 90 percent of the time. The other four shelters said they could not estimate this. Twenty-six percent of respondents indicated that they did not know how often school officials make “best interest” determinations.

Thirty-six percent of the respondents indicated that school officials consistently consider the requests of parents or unaccompanied youth when making “best interest” determinations. Of the 25 percent who replied that school officials do not consistently consider the requests of parents or unaccompanied youth, three shelters replied this is never done, two replied that it occurred 5 percent of the time, and one replied it occurred 50 percent of the time. The other three shelters said they could not estimate this. Thirty-nine percent of respondents indicated that they did not know whether these requests are considered.

Thirty-four percent of the respondents said that the requests of parents or unaccompanied youth are consistently met. Of the 13 percent who responded that these requests are not consistently met, one respondent said these requests were met 75 percent of the time, and another replied 95 percent of the time. The other two respondents said they could not estimate how often these requests were met. Fifty-three percent of respondents indicated that they did not know whether or not such requests are met.

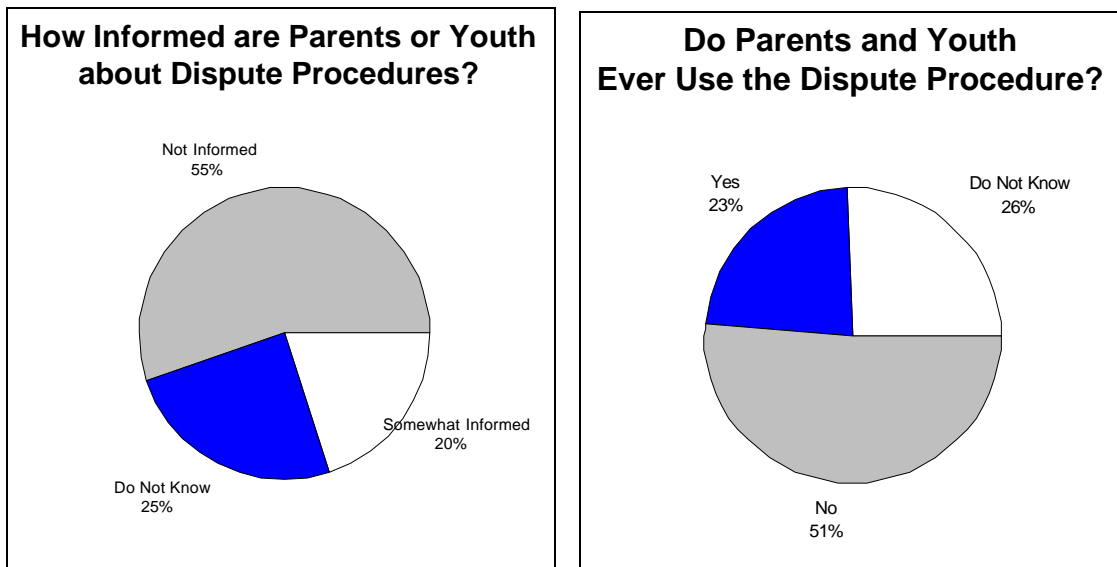
As far as reasons for not consistently meeting the requests of parents or unaccompanied youth, five of the respondents said that school officials claim the school district does not provide transportation to the school of origin. Two respondents said school officials claim the school district requires children to transfer to a school in the shelter’s attendance area, and seven respondents said school officials claim the school of origin is too far away. Two respondents provided other reasons for not attending the school of origin which included school officials need to abide by desegregation laws, to meet special education needs, and to meet the safety needs of an abused child.



Grievance and Dispute Resolution Procedures

Fifty-five percent of the respondents said that homeless parents and youth are not informed about what steps they can take if they disagree with a school placement decision. Twenty percent replied that homeless parents and youth are somewhat informed, and 25 percent responded that they did not know. None replied that they were well informed.

Twenty-three percent of the respondents indicated that parents or youth use the dispute procedure, and 51 percent indicated that they do not use the dispute procedure. Twenty-six percent of the respondents did not know whether or not parents use the dispute procedure.



Barriers to Obtaining a Public School Education

The McKinney Act requires that school officials reduce barriers to homeless children and youth enrolling in and attending school. This includes both the school of origin and schools in the attendance area of the shelter in which homeless children and youth reside.

Barriers to Transferring to Schools in the Area of the Shelter

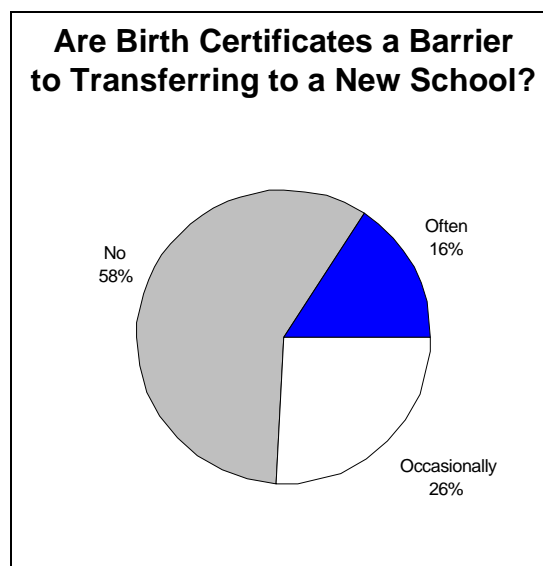
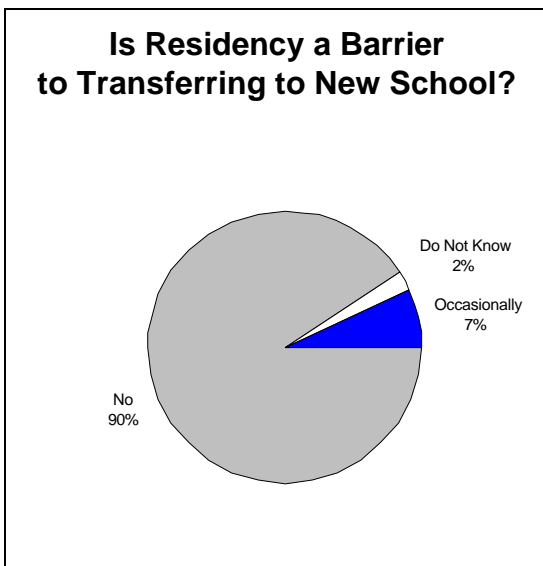
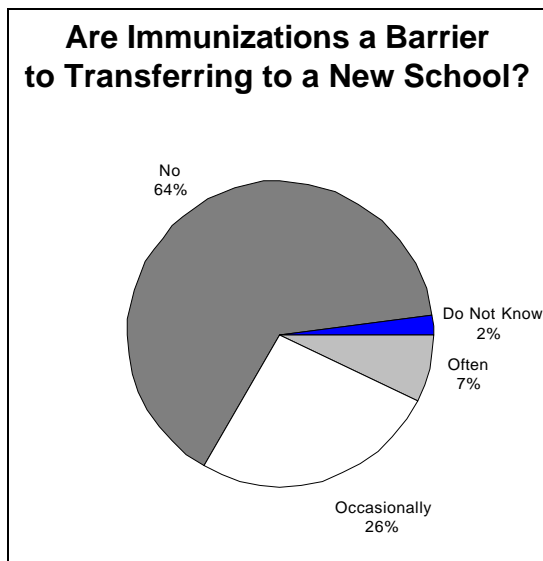
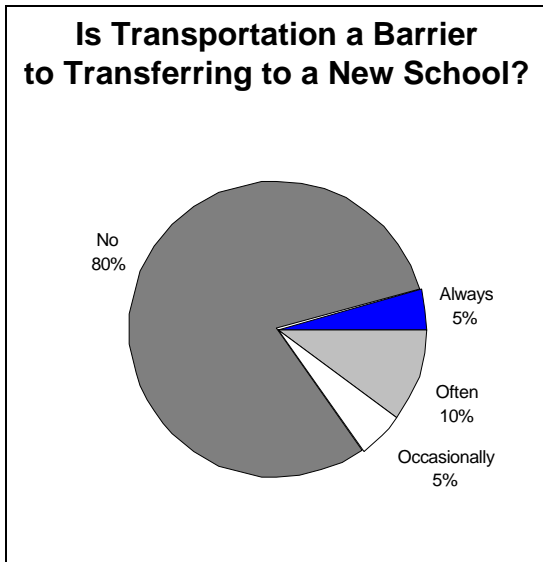
Five percent of the respondents indicated that transportation is occasionally a barrier to transferring to a new school. Ten percent replied that this is often a barrier, and 5 percent replied it is always a barrier. Eighty percent replied that transportation is not a barrier.

Twenty-six percent of the respondents indicated that immunization requirements occasionally create barriers, and 7 percent replied it is often a barrier. Sixty-four percent indicated that immunization requirements do not create barriers, and 2 percent did not know.

Seven percent of the respondents indicated that residency requirements occasionally prevented or delayed enrollment. Ninety percent indicated that this did not cause enrollment problems, and 2 percent did not know.

Twenty-six percent of the respondents indicated that obtaining birth certificates occasionally create barriers to enrollment, and 16 percent replied often. Fifty-eight percent responded that obtaining a birth certificate is not a problem.

Ten percent of the respondents indicated that transferring a student record from a previous school is occasionally a barrier to enrollment in a new school. Five percent replied

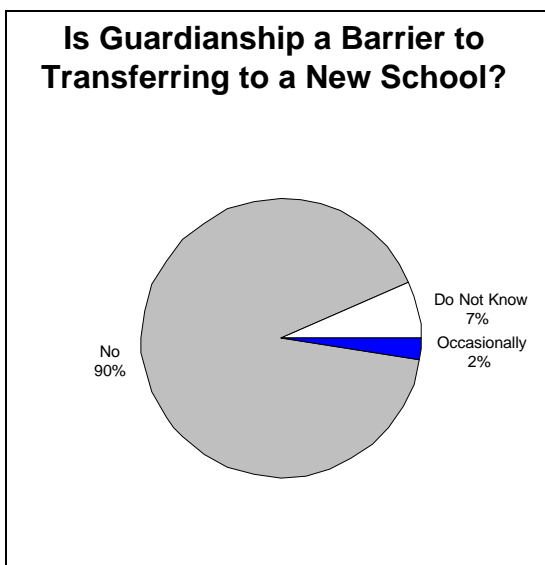
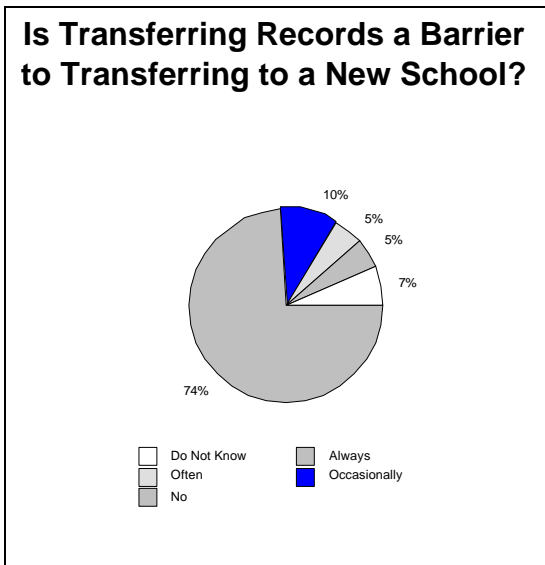


often, and 5 percent replied that it is always a barrier. Seventy-four percent indicated that the transferring of records is not a barrier, and 7 percent did not know.

Two percent of the respondents indicated that guardianship requirements occasionally pose problems for enrollment. Ninety percent said that they do not pose problems, and 7 percent did not know.

Two percent of the respondents indicated that school uniforms occasionally create barriers to enrollment, and 7 percent replied often. Eighty-eight percent indicated that this is not a problem, and 2 percent did not know.

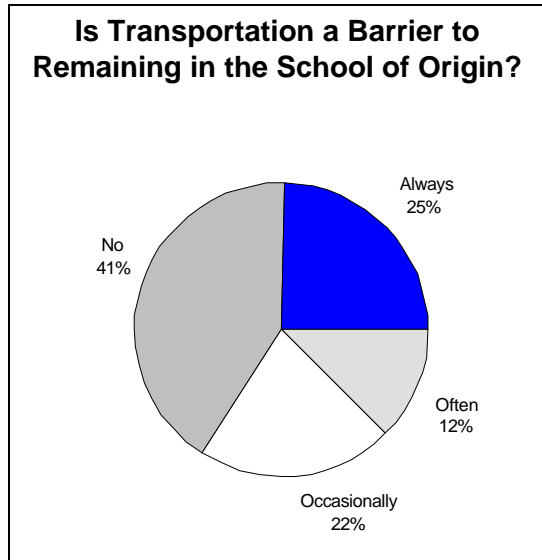
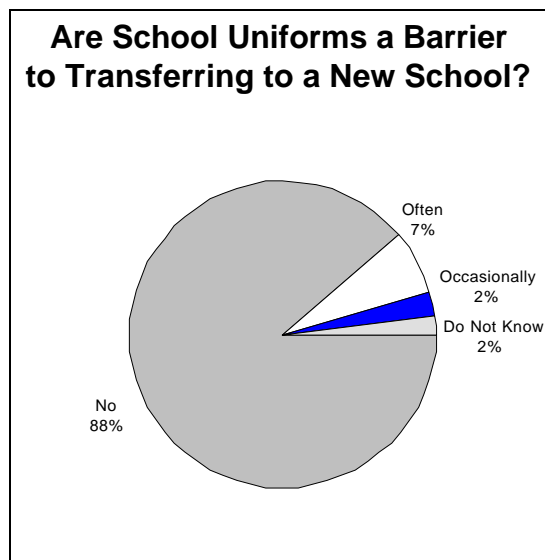
Other problems identified relating to barriers to transferring to a new school in the attendance area of the shelter included school staff being judgmental against children and their mothers, children being labeled as “problem kids,” social barriers such as making new friends, and the consistency in the curriculum from school to school. One respondent from a battered women’s shelter indicated that schools should expunge the address to which school records are sent in order to protect the child from an abusive father. One shelter blamed parents for any delay in enrollment.



Barriers to Enrollment for Continued Attendance at the School of Origin

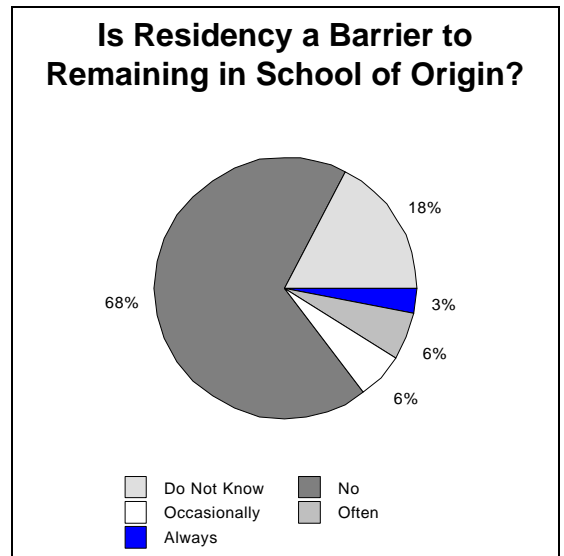
Twenty-two percent of the respondents indicated that transportation is occasionally a problem to continued attendance at the school of origin. Thirteen percent responded that this is often a problem, and 25 percent replied it is always a problem. Forty-one of the respondents indicated that transportation is not a problem to continued attendance at the school of origin.

Six percent of the respondents indicated that residency requirements are occasionally a barrier to continued atten-



dance at the school of origin. Six percent responded that this is often a problem, and 3 percent responded that this is always a problem. Sixty-eight percent of the respondents indicated that residency requirements do not create barriers, and 18 percent did not know.

Twelve percent of the respondents indicated other problems related to continued attendance at the school of origin. One respondent indicated that it is often a problem to schedule a time for parents and teachers to meet because teachers don't take the parents' special circumstances and difficulties into account. Three respondents indicated that continued attendance is often delayed for safety reasons in order to protect a child from his/her abuser. Eighty-five percent of the respondents said there were no additional problems other than transportation and residency requirements, and 3 percent did not know.



Questions About Transportation

Arkansas is largely a rural state with limited public transportation. The majority of shelters in this study are located in areas that do not have public transportation. Three respondents indicated that public transportation is paid for by the school district, four said it is paid for by the shelter, three said it is paid for by the parent, and one said that both the school district and the parent pay the costs for public transportation.

All of the respondents whose children and

youth utilize a school bus said that buses are provided by the school district.

Twenty-one percent of the respondents indicated that their school district or city had policies to limit transportation to children and youth who lived beyond a certain distance from the school(s); however, none of these were sure what the policy says. Twenty-four percent replied that there was no such policy, and 55 percent did not know.

Equal Access to School Programs

Of those respondents who indicated that they had children or youth who they thought should participate in special education programs, 3 percent replied that they were never able to participate, 3 percent replied they were occasionally able, 9 percent replied they were sometimes able, 16 percent replied they were often able, and 69 percent replied they were always able to participate.

Barriers to participating in special education programs, as identified by the respondents, include the length of time it takes to get the Individualized Education Program (IEP) from the previous school as well as the length of time it takes to do the testing that is required for placement in special education programs. Also, schools may claim that it is too late in the school year to enroll in the program. Other problems include the lack of early education programs for children with special needs and behavior problems that can be associated with homeless children and youth.

Of those respondents who indicated that they had children or youth who they thought were eligible for Title 1 programs and services, 23 percent replied children and youth are often able to participate, and 73 percent replied always. Five percent did not know.

Of those who indicated they had children or youth who wanted to participate in vocational education programs, 14 percent said they were often able to participate, and 79 percent said they were always able to participate. Seven percent did not know.

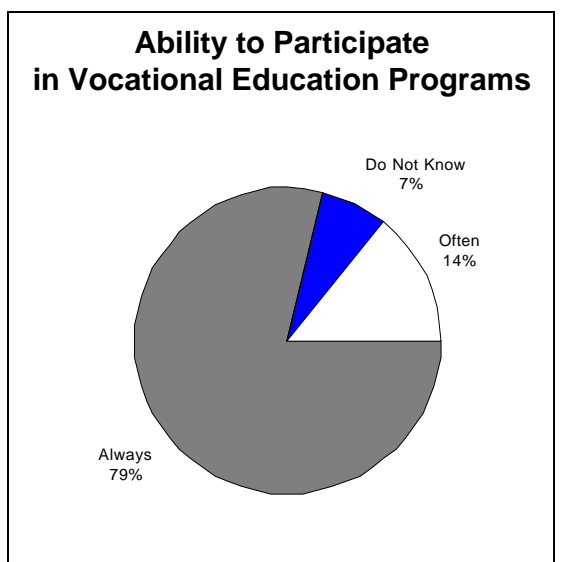
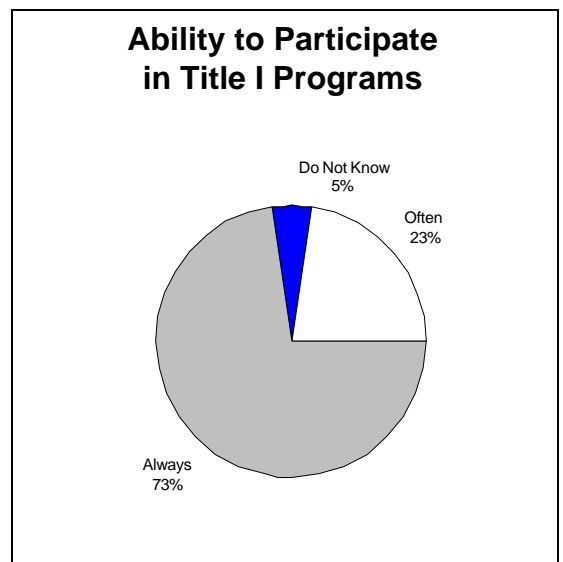
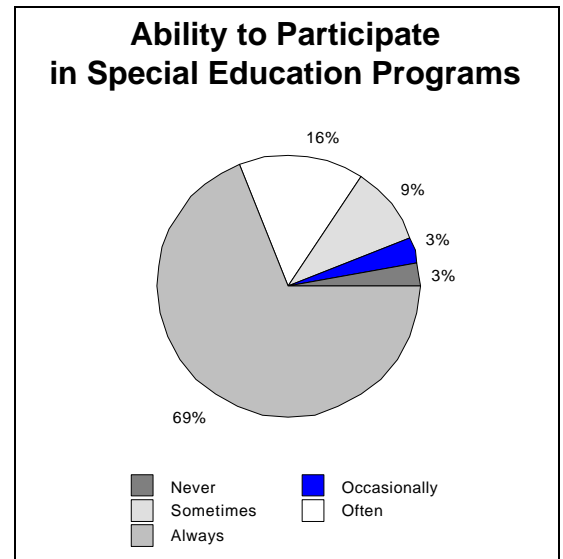
Barriers to vocational programs include a lack of availability.

Of those who replied that they had children or youth who they thought should participate in gifted and talented programs, 4 percent replied that children or youth were never able to participate, 4 percent replied occasionally, 18 percent replied sometimes, 14 percent replied often, and 55 percent replied always. Four percent did not know.

Barriers to participating in gifted and talented programs, as identified by respondents, include the limited time that children and youth live in the shelter and the availability of the programs. Also, as mentioned earlier, behavior problems may exclude children and youth from participating in gifted and talented programs.

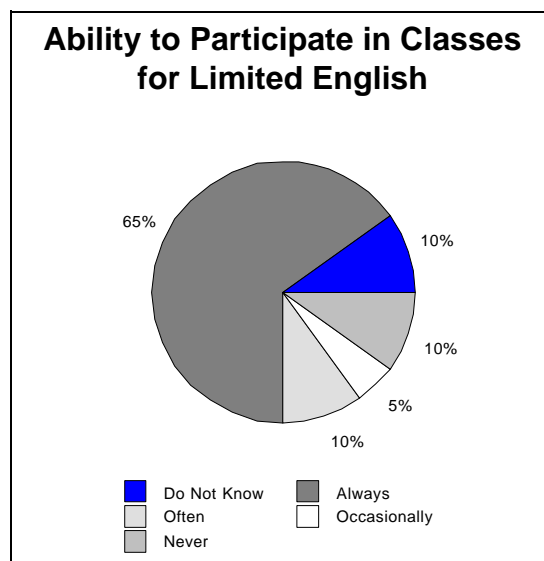
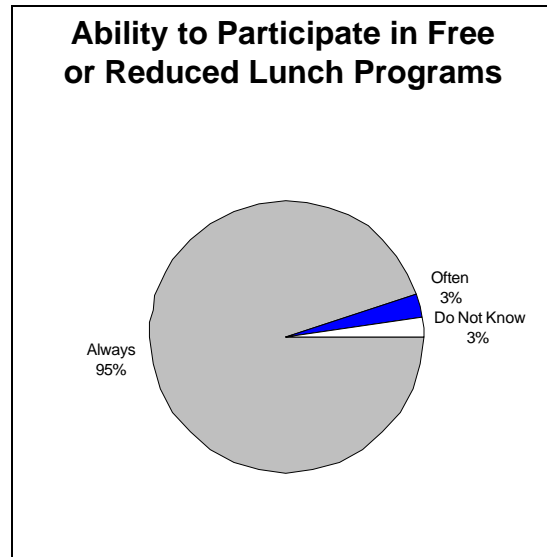
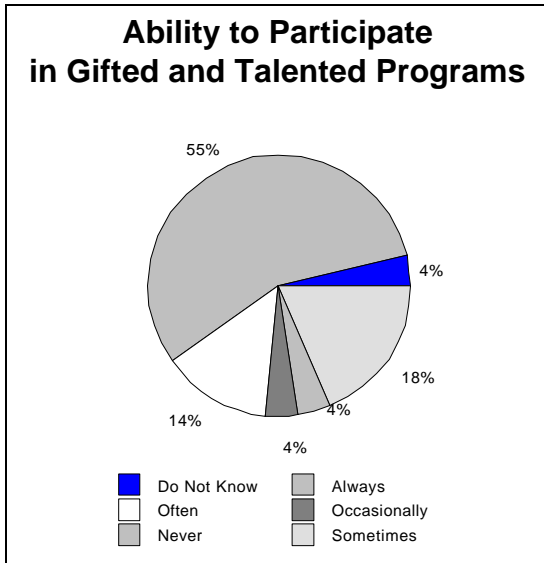
Of those respondents who indicated they had children or youth who they thought were eligible for free or reduced lunch, 3 percent replied that they were often able to participate, and 95 percent replied always. Three percent did not know.

Barriers to participating in free or reduced lunch include getting the paperwork done.



Of those respondents who indicated that they had children or youth who spoke a foreign language or who had a limited proficiency of English, 10 percent replied that they were never able to participate in English proficiency programs, 5 percent replied occasionally, 10 percent replied often, and 65 percent replied always. Ten percent did not know.

A barrier to participating in limited English proficiency programs, as identified by one respondent, includes parents not being aware of what is available. Another shelter responded that they were able to get a child into a limited English proficiency program, but it was a major battle with the school!



Preschool Age Homeless Children

All of the respondents who provide services to preschool age homeless children indicated that there were early childhood development or preschool programs in their area. Of these respondents, two said that they had a program for preschoolers at their shelter, 14 respondents said programs were located at local public schools, and 25 respondents said that these programs were at other locations in the community such as public and private agencies.

Barriers to attending preschool programs include the lack of available spots, long waiting periods, lack of money to pay for private programs, and transportation. One respondent commented that parents are not always aware of what is available. Other barriers include getting the required information, such as birth certificates and immunization documentation, before children can attend and getting the proper clothing and supplies that are required for each particular school.

Other Comments Made by Service Providers

Ten respondents stressed that they had great relationships with their local school districts.

Other comments included the problem of safety in schools for children who have been abused, the lack of knowledge about the true definition of homeless, and the fact that schools are often uneducated regarding the dynamics of domestic violence. One respondent wished that the school district would provide a teacher or funds for children and youth who cannot go to public school, and one said that testing for grade placement should be a priority.



Under the provisions of the McKinney Act all barriers to enrollment, attendance and success in school should be eliminated so that homeless children and youth have the same access to free, appropriate education as non-homeless children and youth.

Knowledge of the McKinney Act

The results of this study indicate that the large majority of service providers have never heard of or have only limited knowledge of the provisions of the McKinney Act. In addition, 73 percent of the respondents said that parents are not well informed about the educational rights of their children, with 51 percent reporting that parents are not informed at all.

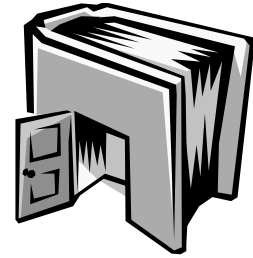
This widespread lack of knowledge regarding the rights of parents and homeless children is the major finding of this study and cause for grave concern. This absence of knowledge may be related, at least in part, to both the lack of resources and information available through the LEAs, as well as the fact that the state coordinator's position remained vacant for an extended period in 1999, just prior to the time of this survey. The Arkansas Department of Education must take immediate steps to address this problem now that the coordinator's position has been filled.

School Placement

While the results of this study suggest that homeless programs do a good job of placing children in educational programs — 95 percent of respondents stating that homeless children and youth are enrolled within four days — this finding conflicts with the Arkansas Department of Education's 1997 estimate that on any given day in Arkansas only 40 percent of homeless children residing in shelters are enrolled in school. Perhaps this disparity is because a large number of homeless children do not reside in shelters and are not reflected in these survey results. It may also be a result of the barriers to enrollment revealed in this study. Or, perhaps once a homeless child or youth is enrolled, he or she does not remain in school for a long period of time. This incongruity calls for further study.

Only 51 percent of respondents reported that school districts consistently make "best interest" determinations regarding school placement. This finding indicates that schools too often fail to consider this important — and statutorily required — aspect in

making educational placement decisions for homeless children and youth. Nor did the survey affirm any uniform consideration given to the parent's or youth's request related to school placement. Both findings — 49 percent of shelters said that children are not given “best interest” determinations; and the likelihood that parents and youth are not informed of what steps they can take if they disagree with school placement decisions — are serious causes for concern.



Barriers to Enrollment

School records and other requirements likely to delay transfer to a new school are being handled well by some of the districts, but serious deficiencies still exist. Birth certificates and immunization records are the most troublesome barriers. Although less widespread, transportation and school records also present problems for homeless children and youth trying to attend the local school.

The biggest barrier to homeless children being able to attend their schools of origin is transportation. Other barriers include residency requirements and school uniforms. In addition, many of the respondents were not even aware that attending the school of origin is an option.

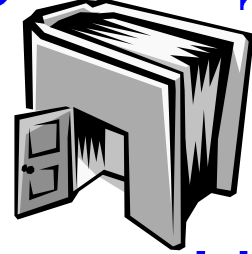
Equal Access to School Programs

Thirty percent of the shelters reported that children could not participate in special education programs. Twenty-five percent of shelters serving children with limited English proficiency stated that these children could not always participate in such programs.

Non-respondent Bias

The information contained in this study was gathered from only 43 of the 65 shelters contacted because 22 shelters did not respond. This means that almost one-third of the existing shelters were not included in the results. We do not know whether the shelters that self-selected out of the study were different in any meaningful way from those that did participate. The survey results may be skewed because those shelters chose not to respond.

Conclusion &



Recommendations

Education plays a critical role in the lives of all children and youth, and homeless children have special needs. These findings — particularly the lack of information about the rights of homeless children and youth; the failures to make “best interest” determinations and to disregard the placement concerns of parents; and the significant enrollment barriers that still exist — suggest that Arkansas still has a long way to go.

Arkansas Advocates for Children & Families recommends that the Arkansas Department of Education and the Coordinator for the Education for Homeless Children and Youth institute a statewide education program. This effort should include on-site visits to shelters with homeless children and youth to ensure that shelters are fully aware of the rights of these children. On-site visits should also provide a forum for shelters to ask questions about the specific provisions of the McKinney Act and emphasize those serious deficiencies revealed by this survey.

In addition, AACF calls on the state to visit each local school district to provide information and answer questions regarding this important legislation. The state should also encourage the LEAs to develop policies and procedures to address current barriers.

A weakness of this study is that the information contained herein is based solely on the opinions of service providers. It would be helpful if the state studied and compared the differences that exist between those school districts that receive McKinney Act funds and those that do not.

Arkansas must continue to learn more about this important law and build on the relationships established between schools and service providers to ensure that services reach this vulnerable population.

These recommendations will be sent to the director of the Arkansas Department of Education and the Coordinator for the Education for Homeless Children and Youth.



Arkansas Office for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth
Arkansas Department of Education
#4 Capitol Mall, Room 302-B
Little Rock, Arkansas 72201
(501) 682-4847
www.arkedu.state.ar.us

National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty
1411 K Street NW, Suite 1400
Washington, D.C. 20005
(202) 638-2535
www.nlchp.org

Southern Poverty Law Center
400 Washington Avenue
Montgomery, AL 36104
(334) 264-0286
www.splcenter.org