

School Safety and Crisis

New Schools for Students With Disabilities: Tips for Relocated 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 and school transportation. 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.

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)
- 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. 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 the name of the school and city.
- When did my child first start to receive special education services?
- In what areas did my child receive help? (Reading, math, speech therapy, physical therapy, behavior, etc.)
- How was my child classified for special education? (Learning Disabled, Emotional Behavioral Disorder, Speech Disorder, etc.)
- How did my child receive special education 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? 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?
- Did my child have a Section 504 Plan?
- Has my child ever been retained in grade? When?
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ADVOCATE FOR SERVICES FOR YOUR CHILD

It is important that schools provide appropriate instruction for all children, and that includes children with disabilities. 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. 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 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 hurricane or to relocation, the school psychologist or social worker can help determine if other services are appropriate. The school psychologist or social worker will likely know of community organizations and agencies that can provide a variety of resources to help relocated families. 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 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

- 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

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