

Article URL: <http://starbulletin.com/2008/08/13/news/story06.html>
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Vol. 13, Issue 226 - Wednesday, August 13, 2008

Homeless students can ride buses

The state will assist families to ensure they attend school

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The state will provide school buses and city bus passes to transport homeless children to school under a court settlement intended to give homeless families full access to the public education system.

The state Department of Education has already complied with a federal court ruling by hiring liaison personnel to assist homeless families in navigating the paperwork and regulations involved in getting a child into school.

A settlement agreement announced yesterday finalizes the February ruling by U.S. District Judge Helen Gillmor that the state must revise enrollment forms and computer registration programs to better identify, track and transport homeless students as required by federal law.

Gillmor said in the February order that the Education Department could account only for 300 of the 2,000 students estimated to be homeless in past school year.

"Under this agreement, we shouldn't hear any more stories of children being forced, repeatedly, to change schools or of children waking up at 4 in the morning just to get to school on time," said William Durham of Lawyers for Equal Justice, who filed the lawsuit in October on behalf of three homeless families.

The state agreed to inform homeless families of their rights under the McKinney-Vento Act, which gives Hawaii about \$200,000 a year in federal grants for homeless programs. The law mandates that schools offer transportation and allow children to continue enrollment in a school they have attended even if they move outside the district in search of shelter.

The state will add school buses on the Leeward coast, offer mileage reimbursement for parents who drive their children to school and supply bus passes to students and adult guardians when a child is too young to travel alone.

The Education Department will also conduct yearly training of school personnel and make annual visits to schools and homeless shelters statewide.

The state agreed to modify forms and computer systems to ease enrollment and improve attendance for homeless children.

And the public school system will take affirmative steps to avoid stigmatizing homeless students, according to an announcement.

A department spokesman testified earlier in the case that school registrars did not ask parents if they are

homeless to spare them embarrassment.

"The fact that it took a lawsuit and nearly nine months in court to resolve this matter is shameful," said Paul Alston of Alston Hunt Floyd & Ing. "The DOE's obligations were clear and the violations were indisputable."

The law firm and the American Civil Liberties Union of Hawaii Foundation joined in the lawsuit. In February, the judge granted class action status to the suit, extending it to represent all homeless students.

The Department of Education did not respond to a request for comment.

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