

RESEARCH BRIEF

Working with Unaccompanied Minors in North Texas



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Introduction

Communities In Schools (CIS) employees serve students with a wide variety of needs. During the past decade, CIS of North Texas (CISNT), an affiliate located near Dallas, Texas, has worked with a group of nearly 50 students with a special set of needs. These students, known as unaccompanied minors, are living independently while attending the schools CISNT serves. People serving this population require specialized knowledge, because the ethical and legal issues of providing and brokering services for students without parental supervision are incredibly complex. This research brief will provide an overview of unaccompanied minors in the United States; look at how CISNT serves this population; offer lessons learned and suggestions for other affiliates working with unaccompanied minors; and conclude with resources for further learning and support.

Unaccompanied Minors: An Overview

What is McKinney-Vento?

The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act (McKinney-Vento for short) is a key piece

of legislation designed to address homelessness. It was originally passed by Congress in 1987, and was reauthorized as part of No Child Left Behind in 2002 (National Coalition for the Homeless, 2006). McKinney-Vento is important because it provides guidance on the rights of homeless individuals in the United States. Though not all unaccompanied minors are considered homeless, many unaccompanied minors are, and thus are eligible for certain services guaranteed by McKinney-Vento (National Center for Homeless Education, 2013).

Key Legislation for Serving Unaccompanied Minors

The [McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act](#) provides for the rights of homeless individuals in the United States. A key part of the act stipulates that students have a right to free public education, and that state and local policies should not prevent students from this free education. Additionally, local education agencies must ensure that homeless youth are provided appropriate transportation to their school (107th Congress, 2002).

The [Runaway and Homeless Youth Act \(RHYA\)](#) provides resources to ensure that Runaway and Homeless Youth have access to basic needs. Administered by the Department of Health and Human Services, RHYA funds three distinct programs, including Basic Centers to provide temporary shelter, Street Outreach to allow professionals to connect with homeless youth in the community, and Transitional Living to provide long-term housing and supplemental services to encourage youth self-sufficiency (National Network for Youth).

McKinney-Vento “defines homeless children or youth as, ‘individuals who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence’” (National Center for Homeless Education, 2013, p. 2). If an unaccompanied minor is considered homeless according to specific criteria laid out in McKinney-Vento, they are eligible for certain rights, including the right to enroll in a local school, the right to transportation to that school, and the right to receive assistance from a local homeless liaison¹ (National Center for Homeless Education, 2013). As McKinney-Vento ensures that unaccompanied youth who are homeless receive certain services, it is essential that CIS staff understand this important Act.

What is an unaccompanied minor?

Unaccompanied minors are defined in McKinney-Vento as children “not in the physical custody of a parent or guardian” (107th Congress, 2002). According to the National Center for Homeless Education, this includes “youth... not living with a parent or guardian... youth who are residing with a caregiver who does not have legal guardianship and youth who are living on their own” (National Center for Homeless Education, 2013). Informally, the term is also used to describe older homeless youth not living with parents or guardians (Mizerek & Hinz, 2004).

Practitioners use different terms to refer to categories of unaccompanied minors.² Runaway youth are children in need of assistance who are not in the home of their parent or guardian for at least one night. Throw-away youth have been requested to leave home by their parents. Street youth tend to live in risky situations, such as in abandoned buildings. Systems

youth are part, or have been part, of government-run systems, like foster care or the juvenile justice system (Moore, 2005). Doubled-up refers to youth who are living with other unaccompanied minors. As practitioners work with unaccompanied minors, it is essential to keep these categories in mind, as all of these categories of students bring different needs to the table.

The National Alliance to End Homelessness estimates that there are “approximately 550,000 unaccompanied, single youth and young adults up to age 24 who experience a homelessness episode of longer than one week” (National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2012). The number of homeless youth in the United States – youth who would qualify for services under McKinney-Vento – is approximately 1.7 million (National Center for Homeless Education, 2013). However, it is difficult to estimate the number of unaccompanied minors and even the adults who serve them occasionally remain quiet about their situations to avoid the involvement of social services (Moore, 2005). Additionally, frequently there is a stigma around homelessness and students do not self-identify as homeless (National Center for Homeless Education, 2008). For these reasons, it is likely that published statistics are underestimating this population.

Unaccompanied minors face many risks that could threaten not only their success in school, but their physical health, well-being, and hopes for the future. Homeless youth in general are exposed to risks, such as violence, because they are reluctant to report crimes (Walsh & Donaldson, 2010), low self-esteem, depression and PTSD (Moore, 2005). They

are also more likely to go hungry, suffer a variety of health conditions (Kabler & Weinstein, 2009), and perform poorly in school (Mizerek & Hinz, 2004) than other children. Unaccompanied youth are frequently victims of assault and robbery (Texas Homeless Education Office (THEO), 2005). Street youth in particular face increased risks. The more time youth spend away from their houses and on the streets, the more likely they are to become involved in unhealthy behaviors, such as drug use and risky sex (Milburn, et al., 2012).

In addition to the risks to individual youth, the problem of homelessness and unaccompanied minors has costs to society. Students who are in poor health and struggling in school will be more likely to drop out before completing high school, thus reducing their chances of becoming healthy, productive citizens. Fortunately, CIS employees have the talent and capacity to assist and uplift unaccompanied minors. In the next portion of this brief, we will look at how the employees at one CIS affiliate are working with this unique population.

CIS of North Texas: Experiences in Serving Unaccompanied Minors

During the spring of 2014, members of the Research, Evaluation, and Innovation team with the CIS national office worked with CISNT to:

- conduct a literature review of information on unaccompanied minors
- conduct a study to learn how CISNT works with unaccompanied minors
- develop tools for the CIS network to use when working with unaccompanied minors

This section of the brief summarizes

¹For a detailed yet clear description of student rights, see the National Center for Homeless Education’s McKinney-Vento “Law Into Practice Brief Series Supporting the Education of Unaccompanied Homeless Students”, located [online](#) and included in the bibliography at the end of this brief.

²There is some overlap in categories, and these terms are not all mutually exclusive. In the research literature, these terms are often used interchangeably.

the information gained from interviews and focus groups with site coordinators and program management at CISNT.

How does CISNT serve unaccompanied minors?

Like most affiliates in the CIS network, CISNT uses a systematic process to serve its students, including unaccompanied minors. Sometimes, referrals come through the registrar at the school. The registrar designates the child as homeless and subsequently sends him or her to the site coordinator. Other times, students are referred as homeless or unaccompanied by adults, such as teachers or counselors. Sometimes peers will refer other students, or unaccompanied students will hear about the services that CISNT provides, and will refer themselves.

Once students are enrolled, site coordinators use the same basic assessment process that they would with any case-managed student or student receiving Level 2

services. The site coordinator shares information about the kinds of programs and services that CISNT provides, and then asks the students what dilemmas he or she is facing. During the intake interview, the site coordinator assesses student needs based on six components: supportive guidance, health and human services, academic enrichment and support, college/career awareness, parental involvement, and enrichment. The site coordinator also looks to see if the student has updated immunizations and a home address. Particularly when a student refers themselves, site coordinators ask students careful questions about what is going on in his/her life that caused them to seek out CIS. Gathering details about how long they have been living on their own, where they found shelter the past few nights, and when they ate their last meal will help identify if the student is a runaway or street youth or is unaccompanied for another reason, and will allow site coordinators to deliver or broker the kind of services the child is likely to need. Typically, students are willing to share pertinent information about their situation.

How are students designated as homeless?

As mentioned previously, many unaccompanied minors are also homeless. In order to receive appropriate services through McKinney-Vento, these students need to be designated as homeless in the school's database. Several individuals are important to the process of designating students as homeless. One key person is the homeless liaison. McKinney-Vento requires that each school district designate a homeless liaison. In order to be considered homeless, the student will need to work with the district's homeless liaison

to fill out the Student Residency Questionnaire (SRQ). Typically, the homeless liaison fills out the SRQ by asking students a series of questions designed to assess whether or not the student is currently homeless. If it is determined that the student is homeless, the homeless liaison then works together with the school's registrar to designate a student as homeless in the school's database.

For many CISNT school sites, the site coordinators have become a crucial part of the SRQ completion process. A homeless liaison may not always have the kind of relationship that a site coordinator has with a student. Often, a district's homeless liaison is responsible for several different schools.³ They may also have many other roles in addition to being the homeless liaison. Though this varies from site to site, this puts some CISNT site coordinators in the position of advocating for the student when questions about the student's residency status arise. Many CISNT site coordinators have found it essential to have an in-depth understanding of both the Student Residency Questionnaire form and McKinney-Vento at large. The site coordinator often helps the homeless liaison and student fill out the SRQ; by facilitating this process, the site coordinator advocates for the student so that he or she is able to receive appropriate services.

What services do unaccompanied minors receive?

Basic needs

Unaccompanied minors receive some of the same services that many CIS students receive. However, site coordinators at CISNT do focus service provision in certain areas according to the unique circumstances

Level 1 services are also known as whole-school preventative services that are provided to all students, regardless of their risk for developing serious problems. Examples of Level 1 services include presentations, health fairs, anti-violence campaigns, attendance initiatives, and motivational speakers.

Level 2 services are targeted and sustained interventions provided for specific students over an extended period of time. These services are provided based on individual student needs and include services such as one-on-one academic tutoring, linkages to medical resources, counseling, etc.

³ For CISNT, school districts employ both a district-level homeless liaison, as required by McKinney-Vento, and a school-level homeless liaison who reports to the McKinney-Vento district-level homeless liaison. The school-level liaison often has other job functions in addition to working with homeless students. The district-level liaison often has several schools and campus staff members to supervise, and may also have other jobs besides working with homeless students. Regardless, both campus- and district-level homeless liaisons are important to know when serving unaccompanied minors.

that unaccompanied minors face. In addition to providing clothes, food, hygiene items, and school supplies, CISNT site coordinators also help unaccompanied students find stable shelter. This often requires that site coordinators work with students to develop problem-solving skills by thinking through the difficult situations that they face. Site coordinators help students think through appropriate friends and family members that they might contact to seek shelter; they even facilitate conversations with these friends and family members if necessary. Site coordinators work with churches to help students find a place to stay; they also try to find places for students to shower and relax. If an unaccompanied minor has found shelter, site coordinators work with outside organizations to collect household supplies like blankets and pots and pans – items that students living independently would need, but might not be able to afford on their own. One CISNT site coordinator worked with local faith-based organizations during the holiday season to provide supplies for students' basic needs, and invited Medicaid and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP – previously known as food stamps) to come and enroll unaccompanied minors when the students received the supplies. Site coordinators noted that it is

Key Services when Working with Unaccompanied Minors

Basic Needs

- Obtaining clothes, food, hygiene items, school supplies
- Finding stable shelter
- Developing problem-solving skills
- Finding places to shower and relax
- Collecting household items

Advocacy

- Informing students of their rights
- Listening to students and being a consistent support
- Working with other service providers to ensure that they are following through
- Assisting students to manage their academic load by informing school staff of the student's situation

important to be discriminating in connecting unaccompanied students with services; vetting partners is important, especially with vulnerable populations, because some shelters and food pantries may not be safe for vulnerable youth.

Advocacy

Site coordinators also spend a large part of their time advocating for their unaccompanied students. CISNT site coordinators inform students of their rights, letting them know that they are eligible for transportation and have a right to access their own medical records. Students need someone to take the time to listen and be a consistent support. Site coordinators serve as this support system and often work to ensure that other service providers are following through on their obligations to the student. CISNT staff members who work in one of the local school districts are all trained state navigators who can help students apply for SNAP, Medicaid, and the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC). One site coordinator was able to work with the local North Texas Food Bank to petition for a transfer of a Medicaid/Medicare card to a student from their former guardian so that they would be eligible for receiving food assistance. Site coordinators also encourage students to develop self-esteem and advocate for themselves.

Unaccompanied students often need assistance managing their academic load. Sometimes students will ask their site coordinator to tell teachers about their living situation, so that teachers have an understanding of the difficulties the student faces. When school staff members have even a little information about students' living situations, they tend to be more understanding about students' challenges with grades and attendance.

What are some challenges in serving unaccompanied minors?

CISNT site coordinators and program staff mentioned several challenges in serving unaccompanied minors during interviews. Most of these challenges fall into one of two categories: challenges within the population, and challenges in the system that serves the population.

Challenges in serving unaccompanied minors as a population

There are challenges unique to the population. As mentioned previously, unaccompanied minors tend to not trust providers; they therefore do not seek preventative medical care, because they fear that as soon as they check-in with a doctor, Child Protective Services (CPS) will be notified. Additionally, because unaccompanied minors lack parental supervision, they are missing out on the advocacy that parents who are involved with their children often provide; they also do not have anyone pushing them to attend school, so occasionally, unaccompanied minors will simply not attend school. Next, because unaccompanied minors frequently need to work to pay for rent and other basic needs, school responsibilities tend to fall lower on their priority list. Finally, parents can be a barrier to getting unaccompanied minors the services they need. Parents can withhold insurance information or educational rights or favors because of a rift in the relationship with their child.

Unaccompanied minors who are not in the country legally or whose parents have been deported pose special problems. These students typically do not let people know of their status, and have fewer guaranteed legal rights than U.S. citizens. However, undocumented students do have the same rights under McKinney-Vento as other homeless youth (San Francisco Unified School District).

Challenges in the system that serves unaccompanied minors

There are several challenges with the larger system serving unaccompanied minors. Finding adequate shelter is a large problem. Many shelters will not, in practice, take individuals under the age of 18.⁴ Often, students will stay with a friend of a friend (known as, “couch-surfing”), potentially putting themselves in danger. CPS is also hesitant to help older unaccompanied minors, as CPS has limited resources and employees feel pressure to prioritize finding housing for younger students. Typically, CPS recommends filing a police report, asking a student if they want to return home, or suggesting that the student stay with a friend. However, none of these suggestions ensure that the student is finding immediate, safe, and stable housing. Student isolation is also an issue, particularly in rural areas. The community in which CISNT is located does not have a homeless shelter; transportation to service providers is also incredibly difficult.

Consent issues are also difficult to manage; many ethical questions arise when attempting to deliver services to this population. When a student is unaccompanied, they are legally not of age, but they do not have a parent or guardian to give consent to participate in a wide variety of programs. Medical providers are reluctant to see students without parents, even if there is consent. Other partners that CISNT typically utilizes, such as counselors, will not see unaccompanied minors either. Getting students proper medications is another issue; if they do not have access to their parents’ insurance information, they often end up having to pay out-of-pocket for medications such as inhalers. CISNT staff members mentioned that there is a

process for emancipating minors, but it is lengthy and costly, and not always advantageous if a student is on the cusp of turning 18.

Despite the fact that service providers want to help students in need, because there are so many difficult legal and ethical questions that providers face when working with unaccompanied minors, occasionally partners disagree on how best to serve students.⁵ As site coordinators work with homeless liaisons, they often come up with different understandings of students’ living situations and needs; specifically, there are often disagreements about whether a student qualifies as homeless under McKinney-Vento. Counselors and homeless liaisons have a series of questions that they ask students to clarify their living situation. Occasionally, if a student states during these questions that her parents would let her come back home if she wanted to, counselors do not consider the student to be homeless. This is the case regardless of why the student left home. Additionally, because homeless liaisons typically have multiple responsibilities, some individuals acting as homeless liaisons are not as informed about McKinney-Vento as their site coordinators. Site coordinators cannot sign the SRQ, yet some CISNT site coordinators find that they need to take the homeless liaison through the SRQ in order to ensure that the student gets services. This makes it difficult to deliver critical services, such as transportation.

There are also special political considerations when working with unaccompanied minors. Having a large unaccompanied and homeless population in a school or district can bring unfavorable attention to

the neighborhoods that the district serves. For obvious reasons, no school district wants to be seen as having a large proportion of students who face the daunting challenges that homeless youth face. Additionally, individuals’ political views inevitably come into play when working with this population; there is a stigma around homeless youth and receiving assistance. Because site coordinators are obligated to not discuss confidential issues with school staff, occasionally individuals’ assumptions about homelessness and the stigma around homelessness come into play when dealing with unaccompanied minors. For example, one CISNT program staff member related a story about a student who was in need. The principal made an assumption that the student was not in dire need of assistance because the student had new shoes. However, the principal did not realize that the shoes had been donated to the site coordinator to give to needy students. Clearly, disagreements amongst service providers and political issues are important considerations when working with unaccompanied minors.

What are some lessons learned in serving unaccompanied minors?

Site coordinators as advocates and educators

Throughout the interview process, CISNT site and program staff referenced dual roles that CIS staff members need to play in serving unaccompanied minors. First, CIS staff must act as advocates for students. Unaccompanied minors have specialized needs, and often do not have someone speaking up on their behalf. CISNT site coordinators work with unaccompanied minors so that they understand their rights;

⁴This is in keeping with the finding from the National Network for Youth, a homeless and disconnected youth advocacy organization, which found that “In 2009, RHYA [Runaway and Homeless Youth Act] programs contacted over 812,000 unaccompanied youth, yet only five percent of those youth were provided shelter or transitional housing” (National Network for Youth, 2014).

⁵It should be noted that not all site coordinators experience challenges with all providers; individual school districts and sites operate their programs differently, and some relationships are more seamless than others.

site coordinators also work with service providers to ensure that they are appropriately addressing the minors' needs. Additionally, CISNT site coordinators work as educators, teaching stakeholders about McKinney-Vento, and working with the community at large to bring attention to the population and provide context that will reduce some of the stigmatization that unaccompanied minors face. Site coordinators have spoken at counselors' meetings, and have worked hard with school district personnel to be kept in the loop as various parties work to fill out the SRQ. By keeping abreast of what happens with a student's SRQ and ensuring that students are designated as homeless and unaccompanied, site coordinators are also able to ensure that some of the consent issues are remedied, and that students are eligible for certain services.

Ingenuity and persistence in obtaining medical services

As mentioned earlier, finding health care providers is one of the most difficult tasks when trying to serve unaccompanied minors. CISNT employees have found several solutions to this issue. First, site and affiliate staff members have found that as soon as a student is identified as an unaccompanied minor, it is critical to start the SNAP and Medicaid process immediately. This is a proactive approach to dealing with potential medical needs. Second, they have been able to find some doctors to do quick check-ups and physicals; site coordinators frequently utilize doctors who visit school campuses to check students to see if they are healthy enough to play sports. The health department has been able to do STD and pregnancy screenings. Third, most students are eligible for Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP), which gives them access to affordable health care. Finally, CISNT staff members have found that persistence pays off; with the help of a

school employee, one site coordinator was able to call several cardiologists until they found one who was willing to work with a student with a serious health condition. It is important to note that CISNT site coordinators have worked diligently to ensure that health providers working with unaccompanied minors are ethical; this is another situation in which CISNT staff members have found it essential to advocate for the students they serve.

Getting appropriate transportation and using friend networks

Transportation is still a difficult issue for CISNT's population of unaccompanied minors. CISNT staff work with students and school staff to get bus passes. Other times, CISNT site staff members help students think through responsible adults or friends that could help the students find rides. In fact, friend groups can be leveraged in multiple ways. Occasionally, when one or two unaccompanied students realize that they can trust the CIS site coordinator, other students will start to come to the site coordinator with issues. This is particularly true when working with street youth.

Quick Tip

After CIS site coordinators build a trusting relationship with one or two unaccompanied students, students in similar situations will begin to seek out the advice and support of CIS employees. Leveraging these relationships will allow site coordinators to make a broader impact in their schools and communities.

Leveraging partnerships is essential

Throughout interviews, CISNT stakeholders mentioned that forming productive working relationships with key partners was essential to serving CISNT's population of unaccompanied minors. One of the most important partners is the school. Though different people play different roles at the schools that

CISNT serves, in general, the social worker or counselor, who is often the campus-level homeless liaison as well, can work hand-in-hand with CIS staff, letting site coordinators know when a student comes in with a specific need. The registrar works with the site coordinator by giving him or her referrals, and by ensuring that unaccompanied students on the site coordinators caseload are appropriately tracked as homeless. Multiple staff members, including the registrar, homeless liaison, nurse, counselors, and computer technicians, can pull up lists of students who are unaccompanied and in some instances can even change a student's status to homeless with the approval of the homeless liaison. Some school staff members end up becoming part of the social support mechanism for unaccompanied students; staff members have been known to buy inhalers, donate money, and find doctors for students.

For CISNT, the North Texas Food Bank has been an essential partner. One site coordinator worked with them to petition Medicaid/Medicare to get a Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) card in the student's name, so that the unaccompanied minor could buy groceries. Site coordinators will also work with food banks for unaccompanied minors who are undocumented. Faith-based organizations also serve undocumented students. Additionally, faith-based organizations have proved essential in setting up unaccompanied minors with families who are willing to take them in. Other faith-based organizations have started convening community stakeholders, including

The school is the student's home. They get breakfast; they get lunch. It's safe. They have friends; they have adults... the school is the student's home.

— CIS Staff Member, on the importance of the school to unaccompanied minors

Figure 1: Select CISNT Partners

Partner	Role in serving unaccompanied minors
School districts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identifying student needs Referring students Classifying students as homeless Offering assistance (money, volunteerism)
North Texas Food Bank	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Advocating to get students SNAP cards Serving undocumented students
Faith-based organizations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Serving undocumented students Finding families to house students Convening key stakeholders to develop plans for a shelter Providing mentors for students
Council of PTAs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Fundraising and managing drives to get hygiene items, clothing, shoes, and gym and duffle bags for students to carry their personal belongings
Friends of the Family (shelter for women, children, and victims of domestic violence)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Housing pregnant unaccompanied minors
Texas Homeless Education Office (THEO)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Providing resources on <i>McKinney-Vento</i>

one CISNT site coordinator, to try to get a homeless shelter set up in the community that CISNT serves. For further partners that CISNT utilizes, see Figure 1.

How will CISNT move forward in serving unaccompanied minors?

CISNT interviewees had many ideas about ways to move forward as they continue to work with unaccompanied minors. Obviously, continuing to develop a keen understanding of delicate ethical frames – the social work code of ethics, legal requirements, and organizational (both school district and CISNT) ethics – will be key for all CISNT staff. Working in a complex political environment – diminishing stigma and leveraging the positive relationships that CISNT already has – will also be essential. As part of CISNT’s grant, a set of questions and answers about serving unaccompanied minors was developed by CISNT staff and the Nonprofit Risk Management Center. These questions will help address ethical and risk issues, and are part of a toolkit designed to supplement this research brief.

In addition to working with ethical and political issues, CISNT staff members have ideas on new programs for unaccompanied students. Some of the ideas mentioned during interviews are:

- Creating safe spaces for unaccompanied minors to do homework
- Creating support networks for students

- Finding funds specifically for unaccompanied students’ medical needs
- Creating a resource guide for unaccompanied minors
- Crafting language for site coordinator contracts that details how they should work with homeless students
- Having a case manager who is solely dedicated to working with unaccompanied minors

CISNT employees are dedicated to ensuring that they are growing in their capacity to serve this unique population.

Conclusion

This research brief has defined unaccompanied minors, considered the importance of McKinney-Vento in serving unaccompanied minors, and described one affiliate’s experience in serving this unique population. CIS’ model of integrated student supports will allow affiliates throughout the CIS network to discover and address the needs of unaccompanied students, ensuring that they are given an equal opportunity to succeed in school and in life.

Further Resources

- The [National Center for Homeless Education \(NCHE\)](#) has a wealth of resources on its website, including a [guide](#) to recognizing homeless children and youth and a [guide](#) to understanding how to use McKinney-Vento to support the education of unaccompanied minors.
- The [National Law Center on Homelessness & Poverty](#) has a [booklet](#) on the education rights of homeless children and youth.
- The [National Network for Youth \(nn4y\)](#) has a [brief](#) on the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act (RHYA) and several [informative fact sheets and issue briefs](#) about homelessness, unaccompanied minors, and updates to pertinent laws and regulations.
- The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services’ [Family and Youth Services Bureau \(FYSB\)](#) website has links to find FYSB-funded [Runaway and Homeless Youth programs](#).
- [Google Voice](#) offers CISNT site staff the opportunity to stay connected with unaccompanied minors without giving their personal phone numbers out.

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What Do You Think?

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