



NYSTEACHS.org

The New York State Technical Assistance
Center for Homeless Students

COMMUNICATIONS GUIDE FOR McKINNEY-VENTO LIAISONS

Centering Anti-Racist Approaches to Conversations with Families and Colleagues

McKinney-Vento liaisons are responsible for the identification, enrollment, and the removal of educational barriers for students experiencing homelessness. McKinney-Vento liaisons can create meaningful change in their districts and the lives of students experiencing homelessness by providing internal trainings and connecting students to educational resources and community referrals.

Unfortunately, due to systemic racism across many aspects of American life, [Black, Latinx, Native American, and Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander communities experience homelessness at disproportionate rates compared to white and Asian communities.](#) Systemic racism exists in schools; therefore, it is crucial for McKinney-Vento liaisons to reflect on school protocols and narratives that reinforce racial bias and inequity. Even small intentional changes, such as in our semantics, can have positive effects on family relationships and ultimately, the well-being and success of students.

We created the following tip sheet to help McKinney-Vento liaisons and other school staff reflect on their own communication styles, race, and how institutional racism impacts students and families.

SCENARIO

A family lost their housing and is temporarily living in your district. The parents decide to enroll their children in your district instead of continuing in their district of origin.

PROBLEMATIC APPROACH

*“The liaison in your district of origin should have encouraged you to continue enrollment there. **It would not be in your best interest to enroll here.**”*

WHY IS IT PROBLEMATIC?

Assumes the family hasn’t considered what is in the best interest of their child.

The statement may be interpreted as unwelcoming or exclusionary. Family may feel they have been turned away from enrolling locally.

HOW DOES THIS INTERSECT WITH RACE?

Depending on the circumstance, **pressuring a family to return to their district of origin can enforce school segregation:** [New York has the most segregated schools in the country.](#)

Black and Latino students often end up in **intensely** segregated schools with very low percentages of white students.

ANTI-RACIST APPROACH

*“The federal McKinney-Vento Act asks liaisons to start off with the assumption that it is in a student’s best interest to stay enrolled in the same school for stability. **But this isn’t the case for all students and may not be the case for your children.** Would it be okay to talk about the school selection options for your children and their pros and cons?”*

In addition to stating that schools should presume that keeping the student in their school of origin is in the student’s best interest, the McKinney-Vento Act explicitly states that schools should make school selection best interest determinations based on the wishes of the student’s parent, guardian, or the student themselves if they are unaccompanied. 42 U.S.C. § 11432[g][3][B]

SCENARIO

A temporarily housed unaccompanied youth is seeking enrollment in your district. The student has recently arrived from outside of the U.S and is missing their vaccination records.

PROBLEMATIC APPROACH

*“You can enroll immediately but you need to obtain your immunization records in 30 days. I cannot allow you to return to school after that **because I need to keep the other students safe.**”*

WHY IS IT PROBLEMATIC?

Under federal and state law, **it is the responsibility of the enrolling school district, not the student to obtain educational records** including vaccinations.

Also, the student may interpret the statement as **xenophobic and feel unwelcomed.**

HOW DOES THIS INTERSECT WITH RACE?

Some Americans **associate countries outside of the U.S as underdeveloped** in the public health sector.

However, **113 countries, including many countries in Latin America, have higher vaccination rates for 1-year-olds than the U.S.** [↗](#)

In recent years, public figures have made **inflammatory statements about immigrant populations.** Now more than ever, liaisons should ensure these populations feel welcome.

ANTI-RACIST APPROACH

*“I know that most students who come from outside of the country **have already been vaccinated.** I will work to obtain these records for you. If you are missing any vaccinations, **I can help you set up an appointment** with our local county health department.”*

• • •

SCENARIO

You have been asked to follow up with a family who is suspected of living outside of the district for several months. When you reach out to the family, they reveal they are living in temporarily housing.

PROBLEMATIC APPROACH

*“I will have to double check with my supervisor about your situation. When families **do not immediately report a change of address,** we may need to **investigate for residency fraud.**”*

WHY IS IT PROBLEMATIC?

Assumes that a family may be **lying about their housing situation to “cheat the system.”**

Shifts the responsibility of identification from the school district to the family.

HOW DOES THIS INTERSECT WITH RACE?

Unfortunately, the U.S has **a long history of over-policing and distrust of Black communities.**

One [study](#) [↗](#) found nearly two-thirds of Black adults (65%) said they had been in situations **where people acted as if they were suspicious of them because of their race or ethnicity** compared to only a quarter of White adults who said that had happened to them.

Depending on the circumstances, comments about possible **residency fraud** may be perceived as **distrust based on race.**

ANTI-RACIST APPROACH

*“After experiencing a loss of housing, **it is understandable for families to feel overwhelmed, concerned, or too busy** to report a change of address. If it is okay with you, **I would like to ask you a few more questions** about your housing to find out if you qualify for **protections under the McKinney-Vento Act.**”*

SCENARIO

You schedule an enrollment appointment with a parent in temporary housing and the parent misses it without notice. You are trying to reschedule but haven't received a call back.

PROBLEMATIC APPROACH

*"I have left you several messages this week. **I cannot move forward with enrollment until we meet.** Your child needs to be in school. Please call me back."*

WHY IS IT PROBLEMATIC?

Shames the parent and assumes they are intentionally **neglecting their child's needs.**

Threatens to **delay enrollment which violates the McKinney-Vento Act.**

HOW DOES THIS INTERSECT WITH RACE?

Parents of color, especially those **experiencing homelessness**, may have competing responsibilities and **limited availability.**

Black workers are more likely than other workers to be in front-line jobs, deemed essential during the pandemic. ↗

Furthermore, the Center for American Progress found that in 2018, 67.5 percent of Black mothers and 41.4 percent of Latina mothers were the primary or sole breadwinners for their families. ↗

ANTI-RACIST APPROACH

*"**I recognize you may have a lot on your plate right now.** I wanted to let you know that I have started the enrollment process for your child. Also, I would like to touch base to ensure your child receives all the services they are entitled to. Please call me back at your earliest convenience."*

When you are having difficulty reaching a parent, escalate with care and services. Share referrals and resources. If needed, let parents know in advance about home visits.