

Techniques for Navigating Challenging Conversations



The McKinney-Vento Homeless Education Act is a federal law that protects the educational rights of students in temporary housing. It defines “**homeless children and youths**” as any student who **lacks a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence**.

Conversations about a family’s housing situation can be tense, uncomfortable, or invasive. Here are some techniques and conversation starters for some of the most common conversations you will encounter with students, families, and district administration.

THE CHALLENGE	WHY IT’S CHALLENGING	TECHNIQUES AND CONVERSATION STARTERS
<p>When asked about a current address or living situation, the family gives only vague or generalized answers.</p>	<p>This is challenging because liaisons and/or district staff need specific housing information to make an informed decision about McKinney-Vento eligibility. Vague answers may be misinterpreted as a “false story,” leading someone to make an incorrect determination. Additionally, a family may feel under attack or become upset because of numerous clarifying questions.</p>	<p>If you need more information from a family about their housing situation, first explain WHY you need housing details before you ask any additional questions. You may also want to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Invite the family to speak with you in a private setting. Avoid talking at the front desk or registration counter. • Explain your position/role and intentions. For example, “I am the McKinney-Vento liaison, and my job is to connect students in temporary housing with educational supports and services.” • Be clear about the goal of the conversation. Make clear that you are not trying to get them in trouble, but rather, want to make sure they receive all services for which they are eligible. • Avoid the word “homeless.” Instead, talk about a temporary housing arrangement.
<p>A family’s housing situation seems to be fixed and regular, but you need to know if it is also adequate.</p>	<p>This is challenging because questions about housing adequacy can feel particularly uncomfortable and intrusive. Adequacy conversations are also challenging because families may be nervous that information shared about housing will result in a report to child protective services (CPS).</p>	<p>It is important to take a very sensitive approach to this type of conversation. Before asking any questions about the adequacy of the housing arrangement, begin the conversation by reminding the family that students living in temporary housing situations have educational rights, which may be beneficial to the student and his/her family. Reassure them that your questions are intended to connect the student with appropriate supports and services. Additionally, you may want to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Explain the concept of “fixed, regular, and adequate” as it relates to McKinney-Vento protections. Note that the word “protection” may help put a family at ease. • Give examples of “inadequate housing” instead of asking direct questions. You can list examples like “multiple children sharing one bed” or “not having a working kitchen” and then ask the family if any of those examples apply to them. You may also try asking, “do you feel comfortable telling me more about that,” rather than asking direct questions. • If appropriate, let the family know that inadequate

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		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • housing is not the same as child abuse or neglect. Mandatory reporting laws for suspected child abuse and neglect are different from McKinney-Vento eligibility determinations. If the family is concerned about a call to child protective services, reiterate that the purpose of determining eligibility under McKinney-Vento is to connect students with appropriate services and protections.
<p>A family has been living at the same address for more than a year and you are unsure if the housing should still be considered to be temporary.</p>	<p>This is challenging because revisiting a McKinney-Vento eligibility determination may feel like an awkward “investigation” or worse, could be re-traumatizing for the family.</p> <p>It may also be challenging if you believe that a family’s temporary housing situation has actually become permanent, but the family disagrees.</p>	<p>As a best practice, schools can check-in with families at the end of each school year about their housing status. By having annual McKinney-Vento eligibility conversations in the spring, you can limit disruption for students and schools in the fall. A few suggestions for having this conversation include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Let the family know at the time of initial identification that you plan to follow up at the end of the school year. Having a plan in place will make it seem less like an “investigation.” • Have any follow-up conversations WELL BEFORE September! If you believe the family’s situation is now permanent, talk to the family in May or June about making a smooth transition to the local school. Make sure that the student starts the next school year off on the right foot (and in the right school) by connecting the family to the enrollment office at the new school, transferring records, etc. • If the follow-up conversation doesn’t clarify the situation, or if there is disagreement between parties, please call our Help Line at 1-800-388-2014. We will talk it through with you. • To the extent possible, have end-of-year conversations with ALL families who have been identified as living in temporary housing. Let them know that this is routine practice in the district to avoid having families feel like they are being singled out.
<p>The student or family seems to be telling a different version of their housing story to the liaison versus the school principal or enrollment secretary.</p>	<p>This is challenging because variations in housing explanations/descriptions can raise a red flag for school or district staff about the authenticity of the story.</p>	<p>For some families, a temporary housing situation can be a very sensitive issue. Depending on whom they are speaking with, a family may change or omit details of the story out of fear, shame, or embarrassment. When having a housing conversation, a few suggestions include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When possible, a person who already has a relationship with the family should lead the conversation. This may reduce anxiety and unnecessary repetition of difficult stories. • Before asking the family about their housing situation, assure them that your questions are meant to determine what services may be available to their children under McKinney-Vento. Remind the family that you are there to assist and not trying to get them in trouble. • If appropriate, let the family know that inadequate housing is not the same as child abuse or neglect. If the family is concerned about a call to child protective services, reiterate that the purpose of determining eligibility under McKinney-Vento is to connect students with appropriate services and protections.

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<p>A family shows up at a school to enroll their student but does not have any documentation.</p>	<p>This is challenging because front-line school staff may not be aware of the right to immediate enrollment without documentation under the McKinney-Vento Act and may mistakenly turn families away. Making matters more challenging, families may also be unaware of McKinney-Vento protections causing them to avoid or delay school enrollment for their children.</p>	<p>Make sure all front-line school staff are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Trained to recognize the signs of homelessness (see Tips for Teachers), • Understand the basic protections for families in temporary housing (see Tips for Parents and Guardians), and • Recognize that the safest place for a child or youth is to be in school. <p>When a family comes to a school to enroll, the staff person should:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have every new student (family) fill out a housing questionnaire upon enrollment. This will give staff an immediate clue as to the family’s housing status. • Do not ask if the family is homeless. If needed, use phrases like “housing status” or “temporary living situation” instead. • If the family is temporarily housed, enroll the student immediately and refer the family to the district’s McKinney-Vento liaison. Remember that “immediately” means same day, regardless of what documentation the family can or cannot produce.
<p>An unaccompanied youth shows up at a school or enrollment office without any paperwork wanting to “sign up for school.”</p>	<p>This is challenging because schools are often nervous about enrolling a student without parental permission. It is also challenging because an unaccompanied youth may not be upfront about their reasons for leaving home.</p>	<p>Make sure all front-line school staff are trained and understand that:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Most youth leave home because of significant family dysfunction and abuse, not because they don’t like their parents’ rules. Most youth who have left home, especially those who stay away from home for a long time, have fled abusive homes. They may not tell you what has happened to them, but studies of unaccompanied youth have found that 20-50% were sexually abused in their homes and 40-60% were physically abused. • The safest place for a student to be is in school. Whatever the background story is, it is always preferable, and indeed required by law, for unaccompanied youth to be immediately enrolled in school. <p>A few suggestions for having an effective conversation with an unaccompanied youth include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Start the conversation by focusing on the student’s strengths. For example, “I’m glad that you came to enroll today. We want help you be successful in school.” • Make sure the unaccompanied youth knows that they can either stay in their same school and get transportation back to that school or immediately enroll in the local school. Oftentimes youth don’t know that they can stay in their same school if they are temporarily living outside of the school district boundaries. If the youth does decide to stay in their same school, make sure that the youth is connected with the

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		<p>McKinney-Vento liaison in that district and that transportation is arranged.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make the student feel welcome by stressing partnership over power. For example, you might tell the student, “We want to help you be successful in school. Let’s work together to make sure you can get to school on time each day.” • Take steps to connect the youth with services in the school community and beyond. Without parental support, an unaccompanied youth may rely on support and services from the community. Talk to the youth about any available tutoring/mentoring programs or other after-school activities. Also try to talk to the student about his/her needs and interests and make appropriate referrals, including to housing service providers (see the Runaway and Homeless Youth Program Directory).
<p>A student who is temporarily housed is exhibiting challenging behavior in school and/or is repeatedly absent.</p>	<p>This is challenging because school staff may not be aware of strategies to respond to challenging behaviors. Interpreting these behaviors, frequent absences as “attention seeking,” “intentionally defiant,” or “apathetic” may create a deficit-based thinking and can impact interactions and positive relationships with students. Any of these labels can cause friction between a students and staff and impede school success.</p>	<p>When working with a student in temporary housing, keep in mind that losing one’s home can be traumatic. In some cases, the student may be contending with chronic stress caused by the instability of being homeless and additional factors such as substance abuse on the part of the parent(s), untreated mental illness on the part of the parent(s), or domestic violence. Chronic stress and trauma have a very real effect on a student’s brain, body, and behavior. When talking with a student, be sure to use trauma-sensitive strategies including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Start any conversation with pointing out a strength before discussing a problem. For example, “I noticed that you did a great job following instructions in math class yesterday. What do you think helped you do that and how can we do that again today?” • Make the student feel safe and supported. Make sure an adult in the school community is regularly checking in with the student. Practice active listening and emphasize partnership over power. Avoid causing shame or blame and be very clear about expectations. • Help other school-based staff understand the impact of trauma and provide professional development on trauma-sensitivity. For more information, visit our trauma-sensitivity page at https://nysteachs.org/topics/trauma-sensitive-strategies/



The New York State Technical and Educational Assistance Center for Homeless Students



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