

BUILDING AWARENESS OF THE MCKINNEY VENTO ACT IN MINNESOTA K–12 PUBLIC SCHOOLS: A PRACTICAL BLUEPRINT

 Okhale Emanemua

Minnesota State University, Department of Educational Leadership, Mankato United States of America

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ABSTRACT

Students experiencing homelessness in Minnesota face major barriers to school stability, learning, and well-being. This article explains the core protections of the McKinney Vento Homeless Assistance Act and explores how uneven awareness among educators and families can limit the impact of these legal rights. Drawing on existing guidance and research, the article proposes a practical blueprint for K–12 public schools in Minnesota that centers leadership commitment, empowered liaisons, systematic staff training, family friendly outreach, community partnerships, and data informed improvement. The blueprint is designed in clear language so that school professionals, policymakers, and community members can work together to create a more stable and supportive school experience for students who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate place to live.

Keywords: McKinney–Vento Act; student homelessness; Minnesota K–12 schools; educational rights; school stability; homeless liaison; professional development; family outreach; community partnerships; trauma-informed practice; early identification; equity in education; data-driven improvement; policy implementation; school leadership.

1. INTRODUCTION

Students who experience homelessness face serious barriers to attending and succeeding in school, including frequent moves, lack of transportation, and unmet basic needs (National Center for Homeless Education, 2016). The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act is the main federal law that protects the educational rights of these children and youth in public schools across the United States, including Minnesota (National Center for Homeless Education, 2016). This article proposes a practical, step-by-step blueprint to raise awareness of the McKinney-Vento Act among K–12 school districts in Minnesota so that eligible students are identified early and receive the support they are guaranteed by law.

Background: The McKinney-Vento Act

The McKinney-Vento Act requires every state to support homeless education and every school district to designate a liaison for students experiencing homelessness (National Center for Homeless Education, 2016). Under the law, homelessness is defined broadly to include students who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence, such as those living in shelters, motels, cars, campgrounds, or doubled up with others due to economic hardship (National Center for Homeless Education, 2016). Key protections include immediate enrollment without typical documents, the right to stay in the school of origin when it is in the student's best interest,

transportation to that school, and access to the same academic and support services as housed peers (National Center for Homeless Education, 2016). These protections are designed to reduce educational disruption and promote stability for highly mobile and vulnerable students.

Minnesota Context and Need for Awareness

Minnesota school districts, including large urban systems such as Minneapolis Public Schools and suburban districts like Minnetonka, explicitly operate under McKinney-Vento and related federal guidance to support students experiencing homelessness (Minneapolis Public Schools, n.d.; Minnetonka Public Schools, n.d.). However, research indicates that implementation quality and awareness levels can vary significantly across districts, with gaps in training, communication, and collaboration affecting how well the law is carried out (Julianelle & Foscarinis, 2003; Wright et al., 1998). Recent studies of Midwestern districts show that many educators still receive information about the law in a piecemeal way, and school staff may not fully understand the broad definition of homelessness or the services available (for example, transportation and school selection options) (Wright et al., 1998). These patterns suggest that Minnesota needs a structured, statewide strategy to improve awareness and consistent implementation of McKinney-Vento in K–12 settings.

Blueprint Goal and Guiding Principles

The overarching goal of this blueprint is to build a sustainable culture of awareness about the McKinney-Vento Act among Minnesota K–12 educators, support staff, leaders, students, and families. This culture should normalize identifying and supporting students experiencing homelessness as a shared responsibility, not just the job of the district liaison or social worker (National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth, 2025). Four guiding principles shape the blueprint: (a) equity, ensuring that students experiencing homelessness have the same opportunities as their peers; (b) early identification, so that support begins before crises worsen; (c) collaboration, linking schools with community services; and (d) human-centered practice, recognizing the dignity, strengths, and privacy of students and families (Julianelle & Foscarinis, 2003).

Component 1: Strengthening District and School Leadership

Effective awareness begins with strong, informed leadership at district and building levels. District superintendents and school boards should formally adopt policies that clearly reflect McKinney-Vento requirements, including identification procedures, enrollment protocols, dispute resolution, and transportation arrangements (National Center for Homeless Education, 2016). Principals play a critical role in setting expectations that all staff share responsibility for recognizing signs of housing instability and referring students to the liaison promptly (Wright et al., 1998). Leadership preparation programs and ongoing professional learning for Minnesota administrators should include content on homelessness, legal obligations, and trauma-informed school practices to ensure that leaders can translate policy into everyday practice (Julianelle & Foscarinis, 2003).

Component 2: Empowering the McKinney-Vento Liaison

The McKinney-Vento liaison is the central figure in each district's homeless education program and must be visible, accessible, and adequately supported. The liaison's core

responsibilities include identifying eligible students, coordinating services, training staff, and serving as a bridge between schools, families, and community agencies (National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth, 2025). In Minnesota, districts should ensure that the liaison has dedicated time, clear authority, and access to data systems to track students, rather than assigning the role as an added duty to already overextended staff. Regular regional or statewide networking sessions, virtual or in-person can help liaisons share promising practices, tackle challenges, and maintain up-to-date knowledge of state and federal guidance (National Center for Homeless Education, 2016).

Component 3: Systematic Professional Development for School Staff

Teachers, paraprofessionals, school counselors, social workers, nurses, office staff, and bus drivers are often the first to notice changes in attendance, mood, or living situations. Yet many report limited training on homelessness or the McKinney-Vento Act (Wright et al., 1998). Minnesota districts should implement annual, tiered professional development that is practical and scenario-based. Core training sessions can cover the legal definition of homelessness, key rights (immediate enrollment, school of origin, transportation), confidentiality, and referral processes (National Center for Homeless Education, 2016). Role-specific modules can address how classroom teachers can respond to inconsistent homework, how office staff handle enrollment without documentation, and how transportation staff support students with complex routes. To keep training accessible and humanized, districts can incorporate short videos, real-world case examples, and voices of youth with lived experience, using trauma-informed approaches that avoid stigma and respect privacy.

Component 4: Family and Student-Centered Outreach

Awareness of rights must extend beyond educators to reach families and students themselves. McKinney-Vento requires that information about rights be posted in places easily seen by parents, guardians, and unaccompanied youth, in languages they understand (National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth, 2025). In Minnesota, districts can place simple, friendly posters in school offices, cafeterias, bus stops, shelters, food shelves, libraries, community centers, and faith-based organizations. Outreach materials should use clear, non-technical language that avoids the word “homeless” when it may carry stigma, instead describing situations like staying with friends, living in motels, or moving often due to financial problems. Schools can also integrate awareness into back-to-school events, parent-teacher conferences, and digital communications, such as district websites and social media, so that families know whom to contact if their housing situation changes (Emanemua, 2024).

Component 5: Cross-System Collaboration and Community Partnerships

Since homelessness is not only an educational issue, schools should endeavor to coordinate with housing agencies, social services, and health providers to support the whole child. Research shows that robust communication networks within schools and between community services improve the effectiveness of McKinney-Vento implementation (Wright et al., 1998). Minnesota districts can create local interagency teams that include the McKinney-Vento liaison, school social workers, counselors, and representatives from shelters, youth service organizations, and county agencies. Regular meetings can focus on reviewing trends, addressing barriers such as transportation or documentation, and aligning resources like tutoring, mental health services, and

basic needs support. These partnerships also help schools connect families to longer-term housing options, reducing the instability that undermines student learning (Julianelle & Foscarinis, 2003).

Component 6: Data Systems, Monitoring, and Continuous Improvement

Sustainable awareness requires good data and ongoing reflection. Districts must accurately identify and report the number of students experiencing homelessness each year, but identification is often incomplete when staff lack awareness, or families fear disclosure (National Center for Homeless Education, 2016). Minnesota districts should refine enrollment forms and annual verification processes to include sensitive, non-judgmental housing questions, accompanied by clear explanations of why information is collected and how it will be used. Data dashboards can track enrollment, attendance, mobility, academic outcomes, and service use for students identified under McKinney-Vento, without revealing personal details to staff who do not need them. District and school teams can then review this information regularly to spot gaps, for example, low identification rates in certain schools or grades, or inequities in access to transportation—and adjust training, outreach, and resource allocation accordingly (Julianelle & Foscarinis, 2003).

Implementation Steps for Minnesota K–12 Schools

Based on the components above, Minnesota districts can follow a phased implementation process:

1. Assessment and planning.
 - Conduct an internal review of current McKinney-Vento policies, training, identification rates, and partnerships.
 - Engage stakeholders, including liaisons, social workers, teachers, families, and community partners—to identify strengths and gaps.
2. Policy and role clarification.
 - Update board policies and administrative procedures to align with federal guidance.
 - Clarify and communicate the liaison's role, including how staff should refer students.
3. Professional learning rollout.
 - Develop or adopt statewide training modules for all staff, using a mix of online and in-person formats.
 - Integrate McKinney-Vento content into new-staff orientation and administrator preparation programs.
4. Outreach and communication.
 - Create multilingual, stigma-sensitive outreach materials for families and youth.
 - Update district and school websites with clear contact information and resources.
5. Partnership building.
 - Formalize agreements with local shelters, youth programs, and social service agencies.
 - Participate in regional networks to share practices and coordinate support.
6. Review and refinement.
 - Use data to evaluate identification, service delivery, and outcomes for students experiencing homelessness.
 - Adjust training, communication, and resource allocation yearly based on findings.

2. CONCLUSION

The McKinney-Vento Act offers powerful protections for students experiencing homelessness, but those protections only matter when people know about them and know how to act on them. In Minnesota K–12 public schools, building awareness requires intentional leadership, empowered liaisons, ongoing staff development, family-centered outreach, strong community partnerships, and data-driven reflection. By following the blueprint outlined in this article, districts can move from compliance-only approaches toward a proactive, human-centered system that ensures every child, regardless of housing status, have a stable, supportive path to educational success.

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