

REDUCING HOMELESSNESS IN MINNESOTA K–12 SCHOOLS: STRENGTHENING MCKINNEY-VENTO IMPLEMENTATION

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ABSTRACT

Homelessness among K–12 students in Minnesota harms academic achievement, school stability, and overall wellbeing, with thousands of children identified as homeless each year (National Center for Homeless Education [NCHE], 2023). The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act offers federal protection for the educational rights of students experiencing homelessness, but uneven local implementation weakens its impact (McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, 1987/2015; National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth [NAEHCY], 2025). This article explains the core provisions of McKinney-Vento, examines Minnesota's current efforts and challenges, and presents action steps for the Minnesota Department of Education (MDE) based on research, policy analysis, and implementation studies, including recent work on homeless rights awareness and educator practice by Okhale Emanemua (Emanemua, 2023, 2024a, 2024b). This article also builds on and extends the ideas first developed in “Building Awareness of the McKinney Vento Act in Minnesota K-12 Public Schools: A Practical Blueprint.” In that earlier work, Emanemua focused on how limited knowledge of the McKinney-Vento among educators and families can weaken the impact of students' legal rights, and proposed a clear, step-by-step blueprint to raise awareness across districts, schools, and communities (Emanemua, 2025). This article moves further toward system-level implementation and state policy action in Minnesota, calling for a stronger statewide identification system, uniform professional learning, innovative transportation models and formal accountability mechanisms that monitor outcomes for students experiencing homelessness.

Keywords: McKinney-Vento Act; student homelessness; Minnesota K–12 schools; educational rights; Minnesota Department of Education (MDE); school stability; identification systems; homeless liaison; professional development; school leadership; trauma-informed practice; transportation services; rural education challenges; community partnerships; data-driven improvement; policy implementation; educator bias; housing instability; educational equity; statewide accountability; homeless youth services.

1. INTRODUCTION

Minnesota continues to face serious challenges related to youth homelessness, with more than 9,000 K–12 students identified as homeless in recent school years (NCHE, 2023). Homelessness leads to frequent movement, trauma, and disrupted learning, which weakens long-term educational and life outcomes for children and youth. The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, first passed in 1987 and updated in 2015 under Every Student Succeeds Act, requires states and school

districts to identify students experiencing homelessness, remove barriers to enrollment, and provide services that support school stability and success (McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, 1987/2015; NAEHCY, 2025).

Under McKinney-Vento, students have rights to immediate enrollment, the option to remain in their school of origin when this is in their best interest, transportation support, and access to a district homeless liaison who helps coordinate services (NAEHCY, 2025; DG58 Family Resources, 2024). Recent scholarship by Okhale Emanemua on McKinney-Vento and teacher practice stresses that these rights only matter when educators and school leaders understand and act on them in daily decision making (Emanemua, 2023, 2024a, 2024b).

McKinney-Vento and the Minnesota Setting

The McKinney-Vento Act defines homelessness to include children and youth who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence, including those in shelters, cars, motels, or doubled-up with others due to loss of housing or economic hardship (McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, 1987/2015; Minneapolis Public Schools, 2024). Core protections include immediate school enrollment without typical documentation, the right to remain in the school of origin when appropriate, required transportation assistance, and equal access to academic and support services, such as special education and extracurricular activities (NAEHCY, 2025; DG58 Family Resources, 2024). Each district must appoint a homeless liaison responsible for identifying eligible students, informing families of their rights, and linking them to services (NCHE, 2018; NAEHCY, 2025).

In Minnesota, these federal protections appear in state guidance and district-level procedures that stress removing barriers to enrollment, supporting attendance, and promoting academic success for students experiencing homelessness (Minnesota Department of Education, 2022). Some districts, such as White Bear Lake Area Schools, outline clear procedures for identification, transportation, and coordination, but statewide reporting and research points to uneven identification rates, inconsistent transportation practices, and variations in support services across rural and urban areas (ISD 624, 2024; Chapin Hall, University of Chicago, 2018). Studies of McKinney-Vento implementation, including Emanemua's work on homeless rights awareness, show that staff knowledge, leadership commitment, and district capacity greatly shape whether students benefit from the protections that exist on paper (Emanemua, 2023, 2024a).

Barriers to Effective Implementation

Under-identification and Hidden Homelessness

Many students who qualify under McKinney-Vento are never identified, either because their living situations are hidden or because school staff lack tools and training to ask the right questions. Families may hide housing instability due to shame, fear of child-protection involvement, or a desire to avoid being seen as "homeless" (Mullins et al., 2016). Districts often rely on families to self-report rather than using consistent screening questions at enrollment or through other student-contact points, which leaves many students without the services they are entitled to receive (Julianelle & Foscarinis, 2003; NCHE, 2018). Emanemua's research on McKinney-Vento stresses that when educators are unclear about the legal definition of homelessness or the full range of student rights, under-identification becomes routine instead of rare (Emanemua, 2024a).

Training, School Leadership, and Bias

Research from various states shows that many teachers, counselors, and administrators receive limited training on McKinney-Vento and on how to support students in unstable housing (Tolliver, 2018; Sulkowski, 2016). Staff may be unsure about eligibility, may misunderstand their legal obligations, or may not know how to respond to complex situations such as doubled-up housing or rapid moves across district lines (NCHE, 2018). Emanemua's work on teacher stereotypes and biases points out that negative beliefs about poverty and family "responsibility" can shape how educators interpret behavior and whether they see housing problems as a rights issue or a private matter (Emanemua, 2024b). Without deliberate training that addresses both legal content and bias, school responses can unintentionally push students experiencing homelessness further to the margins (Emanemua, 2023, 2024b).

Transportation and School Stability

Transportation is one of the most persistent challenges in carrying out McKinney-Vento. Guaranteeing that students can remain in their school of origin often requires long routes, cross-district agreements, or specialized transportation arrangements that stretch budgets (NCHE, 2015). These issues are especially pressing in rural parts of Minnesota where distances are long and public transit options are limited (Chapin Hall, University of Chicago, 2018). When transportation cannot keep up with frequent moves or when delays and missed pickups become common, students lose instructional time and the main promise of McKinney-Vento school stability is weakened (NCHE, 2015).

Collaboration, Services, and Community Partnerships

Students experiencing homelessness often need more than school-based help alone. They may require access to shelters, mental-health care, food support, health services, and help finding stable housing. Research shows that districts with strong partnerships with community agencies, shelters, housing organizations, and family-support programs are better able to keep students enrolled and learning (Wright et al., 1998). In Minnesota, however, these partnerships are uneven, and many smaller districts lack formal agreements or regular cross-agency meetings focused on homeless students (Heading Home Minnesota Funder Collaborative, 2017; Chapin Hall, University of Chicago, 2018). Initiatives like Heading Home Minnesota show that when education leaders sit at the same table with housing and human-services partners, families receive more consistent support and students are more likely to stay connected to school (Heading Home Minnesota Funder Collaborative, 2017).

Recommendations for the Minnesota Department of Education

Improve Identification and Data Use

MDE can help districts move from passive to active identification. Standard questions about housing status at enrollment, annual re-enrollment, and during key student meetings would help reveal hidden homelessness and reduce the chance that families fall through the cracks (Julianelle & Foscarinis, 2003; Mullins et al., 2016). These questions should be asked in a respectful, trauma-aware way, with clear explanations of why the information is collected and how it connects to services and rights (NCHE, 2018). The state can also promote better data systems that track student mobility and service use across schools and districts. When liaisons and other staff can see patterns of frequent moves or gaps in attendance, they can intervene more quickly to

protect school stability (NCHE, 2018). Emanemua's work on rights awareness supports the idea that data should not only record a student's homeless status but also track whether key rights such as transportation, tutoring, and counseling are actually being provided (Emanemua, 2023, 2024a).

Strengthen Professional Development and Leadership

MDE should require regular, statewide training on McKinney-Vento for liaisons, administrators, counselors, and teachers. This training should cover legal duties, identification practices, and local procedures, but it should also address trauma, mental health, and build trust with families in crisis (Tolliver, 2018; Sulkowski, 2016). Separate modules for rural, suburban, and urban districts can help staff think through the realities of their own communities, including long distances, language differences, or high shelter use (Chapin Hall, University of Chicago, 2018).

Emanemua's studies of teacher bias and leadership suggest that professional development must also include time for staff to examine their own beliefs about homelessness, poverty, race, and family engagement (Emanemua, 2024b). Personal stories, student and family voices, and structured reflection can help educators shift from blame to a rights-based, problem-solving approach (Emanemua, 2023, 2024b). Leadership training for principals and district leaders should connect McKinney-Vento to broader school-improvement plans, showing how supporting homeless students links to attendance, graduation, and achievement goals (Emanemua, 2023).

Support Transportation Solutions

Because transportation is so central to school stability, MDE can support districts in designing cooperative approaches. Regional transportation partnerships can allow neighboring districts to share buses, drivers, and technology tools in ways that spread costs and make routes more efficient (NCHE, 2015). The state can provide model agreements, planning tools, and technical help to guide these efforts, with special attention to outlying rural areas (Chapin Hall, University of Chicago, 2018).

MDE should also encourage districts to use available state and federal funding such as McKinney-Vento subgrants, Title I funds set aside for homeless students, and recent federal relief funds to cover transportation costs and related supports (Minnesota Department of Education, 2022; NCHE, 2015). In communities where standard bus routes are not practical, carefully monitored pilots using public transit, gas cards, or other solutions may be appropriate, as long as student safety and reliability remain central (NCHE, 2015).

Build Stronger School–Community Partnerships

To better meet the needs of homeless students and their families, MDE can encourage districts to form formal partnerships with shelters, housing agencies, health providers, food programs, and youth-serving organizations. Written agreements can spell out referral processes, data-sharing rules, and joint planning roles so that families experience a more coordinated system instead of navigating separate programs on their own (Wright et al., 1998). District homeless liaisons should be regular members of local or regional homelessness and housing coalitions so that school concerns are included in broader planning efforts (Heading Home Minnesota Funder Collaborative, 2017). Heading Home Minnesota offers a model for connecting housing and education in ways that support highly mobile families over time, rather than through short, crisis-only responses (Heading Home Minnesota Funder Collaborative, 2017). Emanemua's focus on

homeless rights awareness suggests that these partnerships should include clear plans for educating families about their educational rights and for lifting up student and parent voices in community decisions (Emanemua, 2024a).

Increase Accountability and Ongoing Improvement

MDE can promote a culture of continuous improvement by requiring districts to report quarterly on homeless student enrollment, attendance, achievement, graduation, and use of key services. These data should be shared publicly in ways that protect privacy but still allow communities to see how students experiencing homelessness are faring across districts (NCHE, 2018; Minnesota Department of Education, 2022). Such reporting can help highlight districts that are making progress and those that need more support.

In addition, MDE can support the use of tools such as the McKinney-Vento Act Implementation Scale (MVAIS) to regularly assess how well districts are carrying out the law. Emanemua's work points to the value of these tools for focusing attention on rights awareness, leadership roles, and practical barriers, rather than viewing homeless education as a side task (Emanemua, 2023, 2024a). These assessments should be paired with direct input from students and families experiencing homelessness so that numbers are grounded in real experiences and so that improvement plans reflect what students say they need (Heading Home Minnesota Funder Collaborative, 2017).

2. CONCLUSION

The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act provides a strong legal base for protecting the educational rights of children and youth who lack stable housing, but rights on paper do not guarantee results in classrooms (NAEHCY, 2025). In Minnesota, reducing the damage caused by homelessness in K–12 schools require better identification, stronger training and leadership, more dependable transportation, deeper school–community partnerships, and clear accountability systems that drive ongoing change (NCHE, 2018; Department of Educational Leadership, Minnesota State University, Mankato, 2024). By building on state guidance, national resources, and emerging scholarships from researchers such as Okhale Emanemua, MDE and local districts can move closer to ensuring that no child's education is cut short because they do not have a stable place to live (Emanemua, 2023, 2024a, 2024b).

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