



**U.S. Department of State
Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs
Private Sector Exchange**

April 12, 2011

Guidance Directive 2011-01

Secondary School Student Program: Coordinator and Host Family Vetting

To ensure that every exchange student has a positive experience and a successful program, sponsors must only employ or otherwise utilize the services of reputable and knowledgeable persons. These individuals must understand fully their role in the Secondary School Student program and their direct responsibility for the students they are entrusted.

As youth serving organizations, sponsors must be proactive in policing the performance of their local and regional program coordinators.

Floating and Surfing Local Coordinators

The Department is concerned that a pool of underperforming or problematic local coordinators “float” or “surf” from one designated sponsor to another. Many of these coordinators have left a wake of disappointed students, unhappy school officials, and distressed host families and natural parents. This poses an obvious potential for harm to our exchange students and to the Exchange Visitor Program, as these coordinators do not appear to be motivated by acting in the best interests of the students for whom they are responsible. Instead, this small pool of underperforming or problematic coordinators appears to be motivated by the financial incentives they receive for undertaking these coordinator responsibilities. These coordinators must be identified and excluded from involvement with the Exchange Visitor Program.

To this end, sponsors should ask themselves: does my organization have internal controls and standard operating procedures that protect against the harm that these underperforming or problematic coordinators may cause? We offer the following to assist you in evaluating this question:

Initial Screening – Questions to Ask:

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- How and why did my organization retain the services of this local or regional coordinator?
- Did we inquire about their prior experience, specifically their prior involvement with the Secondary School Student program or involvement with other youth programs?
- Did we ask whether there were issues with that prior experience?
- Did we verify and document that prior experience?

The Department observes that organizations that ask these questions and verify the responses have a greatly increased likelihood of not engaging the services of underperforming or problematic local or regional coordinators.

We urge you to begin immediately to ask these questions and to amend your organization's employment application, or volunteer application equivalent, to capture this information. Further, we encourage all sponsors to include questions similar to the following on their employment or volunteer applications:

- Have you had a previous affiliation in any way with the Secondary School Student program and/or international exchange students (i.e., hosting, placing, or monitoring exchange students)?
- If yes, please indicate the name of the sponsor that you were affiliated with, and list the dates of your affiliation with that organization.

We note that some sponsors are conducting these checks while others are not.

The Red Flag of Child Protective Services

The Department notes the obvious: a family monitored by a child protective services agency is being monitored for a reason related to a child's welfare. Sponsors are well advised to not place exchange students in homes being monitored by child protective services authorities.

Further, is a coordinator working on your organization's behalf being monitored by child protective services authorities? If you do not know, it is because you failed to ask. The Department strongly urges all sponsors to immediately commence such inquiries.

The Department considers the verification that a potential host family or coordinator has no previous or existing involvement with child protective services authorities to be an industry best practice. Accordingly, sponsors may wish to include the following questions in their host family recruitment application and in their employment/volunteer application:

- Have you had any contact with any child protective services agency in the past?

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- If yes, please indicate when and for what reason(s).

The Department and program sponsors share a common goal of ensuring a safe and positive experience for every secondary school student. Adoption of the industry's best practices outlined in this Directive provides an extra level of protection for our exchange students and for your organization.

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for Private Sector Exchange