



Suggestions for Conducting Observer Identification

Federal guidance requires the use of observer identification at the elementary and secondary school levels as a last resort, if race and/or ethnicity data are not self-identified by the student or (more typically) the student's parents or guardians. If you are the individual assigned to be your school's or district's observer, these are some suggestions to help you perform this duty. First of all, remember that:

Observer identification is used only as a last resort after all other efforts to have a parent identify the student or a student to self-identify have failed.

Check your district's policies for such procedures. Typically, they will include following up with parents by email and/or phone to determine whether the parent or student is refusing to self-identify rather than simply overlooking the question.

Self-identification is based on how people define themselves and their children. Assigning a race and ethnicity to an individual is a somewhat arbitrary exercise because these are not scientific or anthropological categories. Assigning race and ethnicity to another person is a difficult task. Given the emotionally charged feelings and deep beliefs that many people have concerning the issue of race and ethnicity, your job as an observer is simply to assign the race and ethnicity categories for a student to the best of your ability. It is important that you are consistent in your observation, and that you make your judgments objectively.

In addition to visual observation, there are ways to help you determine an individual's race and ethnicity. Rely first on existing information before you actually "observe" the race or ethnicity of the student, but check your information source to the best of your ability. For example:

- Check the student's *prior record* to determine whether a race and ethnicity was selected in the past. This can narrow down the possibilities.
- Check whether a *student's sibling* in the school has identified a race and ethnicity. There is, however, the possibility of different race and ethnicity among siblings as a result of adoption and/or blended families.

If sufficient existing information is lacking, you may look for clues from other sources such as:

- first-hand knowledge about the student or his/her family (check with a teacher or counselor)
- the student's and parent's country of birth or country of origin
- the student's home language or parent's language of preference
- knowledge about the community to which the school belongs

Federal guidance recognizes the burden placed on school and district personnel in observer identification, and that the practice may not yield data as accurate as those from self-identification. However, absent self-identification or existing records, observer identification is required.

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Students and parents who are reluctant to self-identify should be informed that observer identification will be used. This may discourage them from refusing to self-identify. Self-identification is the preferred choice of selecting an individual's race and ethnicity, though a person is not required by law to make these selections.

Observers should not tell a student, parent or educational staff member how they should identify. When asked, simply restate the question, explaining the definition within a race or ethnicity category. If a parent states that a student is Hispanic, observers should encourage the parent to also select one or more of the race categories, as people of Hispanic origin may be of any race.

Observers should be encouraged to stay within their comfort zones. Visual identification of a multiple-race background is a difficult task. Observers should attempt this only if they are comfortable doing so. Supporting information, such as personal information from a teacher or knowledge about common race combinations within the community, can be helpful in making such determinations.

Observer identification may not be feasible in cases such as distance education. Following up with parents via telephone or email are probably the only feasible options. In some extreme cases of geography, for instance, it can be almost impossible to observe a student. Data collectors from the school or district can speak to the student or parents and try to allay any reservations about providing race and ethnicity information.

More information concerning observer identification is available from the U.S. Department of Education. In 2008, the Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, National Forum on Education Statistics, Race/Ethnicity Data Implementation Task Force released "[Managing an Identity Crisis: Forum Guide to Implementing New Federal Race and Ethnicity Categories.](#)" Exhibit 4.1 in the publication is dedicated to observer identification. We suggest you review this information.