

“ IT’S DISTURBING, WHAT’S HAPPENING HERE ”

THE IMPACT OF
IMMIGRATION ENFORCEMENT
AND ANTI-IMMIGRANT
POLICIES ON K-12 SCHOOLS,
EDUCATORS, AND IMMIGRANT
YOUTH AND FAMILIES

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

OVERVIEW AND METHODOLOGY

This report summarizes a timely national qualitative case study documenting the acute structural and emotional shocks rippling through America's public education system due to heightened federal immigration enforcement actions. This study synthesizes over 50 hours of qualitative empirical data gathered from 37 educators, including teachers, leaders, and state-level personnel across 14 distinct states between January and April 2026. Respondents represent a diverse group of frontline educators, including classroom teachers, school social workers, principals, district-level coordinators, and community-based organization leaders.

CORE RESEARCH FINDINGS

1

Escalating ICE Presence Causes Pervasive Community Terror: Educators nationwide report unprecedented, aggressive operational visibility from Immigration and Customs Enforcement. Documented activities include nighttime home raids that involve kicked-in doors, agents patrolling suburban neighborhoods unannounced, and common local commercial infrastructure becoming targets, including grocery stores and local restaurants. Crucially, ICE's footprint has expanded directly into the "no-man's land" of student life, with enforcement visible at neighborhood school bus stops and directly outside classroom windows.

2

Severe Psycho-Emotional Trauma Perpetuates Academic Disengagement: The constant threat of sudden family separation has completely eroded the psychological safety required for learning. Educators report a landscape of prolonged distress: children experiencing severe panic attacks, debilitating fear of simple routines (e.g., waiting for school buses or getting mail), and crippling anxiety that parents will be missing upon their return home.

3

ICE's "Chilling Effect" on Absenteeism and Enrollment: Fear directly alters school attendance metrics. The study shows a sharp decline in school enrollment, a widespread rise in long-term chronic absenteeism, and parents strategically keeping children home or shifting them to virtual learning models to shield them from roadside enforcement. This dynamic creates an additional operational crisis because attendance-based school funding formulas are penalizing districts for these forced absences.

4

The School(s) as Safe Spaces Paradox: While *Plyler v. Doe* legally secures free K-12 public educational access for all children regardless of documentation status, the reality on the ground is highly fragile. The federal rescission of the "Protected Areas" policy has stripped schools of their historical insulation, leaving school perimeters exposed and local educators with varying degrees of relevant legal literacy to push back.

DYNAMIC AND HOLISTIC SCHOOL-LEVEL COUNTERSTRATEGIES

In response to the above issues, public schools have drastically adapted their operational identities, extending their capacity and role beyond academics to serve as ad hoc social and legal safety nets:

- **Protocol Development:** Schools are establishing internal teams to formalize crisis communications, executing perimeter checks at dismissal, and organizing secure lines of student transit to family vehicles.
- **Legal and Informational Scaffolding for Families:** Educators are actively self-educating to fill knowledge gaps, developing comprehensive “resource binders,” and using school facilities during off-hours to host “Know Your Rights” assemblies and Power of Attorney clinics to prepare families for separation.
- **Social Safety Provisioning:** Schools are increasingly becoming grassroots social services hubs, managing pop-up food banks, clothing closets, and providing other basic supplies to families targeted supply programs.
- **Inclusive Student Civic Action:** Widespread peer-led solidarity efforts are emerging. For example, students are leading multi-lingual welcoming environment campaigns, student-run culture clubs that provide post-secondary counseling and organized non-violent walkouts to protest local raids.

SYSTEMIC RECOMMENDATIONS

The report concludes that relying on individual educators to absorb this structural strain is fundamentally unsustainable. Schools cannot combat this administration’s enforcement campaign in isolation. The study issues an urgent call for:

1

SYSTEMIC LEGAL INFRASTRUCTURE

Expanding dedicated legal aid partnerships across districts rather than requiring educators to make sense of legal literacy on their own.

2

UP-TO-DATE POLICY LITERACY

Embedding university-based researchers and policy experts within districts to translate fluctuating immigration ordinances in real-time for educators on the ground.

3

PROACTIVE LEGISLATIVE FRAMEWORKS

Mirroring the legislative actions of states like Illinois, Connecticut, Maine, New Jersey, Oregon, and Virginia by enacting definitive, proactive state-level protections for educational access regardless of a student’s immigration background.

KEY HIGHLIGHTS AND THEMES

THE TRAUMA OF ENFORCEMENT ON KIDS AND FAMILIES

“We have had a lot of parents share recently doors being kicked in and that it was in the middle of the night and their children have had trauma because of this. So that in the most recent time that we’re in now has been something that we are hearing more and more frequently.”

THE FEAR OF LEAVING HOME

“I have kids all the time who are afraid to walk home from the bus. They’re afraid to walk to the grocery store. They’re afraid to get the mail. They can’t even go get their trash cans.... So that unmarked car is gonna pull up.... And then they’ll never see their dad again. Like, could you imagine living under that stress?”

THE EMOTIONAL TOLL ON EDUCATORS

“I finally broke down. I had been writing letters to judges, attending court, and just watching kids come to school every day. Every day, they are crying, and worried.”

HOW EDUCATORS ARE BUILDING TRUST WITH KIDS AND FAMILIES

“I am right now a sense of stability that families can know that their kids are sent to school for an education and be safe, that they know that they can reach out to me.”

INTRODUCTION

SINCE JANUARY 2025, THE TRUMP ADMINISTRATION, IMMIGRATION CUSTOMS AND ENFORCEMENT, UNDER THE PLAYBOOK OF THE FAR RIGHT AND PROJECT 2025, HAVE KIDNAPPED AND TERRORIZED IMMIGRANT FAMILIES AND CHILDREN.¹

Deploying ICE in major cities has been a hallmark in the playbook of the Trump administration and its expansive immigration enforcement plan. Trump has allowed for mass deployment of ICE in many large cities in the United States, including Los Angeles, Chicago, Minneapolis, New Orleans, and Charlotte. Many cities and governors have fought back through the deliberate creation of policies to protect immigrant families and residents, given the disruptions caused by ICE in America's streets, including the violation of individual rights, use of racial profiling, and murder of U.S. citizens.²

In April, Maine immigration agents arrested dozens of people from communities across the state.³ In Connecticut, ICE made arrests in downtown New Haven.⁴ In West Virginia, ICE announced that it had made over 650 arrests over the course of two weeks in early January 2026.⁵ The Trump administration is also deporting both a higher proportion and greater numbers of detained individuals compared to past years.⁶ A report from the Deportation Data Project found that ICE arrests overall have increased fourfold, which has resulted in a similar increase in deportations.⁷ From Los Angeles to Chicago, the administration has deliberately engaged in fear-based tactics in immigrant communities. However, school communities have also demonstrated solidarity with immigrants to resist such violent and draconian approaches. Examples across the United States demonstrate how students push back against the administration's immigration policies.⁸

Meanwhile, a cornerstone of this nation are institutions like schools and community-based organizations tasked with developing instruction, and maintaining calm, safe environments for all kids to learn. Prior research, especially during the first Trump term, shows an increase in absenteeism in communities with higher numbers of immigrants; few studies to date have examined the impacts and disruptions of ICE nationally.⁹

This report shares findings from a national qualitative study of educators about the impact of anti-immigrant policies and increased immigration enforcement. The aim was to understand how the constant dehumanization of immigrant communities, racial exclusion, and discrimination affected kids and families in communities and schools across the country. Specifically, this qualitative case study of educators nationwide shows the deep impact of ICE presence and activities on immigrant youth and families, and on the educators who serve them in the nation's public schools. This study also highlights the strategies educators use to support immigrant students and families and demonstrate both solidarity and resistance.

The report shares findings in relation to these overarching research aims. First, the study investigates educators' experiences and perceptions of immigration enforcement.¹⁰ Past research shows the critical role that educators in various roles, such as social workers and counselors, play in perceiving and responding to increased immigration enforcement.¹¹ The effects of ICE have been documented during the first Trump administration.¹² Second, the study investigates how immigration enforcement affects schools and immigrant children. To date, this study contributes to a national scope of the impacts of

ICE and this administration's anti-immigrant agenda. The intensity and frequency of ICE presence and activities is unique to this moment. This study shows the disruption this administration and ICE is causing to school environments and educators' daily lives, as well as educators' and institutional efforts to counteract the administration's detrimental actions.

This timely, relevant research builds an empirical knowledge base that documents the disruptions to children and families' lives, the toll and burden on the U.S. education system, and overarching impacts on all children. It illustrates the dehumanization of immigrants, and the impact of immigration enforcement on teaching, learning, and school environments for all children in U.S. public schools. The report shares the story of the nation's educators as they persist in supporting immigrant children and families through relationships, care, and resilience. Below, I present findings related to:

- Increased ICE presence and activity
- Impact of ICE and anti-immigrant policies and practices on educators
- Kids and families, and how schools are responding

BACKGROUND AND RELEVANT RESEARCH

IMPORTANCE OF SCHOOLS AS SAFE SPACES OF BELONGING FOR IMMIGRANT STUDENTS

Schools are often the first and primary social institutions that welcome and serve immigrant students and their families. Research has shown that schools provide immigrant students with a safe space and connections to people and resources that they need to flourish. For example, research has found that schools provide immigrant students with structures and in-school relationships with both teachers and peers, which in turn provide these students with social capital that helps them achieve their educational goals.¹³ Further, schools can positively shape immigrant students' sense of belonging, well-being, and academic motivation and success. Research illustrates that inclusive school climates—defined by shared positive attitudes toward immigrants—are linked to stronger belonging among immigrant students.¹⁴ Similarly, research documents the importance of supportive relationships and that empathetic responses to discrimination support immigrant students' sense of belonging.¹⁵ All in all, schools can provide immigrant students with safe spaces that enforce belonging, build social capital (that is, strong relationships with adults and youth), and provide the resources they need to thrive. This report illustrates examples of this in relation to the impact of anti-immigrant policies and immigration enforcement actions.

PRIOR RESEARCH: SCHOOLS AS VULNERABLE SAFE SPACES

Schools, under *Plyler*, have generally been safe spaces for children regardless of immigration status. However, in 2025, the Trump administration challenged the premise of sensitive locations, such as schools and bus stops, by rescinding the policy and leaving them vulnerable to immigration law enforcement.¹⁶ My research proposes the notion of schools as vulnerable safe spaces, with multiple actors, ideologies, and supports, and impacted by immigration enforcement and anti-immigrant sentiment. There are laws and policies in some states that identify schools as safe spaces, remedying the effects of the policy's rescission. For instance, some laws don't allow local law enforcement to cooperate with federal immigration enforcement. Others include a) access to education for all children, without requiring proof of citizenship or lawful immigration status; b) sensitive locations type guidelines protecting areas around and in schools and c) freedom to learn in K-12 curriculum and instruction.¹⁷

Despite threats at the state level, *Plyler* remains the law of the land, providing K-12 educational access to all.¹⁸ However, in late 2025 and early 2026 a series of states, including Ohio, Tennessee, Texas and others, have attempted to ban undocumented students from public education. And efforts to ban diversity, equity, and inclusion topics from education curricula and professional development models, building on prior efforts such as Florida's K-12 policies, are being pushed by the Trump administration.¹⁹ Despite these active threats, recent research highlights the complexity of sanctuary, which is a term often applied to pro-immigrant policies in cities and states, or more anecdotally in schools or districts. Research shows how sanctuary policies, especially in cities and school districts, are non-binding but signal affirmation of and protection for immigrant communities. The term itself can provide a sense of affirmation, belonging and safety in the current moment; yet schools are vulnerable to the anti-immigrant actions of this administration.²⁰ On the one hand, it is critical for districts and state-level policy makers to stand up to Trump's anti-immigrant agenda as seen in Denver public schools, Chicago, and Los Angeles through lawsuits, or pro-active, protective legislation to ensure safety, and educational rights and access. This study shows the impacts of enforcement and the vulnerability of educators as they advocate in immigrant-serving schools and respond to the current administration's attacks on immigrant communities.

EDUCATORS' ROLES AS INSTITUTIONAL AGENTS FOR IMMIGRANT STUDENTS

School-based educators play a significant role in providing a safe space for immigrant students and their families. For example, research has found that school-based educators, such as social workers, can work as institutional brokers who strengthen trust between schools and immigrant families. Educators do this by building trust with immigrant students and their families and developing their own awareness and advocacy. Further, past research has shown that many teachers feel obligated to learn and understand how immigration policy and issues affect their immigrant students and their families in order to best serve them.²¹

Schools can also connect undocumented youth to resources and networks by collaborating with community-based organizations. While some immigrant students may face inadequate access to resources and skill-building opportunities in school, research has shown that school-based educators can effectively connect immigrant students with these resources and opportunities outside of the classroom. Overall, this research demonstrates that educators in schools serve immigrant students by providing them with the opportunities, resources, and networks (both inside and outside of school) they need to flourish academically and socially.²²

Educators' attitudes and actions toward diverse students affect how they respond individually and institutionally.²³ To date, research shows how educators' knowledge about the sociopolitical context shapes their response to the needs of immigrant students, and thus consistent training and professional development is needed to ensure that teachers and other critical school-based personnel are equipped to broker resources and advocate for immigrant students.²⁴ Schools remain vulnerable to the threats to sensitive locations and sanctuary policies. While sanctuary statements in districts, counties, or states are important to showing immigrant communities they are welcome, there is a lack of federal definition of such policies.²⁵

SIGNIFICANCE OF STUDY AND RESEARCH METHODS

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

This study provides empirical evidence in response to a sociopolitical landscape of anti-immigrant legislation and policies primarily at the state level. Our collaboration aims to provide research-based support to push back against efforts attacking immigrant youth and their families. The research in this report provides foundational knowledge that illustrates the impact of the current administration’s policies and increased immigration enforcement on immigrants and their children. It also demonstrates how individual educators are bearing the brunt of these actions, expanding their role in many communities, and how schools forge promising institutional responses are supporting immigrant students, families, and the larger school community.

RESEARCH METHODS

Employing a qualitative case study research design, I examined educators’ perceptions of the impact of immigration enforcement on immigrant youth and families in public schools across the United States.²⁶ Further, the present study explored institutional responses to supporting immigrant youth and families. I recruited current educators, including teachers, counselors, leaders, and newcomer coordinators, at school, district, and state-level educational agencies through personal and professional networks (Table 1). I use the term educator broadly in this report to protect the identities of those interviewed. In some states, there may be only one English-as-a-Second-Language coordinator in a district, so using the term “educator” is intended to keep the experiences of individuals protected. Along these lines, the major criteria for participating in this study is that educators interact with immigrant students and families, and their schools serve immigrant children, youth, and families.

CATEGORY	ROLES INCLUDED [SELF-IDENTIFIED BY PARTICIPANTS; CONTEXT VARIATION]
INSTRUCTIONAL	Bilingual or English-as-a-Second-Language teacher, English teacher, Spanish teacher, resource teacher
LEADERSHIP	Principal, assistant principal, director of special populations, supervisor
SUPPORT AND OPERATIONS	Parent liaison, outreach coordinator, social worker, project manager

The project involved interviews with 37 respondents across 14 states between January and April 2026. The participants ranged from having 1 to 20 years or more of experience in their current role or multiple roles. They were from racially or ethnically diverse backgrounds and worked in schools that served immigrant students at the elementary, middle, and high school level. As **Table 1** shows, participants served a range of roles in school, district, and state-level educational agencies. Interviews ranged from 45 to 75 minutes in length and took place in person and through Zoom. In some cases, I contacted individuals with follow-up questions or clarifications regarding the interviews.

- The background and experiences of educators.
- The demographics of their communities and schools.
- Their observations of the current political climate's effects on immigrant students and families.
- Their personal and professional experiences working with immigrant students.
- The impacts of increased immigration enforcement in their communities.

Data included over 50 hours of interviews from 37 participants, and artifacts from several to show how they are supporting immigrant students and families, e.g. policies, curriculum, or programs in their schools or districts. I used standard procedures for analyzing the data set, including writing memos, reflections, and responses in relation to the current scholarly research about how educators support immigrant students.²⁸ I include information about the sample and states represented.

FIGURE 1 PARTICIPANTS' STATES

○ = 1 INTERVIEW CONDUCTED AS OF 5/18/26 (N=37)

FINDINGS

This report shares findings from this national study of educators' experiences and perceptions of immigration enforcement on youth and families. The prevailing sentiment across the interviews is the need to document the stories of immigrant communities and the schools serving them, including the harms caused by immigration enforcement actions. Study participants highlight the importance of recording the impact of these policies to ensure that a historical and systemic record exists. One educator at the outset of the study said that during these high intensity moments of anti-immigrant enforcement practices, "We really need some kind of a record" alongside "systemic reflection" because "everything's a crisis," referring to how districts are grappling with the current socio-political climate. Educators noted that having a record of this experience of immigrant youth and families and the impact on all kids in schools is critical because educators are "not alone" in this work to provide safe, inclusive environments for kids.

This section reports key findings from the data, including:

- How educators, students, and families experience ICE in their communities.
- The psychological and traumatic impact of anti-immigrant policies and practices on immigrant children and families, and all kids in the school community.
- How individuals and institutions are responding to these impacts.
- How schools face threats to their role as safe spaces.

THE IMPACT OF ICE PRESENCE AND ACTIVITIES ON COMMUNITIES

Educators across the country have reported various levels of ICE presence and activities in their students' and families' communities. Across the interviews, educators noted the escalating presence of ICE, its daily disruption to kids, families, and schools, and the increased racial profiling that ICE agents engage in. For instance, educators commented that ICE has been "really bad" in recent months, infiltrating suburbs and areas where "no one's paying attention," such as trailer parks. Some educators noted activities such as "going door-to-door" and "hitting drive-throughs."

One New Jersey educator noted that parents have reported fears of being unable to pick up their children after simple errands, such as getting a McDonald's Happy Meal, due to heavy ICE presence in communities. Another educator noted additional broad impacts such as racial profiling and frequent visibility of ICE. For instance, the educator observes "blocks of SUVs" that appear to be "raiding all over the place" and notes that enforcement often involves "racial profiling."

Meanwhile, in an interview with an educator in Pennsylvania, through tears, she shared that she could see ICE vehicles lurking in the neighborhood. As she pointed to the window in the classroom where we were seated for the interview, she said, “You can see them. Out there, they are around. Kids see them and know.” An educator in North Carolina noted, “They [the community] didn’t used to be afraid. Now they don’t even go to the grocery....They’re all so scared, according to what my students say.” Multiple educators noted “doors being kicked in,” by ICE in some families’ homes. The broad visibility and disruptive actions of ICE reverberate across communities.

The impact of increased enforcement visibility broadly shows that fear is present within families, which leads to trauma, disruptions to daily life, and a dwindling educational success. According to a Colorado educator, parents shared that they were “not taking any chances” and keeping kids home instead of sending them to school. And, if kids are at school, they are sharing stories about ICE presence outside of the school. The same educator shared an interaction with kids: “I had a few kids that were standing next to the window, during lunch. I was just eating my lunch, looking at the view, and they were like, that’s ICE right out there. And I’m like. You sure? And they’re like, no, yes, that’s ICE because they’ve been around my street.”

In addition to the daily disruptions to school attendance and community fear, parents who want to send their kids to school are grappling with whether walking them to school or taking a bus is safe. Educators also shared that they see a major impact of this increased ICE presence in kids getting to school, if parents decide to let them go to school in the first place. One educator in Colorado explained that students who are outside the school boundary need help getting to and from the bus safely or access to a bus overall, especially since many parents don’t have access to a driver’s license due to their legal status. Similarly, an educator in Texas shared, “It’s kind of a concern or a fear that I have, really, around transportation for these kids. Most of them, the vast majority of them end up getting on a bus to come to school, and so, you know, that’s something I think about, is what happens when ICE is present, and there are kids at the bus stop, and you know, who protects them while they’re waiting for the bus?”

The principal, school office staff, and educators all shared how increased ICE presence is hurting their families and communities. Across the interviews, I heard stories of educators seeing an increase in requests from families about online school options, as families in California have reported fear of seeing ICE in their neighborhoods, or general increased presence in New York and Virginia, where ICE presence is near immigration courts. While the presence of ICE has demonstrably increased, the fear of ICE persists regardless of their visible presence, which I describe below, and is part of the legal and emotional violence this administration aims for.

ICE IMPACTS ON IMMIGRANT KIDS AND FAMILIES

Past research documents the psychological trauma of immigration enforcement on families and children. To date, studies show that enforcement presence and activity for children of immigrants and immigrants themselves causes fear and worry. Across the interviews, educators noted how anti-immigrant policies and the intensity and frequency of ICE in communities led families to feel stressed and anxious, and to express worry about their children’s well-being. Additionally, educators witnessed an increase in absenteeism and decrease in enrollment of immigrant children and children of immigrants. While this report shares examples from the data, these findings are interrelated and causal. In other words, stress, worry, and fear are interconnected. The prolonged trauma that is noted in the evidence will have short-term and long-term consequences for kids’ mental and physical health. Further, this trauma impacts all schools as children, regardless of background or immigration status, see disruptions to their schools. The emotional toll this administration’s actions are having on their teachers, leaders, and peers is persistent. Across the interviews, educators describe a level of terror that extends far beyond the moment of

an action, fundamentally altering a child's sense of safety. Educators across multiple states noted the “nighttime raids” in families’ homes as a central form of terrorizing communities. One educator in Pennsylvania explained, “We have had a lot of parents share recently doors being kicked in... in the middle of the night and their children have had trauma because of this.” This educator explained the emotional weight of the moment on families as an additive factor impacting psychological well-being. Observing kids in her elementary school, she said, “They are dealing with all of that [immigration stress] on top of all the daily things that they have to deal with here... it’s just a lot for a little person.”

This section details the impacts of enforcement on kids and families, including:

- constant worry and fear
- from worry and fear to trauma
- increased absenteeism and decreased enrollment
- the overall impacts on all students

CONSTANT WORRY AND FEAR

General worry, worry about getting to and from school, and worry about family separation or deportation is persistent in the data. One educator reflected: “Because they were so anxious and, like, terrified that they were gonna go home and realize their parents were missing. We would have kids who didn’t come to school....because their truancy day is 10 days, they would stay home with their families for 9 days and then come in on the 10th day, so truancy couldn’t get them, because they wouldn’t leave their families, and their parents would come up and be like, you have to go to school. It is physically safer for you to be here than to be at home, and they’re like, I’m not leaving you, what if I come home and you’re gone?”

Kids and families face immediate and long-term worries. According to a New York educator, “They face, you know, existential threat over their heads of, you know, facing changes in federal immigration policy.” Educators also noted that they worked hard to keep their schools as calm as possible due to the constant news and ICE sightings. One educator in Oklahoma shared that many families believe in the American Dream, but that is being compromised and general “safety” in the country has “started to turn.”

Within the day-to-day, kids, families, and educators worry about the “no-man’s land” of the student’s daily travel to and from school. Some kids walk to school, or travel by bus, and they worry about their safety or their parents’ safety if they walk them to school. A California educator noted that families are afraid to “congregate outside the school to wait, wait in the pickup line,” necessitating school responses and practices (described below) to alleviate the stress.

In addition to specific daily worries about traveling to or from school, kids worry about their parents and caregivers, especially in mixed legal status households, where children might have an undocumented parent. A Pennsylvania educator explained that “people are afraid to leave home to go to work. You know, sometimes the father goes to work while the mother stays home, because they’re, you know, they... there’s so much fear, and they want to make sure that if he gets picked up, that at least she’s there for the kids.” An educator in Texas shared similar stories of kids feeling “terrified” and coming to school “crying in the mornings that they didn’t want to leave their parents, because these are little kids, like, they’re scared that they’re not going to see them again,” which caused anxiety that directly impacts students and the learning environment.

Another educator shared that kids and families are in a constant state of worry. One educator reported, “I have kids all the time afraid to walk home from the bus. They’re afraid to walk to the grocery store. They’re afraid to get the mail. They can’t even go get their trash cans.... So that unmarked car is gonna pull up.... And then they’ll never see their dad again. Like, could you imagine living under that stress?” Parents in some communities were also afraid to attend school functions, or events, such as graduation, conferences, and other celebratory moments for their kids. This evidence shows the impacts of increased enforcement activities nationwide. Educators are witnessing the emotional toll that results from the frequency and intensity of immigration enforcement. While past research has documented many components of this phenomenon, i.e. racial profiling and mental health impacts on youth, the sheer volume of instances of ICE presence, and the number of families impacted directly or indirectly is alarming in the current moment.³⁰

FROM FEAR AND WORRY TO TRAUMA

Across the interviews, educators shared how many families they serve experienced significant trauma pre- and post-migration to the United States. Several educators across the country said that with the frequency of ICE surveillance and raids “kids are dealing with a lot.” A California educator noted how pre-migration grief exists, and the increased ICE presence and activity is “re-traumatizing of so many of our families.” In this example, the participant discussed how families escape persecution in their host countries, and encounters with ICE can be triggering. Another educator in California said, “I feel like this trauma or this constant fear is also increasing, like, you know, chronic absenteeism is happening across the nation, and we see that here too.” Several educators highlighted the differences in families’ experiences since Trump’s first administration. One California educator recalled, “There’s a lot of uncertainty under the Trump administration. The first one and the second one. I remember the first one, I was still in the classroom and coming in the day after, and students being like, like, what... like, what is gonna happen to my family? What is gonna happen to me? It was, like, very, like... Traumatic experience, being in the classroom and having to... basically answer questions constantly as laws were being changed, passed, and now this second administration, it’s now more violent, right?”

Several educators who work in the capacity of social workers or mental health professionals explained how significant it is in a child’s life to have to be in a state of prolonged stress. One explained, “And it’s the hardest thing, you know, anticipating the trauma, the separation, it can sometimes be more traumatizing than the actual thing, kind of like that emotional versus physical abuse, and I think that’s what I found most concerning, and I see this.”

Others talked about the cognitive impacts. One immigrant teacher shared, “You’re a baby. Your brain is not fully developed, you were not meant to live under the... and, like, maybe it’s because I lived under that constant state of duress.” Many educators also talked about how difficult focusing on academics is during times of heightened stress or anxiety. The trauma of family separation and deportation is also evident. Educators in Oklahoma, Texas, and New York all noted that students are returning or being deported to places they fled or are scared of in the Northern Triangle, or self-deporting, as noted in Pennsylvania and New York, and dealing with the “emotional toll” of that.

INCREASED ABSENTEEISM

Many educators have noted an increase in absenteeism due to heightened immigration enforcement. Several interviews discuss significant drops in enrollment and specific reasons for absenteeism related to the current political climate and immigration enforcement. For example, one administrator in a large district noted a dramatic decrease in the number of English Learner (EL) students. They stated, “We always have averaged around 15,000. We got just under 14,000 last year, and then now we’ve dropped to, you know, around 10 [thousand].”

In a rural Colorado district, an educator observed a lack of new immigrant students in the youngest grade levels, noted, “This year, we don’t have any, like, in kindergarten because of what’s been going on”. Connecting to the fear and worry documented above, educators highlighted that students are often absent or afraid to attend school because of the risk of enforcement actions during their commute. Several educators noticed difficulty engaging in or with schools. An educational leader Tennessee mentioned that their district stopped taking Title III funds for migrant students because “We’re not successful as a district in engaging with [these] families,” leading them to partner with community organizations that had better “mobility to go out and meet migrant families where they were in their spaces.”

Moreover, one principal in New York noted that his high school has experienced a drop in enrollment over the past few years (from a projected 300 students to the high 260s) due to federal immigration policies. Another principal in New York noted that while enrollment hasn’t dropped drastically, the student body includes a handful of long-term absences who are still registered with the school; these students miss school due to being forced to leave the country, and housing instability. One New York educator felt so strongly about the issue of absenteeism that she called the mayor’s office to share her concerns and demand the mayor take action. An educator in Colorado noted that while she usually serves about 30 newcomer students, this year she only has 17 students. The decrease, she attributed to “living in a town where immigration control has been very aggressive.” Additionally, she mentioned that some parents have opted to have their children attend school virtually, which other educators in Pennsylvania and New Jersey reported also.

Meanwhile other educators shared that they face “chronic absenteeism” with hundreds of kids absent, and parents are saying in teacher-parent phone calls, “I’m afraid to send my kid to school because of ICE.” Related to the fear of deportation, or self-deportation due to fear, kids share that immediate family members have been deported, and that often that impacts attendance. A California educator said: “They’re not coming to school, or they are just disengaged, because there are other things on their mind, and for some of our kids, they don’t... they don’t talk about it. They don’t know how to talk about it yet. And especially our little ones.” Other families disenroll if they decide to relocate or self-deport.

Finally, a constraint a social worker in California named in supporting immigrant youth and families is the way schools are funded in California, as it is based on attendance rather than enrollment, “So there’s this moment where our newcomer numbers are low, so they’re cutting newcomer programming that has taken decades [to build].” Similarly, a New York principal noted that it’s challenging to address a decrease in attendance, which impacts achievement in schools, in the current immigration climate. The many examples show the deep impact that ICE presence and deportation or threats of it are having on schools in the short-term. The impact on the learning environment for all kids and educators will also be chilling as the administration continues to disrupt the everyday work of schools, and the public education system.

IMPACTS ON ALL KIDS AND SYSTEMS

While the direct impact of enforcement actions is most acutely felt by immigrant families, the ripple effects extend to the entire school community, altering the climate for all children regardless of their national origin. This environment creates a profound “chilling effect” where the fear of family separation disrupts the psychological safety required for learning. For example, a student from an African immigrant family experienced a “full-blown panic attack” and became hysterical when she could not find her mother at home, immediately fearing her family “had been taken by ICE.” Such trauma is not isolated to the students; it deeply affects the educators who must manage this collective anxiety while navigating their own personal histories. One elementary teacher, who had crossed the border as a child, found that seeing enforcement outside his school triggered personal

trauma even as he worked to protect his students. Consequently, the presence of enforcement does not just target individuals; it degrades the cohesive, supportive atmosphere essential for the academic and social development of everyone.

One specific example of the impact on the entire school community was observed in Pennsylvania schools, where I have conducted research for the last three years. A group of middle school students wanted to civically engage and respond as U.S. citizen peers who were witnessing the distress of their immigrant classmates. I sat in the principal's office one day in February 2026 with district personnel when a seventh grader came into the office to express her concerns about her friends. This student and her U.S. citizen peers sought to engage in a peaceful protest against enforcement actions, because they felt it was “not fair” that their friends who “aren’t really from here” were “going through a lot.” While the students demonstrated a sophisticated civic awareness, identifying the situation as something “civically... important” and noting that “this isn’t about [them as non-immigrants],” the school leadership expressed a mix of pride and caution. The principal noted that the students were “more aware than some scholars would be in seventh grade,” yet the dialogue reflects the delicate balance leadership must strike when students want to “speak up.” Despite the students being inspired by “walkouts or protests” seen on TikTok and in neighboring districts, district leadership often remains “nervous” about the attention such demonstrations might draw to a sensitive local issue. This tension highlights how enforcement affects the entire educational environment, turning the school into a site where students struggle to reconcile their civic values with the administrative desire for stability.

As schools grapple with how to respond to the needs of immigrant students and families, they also have to worry about creating a safe and effective learning environment for all kids. In Kentucky, I learned from district and school-based leaders how in the past several months student groups (such as Black student unions and Latino/a/x leadership groups) created door decorations of various countries, and international events to show that immigrants are welcome in the school. An educator noted that there is also a “mindfulness fair” where students have their own booths and incorporate mindfulness strategies from their countries and backgrounds. The principal notes the existence of “different events we have throughout the school. Just like we have ‘welcome’ across the front of the building in seven different languages. I mean, even before you walk in, you’re welcomed.” In addition, a high school in North Carolina has a teacher-led, student-run club named “Destination of Success” which celebrates Latino culture, provides bilingual college planning advice, post-secondary education information, and contact information for immigration lawyers. A teacher reported that this club has been a “been a really steady presence... that just seeped into the school’s DNA.” In California, one educator shared how social justice clubs have also been trained in Know Your Rights and creating family preparedness plans with the intent of disseminating this knowledge to more students across the school. There is evidence of widespread student-led support to counteract the effects of anti-immigrant sentiments and enforcement actions, and make all students feel welcomed.

ENFORCEMENT IMPACTS ON EDUCATORS (INDIVIDUAL)

NAVIGATING AN EVOLVING IMMIGRATION LANDSCAPE

The impacts on educators are felt across the country. Educators report all of the ways they are experiencing stress, worry for their students, and how they are responding and mobilizing to support kids and families. The emotional toll and expanded role of educators reverberated across interviews.

Educators have absorbed the emotional impact of intersecting socio-political forces within school settings. The Trump administration’s reversal of President Biden’s “Protected Areas” policy shifts the role

of schools as protected spaces. Educators in this study demonstrate how they exist as central figures in providing students with emotional support, especially when social workers or counselors are unavailable. However, the intensification of ICE presence in and around school communities has contributed to the emotional weight and impact on educators who navigate complex realities alongside their students. In this study, educators express their support for students academically, emotionally, and logistically as students grapple with rapidly changing immigration policies and attacks. Educators describe the emotional toll they experience and witness while supporting students who face acute uncertainty, anxiety, and trauma.

Educators describe the tensions and violence of increased immigration raids permeating their daily lives. An educator in California shared that her students ask her, “What is gonna happen to my family? What is gonna happen to me?” Furthermore, an educator in Pennsylvania described the intensity of emotions students feel as a result of their fear. This educator described a student who had a panic attack because her mom wasn’t home when she returned (her mom was at the grocery store). When worry and uncertainty linger, students struggle to meaningfully engage with academic work.

The increased immigration attack contributes to the undue burden on teachers. For example, the educator from California quoted above noted, “Teachers are definitely burnt out because they don’t know how to navigate what’s happening outside, but then also trying to...keep up with standards and testing... we are expected to continue doing the day-by-day work, but then we understand that our students and parents are traumatized, and that shows up.” Educators balance continuing their daily teaching responsibilities with constantly evolving policies that have implications for student futures and emotional states. A teacher in Texas echoes a similar sentiment, highlighting how her school has to balance “competing issues,” with academics prioritized over supporting immigrant students.

TEACHERS’ ACTIONS

Despite the documented challenges that educators experience in the current anti-immigrant climate, this report highlights their approaches to help immigrant students and families navigate a complex and evolving legal landscape. This includes connecting families to legal advice, brokering critical resources, serving as a space for support, educating themselves, and making introductions to community organizations or external resources to assist families. As one educator from Oklahoma shared, “No matter what we do, I always tell all the teachers, like, you know, you’re a civil rights advocate...it’s not simply teaching.”

First, some educators report supporting families in learning and navigating their rights. One principal from New York noted, “we have families who are getting into legal trouble....we’ve.... gotten more educated as a staff around how do you support families who are kind of getting into those circumstances and what to expect.” In this principal’s school, members of the school community have learned how to connect families to legal aid. This individual underscored that “Helping [immigrant families] to navigate the criminal justice system is not something that, you know, I spend a lot of time getting trained on...in my teacher or my school administration roles, but it’s something that I’ve come to understand is necessary.” Another New York educator observed, “Obviously, we are trying as hard as we can to provide supports when a student has an asylum appointment, or an immigration appointment...you know, we’re using the resources we have.”

Other educators play the critical role of providing information to families. An educator from New Jersey shared how “parents feel like they can talk to me if they have any questions about immigration.” She added that she has a “resource binder to help my students” which is “about everything related to immigration and how to help” her students. This example highlights how educators serve as important brokers of information for immigrant families. As an educator from Pennsylvania reflected, “We’re trying

to help families as much as possible navigate what they need to navigate, whether that be to stay, if it's the issue dealing with someone being deported and make them feel comfortable, open lines of communication, also trying to support just with meeting daily needs. If you're needing to meet some of those daily needs.... we have like a backpack program that can send food home, if need be, holiday assistance." Support and assistance thus take many forms, from connecting families with legal services to assisting with access to food and ensuring that families can meet their daily needs.

Educators interviewed in this report also shared how they have filled in their own knowledge gaps to better support their communities. An educator from New Jersey stated, "I make sure that I'm extremely educated on what's going on, because it affects my students. It affects my community where I live." Examples such as this capture how educators often fill in institutional and information gaps when the school or local organizations fail or are unable to do so. Finally, educators document the importance of serving as a safe space for students.

KEEPING SCHOOLS AS SAFE SPACES AND EXPANDING ROLES (INSTITUTIONAL)

Research, law, and policy confirm that K-12 schools are protected spaces in the sense that children, regardless of immigration status, can access a free public K-12 education under *Plyler*.³¹ And in many instances parents feel that it is safer to send their kids to school despite threats of immigration enforcement in many communities. Building on the previous themes, the following sections describe how schools navigate the tension between serving as both safe havens and, in recent times, sites of surveillance, and the specific, community-centered ways they are responding to this moment.

THE PARADOX OF THE SCHOOL AS A SAFE SPACE

Schools strive to serve as safe spaces, or what participants refer to as "sanctuaries" that are "vulnerable", due to the position that increased immigration enforcement and the resulting climate of fear put them in. Educators in this study are proactively establishing "sanctuary teams" and clear, urgent protocols — such as lockdown procedures and perimeter sweeps at dismissal — to ensure that, if enforcement agents appear, there is a coordinated response among staff to protect students. As one California educator shared, "I kind of had to, like, just jump in," referring to having to resolve the situation. This proactive stance is often born from a "united sense of mission" where staff are "unabashedly" committed to protecting families. Still, the sanctuary status within schools remains fragile as ICE continues to have surveillance and as states across the country are directly attacking *Plyler*. While many districts have formal policies stating they "do not allow ICE in the buildings," the atmosphere is often colored by a "disturbing" quiet that can mask a lack of consistent, updated legal knowledge.

PRIORITIZING WELCOMING CLIMATES AND RELATIONSHIPS

For educators and school leaders, maintaining a welcoming climate is not merely an administrative goal but a foundational priority that directly counters the vulnerable position community members are put in due to hostile enforcement actions. This commitment begins with the physical and social environment, where schools prioritize a "safe and welcoming environment for kids to come to" by normalizing conversations around immigration rather than treating it as a "taboo subject." To achieve

this, leaders have integrated “informational signage” in public spaces to foster a sense of belonging and visibility. Furthermore, this welcoming posture requires a fundamental shift in the school’s identity; it cannot be viewed “strictly as an academic institution” but must instead serve as a space where students are given the “space and time that they need to learn” amidst external pressures. This environment is sustained by a philosophy that “leverages the diversity” of students’ languages and cultures as positive assets rather than obstacles. Ultimately, the success of these welcoming climates relies on the school’s role as a trusted sanctuary; families continue to view school as a “safe place to be” because leaders have been able to steadfastly maintain the boundary that enforcement agents “are not allowed to come in.”

Several interviewees discussed the importance of thinking about relational trust and connections with families. A Colorado educator shared that “trying to build long-term relationships” is central to their model, as is “this idea that true liberation comes from us being connected, collective, and continued.” Another California educator shares the importance of building relationships “right away,” and ensuring a welcoming climate is important from when a child is enrolled, and that the parents have a point person to touch base with.” A few of the educators in the study identified as immigrants, and they felt an additional weight of ensuring their relationships with students and families were strong.

UNIQUE AND HOLISTIC RESPONSES IN THE CURRENT MOMENT

In response to these challenges and individual educators’ strategies and approaches, schools are adopting holistic, “trauma-responsive” models that extend far beyond traditional academics to meet immediate survival and emotional needs. Schools are transforming into community hubs, opening on evenings and Saturdays to provide workshops on “Know Your Rights” and family preparedness planning. In some cases, schools are empowering students to lead this work through assemblies “where the students themselves will present the information to their peers.” Beyond legal advocacy, these institutions are filling critical gaps in social services by managing “pop-up food banks,” clothing closets for students in temporary housing, and providing basic necessities like “coats and certain size underwear.”

A central component of this response is the creation of safe physical and emotional spaces, such as “Our Space,” a resource room where students in temporary housing can get a hot meal and wait in safety after hours. Educators, many of whom were immigrants themselves, prioritize relationship-building to ensure that schools are not seen as intimidating “authority figures” but as part of welcoming environments. By focusing on an “asset-based mindset” that highlights the value immigrants bring to society, these schools work to counter the prevailing culture of fear with a model of “true liberation” that is “connected, collective, and continued.”

Many educators in the study shared several strategies to address the impacts of ICE and anti-immigrant policies. First, several schools formalized “sanctuary teams,” developing protocols to ensure communication and outreach with families in the event of ICE interactions or deportation. They also helped with family preparedness plans in California; in New York and Texas, they hosted assemblies that allowed families to access resources and information about rights, and conducted trainings for teachers, staff, and front office staff, and developed partnerships with school board members and leadership teams in Virginia. This comprehensive support is ideal to shield families from harm in the current moment, noted by a leader in New York. In Texas, some districts trained principals and leaders in protocols for protecting children if ICE visits a school. An educator noted: “We learned, the first thing that they have to do is get in touch with certain people at the district level. They’re not to permit anyone inside the school, and it’s just the way that they would do with any kind of other police entity that is wanting to speak with a student, right?” Similarly, in Colorado,

educators talked about “consistent messaging” for families and that their district encouraged families to know their rights. Some states with more capacity encourage proactive actions. These systemic and holistic supports were crucial for protecting families with consistent communication and procedures.

Second, educators are employing a myriad of strategies to protect kids and families. Many schools, like the example in Pennsylvania where kids were lined up and walked to their families’ or caregivers’ cars for school pickup, are taking more precautions. This is especially true in states like Virginia, Oklahoma, Tennessee, and Texas, where there is more precarity of state policies and politics. An educator shared, “At dismissal, my staff do a perimeter sweep to make sure all is clear.” In addition to general safety, schools and educators are mobilized to gather and distribute food, clothes, and other necessities for families.

DISCUSSION: SYNTHESIS OF INSTITUTIONAL RESPONSES, CHALLENGES, AND NEXT STEPS FOR SCHOOLS

As noted above, individual and institutional responses to immigration enforcement have been underway for months. Across the data, emotional safety, well-being, and belonging within welcoming climates of schools are a key priority. Individual educators have also gone beyond their role to support families in these moments of heightened immigration enforcement and surveillance. In the current moment, schools are serving in many ways as ad hoc social safety nets and have abandoned the identity of being “strictly an academic institution,” an educator explained.

Schools have shifted their operational models to become frontline providers of social and legal aid due to the erosion of public and social services and the chilling effects of anti-immigrant policies and immigration enforcement. First, schools are partnering with outside organizations to host essential services, such as “power of attorney clinics,” to help families prepare for potential separation. Second, they provide necessities. Staff are managing “pop-up food banks” and clothing banks to provide “toiletries, books, backpacks, [and] supplies” to students in temporary housing. Third, they are expanding their partnerships in the community. Still, in many instances, schools are underfunded or face chronic issues in providing academic and social emotional resources, which has long been a feature in K-12 public schools where immigrants often attend.

Educators rely heavily on external support and continue to explore strategies for expanding or engaging with community-based organizations. A particular need that arose from this study is the need for legal services or connections to legal aid, given the support families need related to immigration proceedings. One New York principal shared that their families need legal services, but as a school they do not always have access to this, so sometimes schools partner with external agencies. Still, she notes that her school provides legal support by hosting clinics and other services.

Similarly, another principal in New York notes that their school-level supports include extended-day programming, hosting remote parent meetings, and community school partnerships. The latter part (partnership, which is a grant-funded program housed under the district) allows the school to connect families with other organizations that provide resources, such as community resource fairs and legal representation. One social worker in New York mentioned that these days, she is working a lot to “build partnerships with different organizations so that we can connect our students to lawyers.” This area of external support is critical. Similarly, an educator in Texas emphasized the importance of partnering with an immigrant-serving organization to support families with legal aid and, more

generally, meet their immediate needs. In one example, when a student's uncle was detained, she stated that through the partnership with the organization, "[the district] got in touch with the mom, and... [the educator] was able to, connect with [the family] as well, so that [the school] could, offer [the family] some gift cards to the local grocery store... and see if they needed a consultation with the attorney that is at [the organization]." External programs underscore the role that community members can play in expressing solidarity with immigrant students and families.

While a coordinated effort operates in many communities, relying on schools or individual educators to provide the depth and breadth of support that immigrant families need is not a policy solution. A recurring sentiment across the interviews is that schools cannot adequately support immigrant families in isolation, even if they are trying, and it is even more difficult in states with anti-immigrant laws, agreements between local law enforcement and immigration enforcement, or less expansive social networks. In several interviews, I learned about the limited network of external partners in places like rural Pennsylvania, Oklahoma, and North Carolina. While dense urban centers might have more networks or opportunities for partnerships, several educators in California, New York, and Texas pointed to the administrative burdens on schools that must apply for resources or funding to which they are eligible.

IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS TO SUPPORT SCHOOLS

Based on this research, educators are filling immediate gaps in survival needs while simultaneously calling for more robust, systemic support in legal and policy domains. Despite the tireless efforts of school staff, significant gaps remain that require external intervention and more stable resources:

- First, educators report a critical need for expanded legal services.
- Second, there is a specific need for experts, such as university-based researchers that partner with school districts, who can keep up with "fluctuating laws," as some current workshops rely on community members who may not have the most up-to-date or accurate legal information.
- Third, schools are facing restrictions on resource allocation, such as new barriers to reimbursing teachers for supplies.
- Fourth, there is an ongoing need for organizations to help school districts stay informed and create "policies to protect students" rather than simply reacting to crises. This has started across the country at district levels, in Chicago, Denver, and Los Angeles public schools, and at the state level with examples such as Illinois Safe Schools and Connecticut, Maine, New Jersey, Oregon and Virginia passing state laws to protect educational rights for immigrant students.

In the face of the influx of state policies, state and district level groups ought to continue to be proactive to protect immigrant students and families.

CONCLUSION

Many of the educators in this study were working in schools during the first Trump administration. I heard countless times how much more acute the current stress is on educational systems and the families they serve. Physical and emotional walls persist in many communities, whether it is ICE raiding homes where kids are sleeping under the care of their parents, or at bus stops where families try to manifest their hopes for a better life in the United States by sending their children to public schools.

Yet, they are met with “fearmongering,” bureaucratic neglect, and hyper-surveillance.³² The chilling effects of the threats to educational and social safe nets are evident, and well-documented. This report contributes to the knowledge of the current impacts of enforcement on educational systems, educators, and immigrant children and families. Kids’ futures are at stake, and the emotional toll and trauma-inducing policy approach is impacting all kids and schools.

This report offers individual and institutional responses to the current anti-immigrant policy and enforcement climate. The responses educators nationwide provided include strategies that other educators could engage in if there are not systemic, or district or board-wide resolutions or state laws in place to protect immigrant students. Throughout the participants’ responses, I learned of the courageous efforts of educators to maintain safety and belonging in schools, and to offer grassroots-level support for immigrant students in their schools.

A key takeaway is that talking to educators, and sharing research from this study provided a sense of solidarity in a moment where educators felt alone. Their courage and actions to support immigrant students and families, often beyond their instructional or pedagogical role, provided meaning and a sense of stability as communities are under threat. Listening to the needs of students and families is critical in this moment. The research in this report documents the harm of the current anti-immigrant climate, and the systemic and strategic empathy that educators and schools are showcasing in response.

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