

POLICY ISSUE BRIEF: IMMIGRATION SUPPORT FOR SCHOOL LEADERS

Issue at a Glance

Researchers estimate that there are over 1 million undocumented children and youth living in the United States today. In 1982, the U.S. Supreme Court found in *Plyer vs. Doe* that because undocumented children are illegally in the U.S. through no fault of their own, they are entitled to the same K–12 educational opportunities that states provide to children who are citizens or legal residents. For this reason, U.S. public schools may not deny or discourage enrollment to any school-age children, regardless of their immigration status. In addition, these students are eligible for free and reduced-price meals, special education services, and school-sponsored events and activities.

Federal law does not require school districts or their employees to report undocumented students to immigration authorities, and for decades, schools have been considered “sensitive areas” protected from immigration enforcement action. However, in early 2025, the Trump administration rescinded these longstanding guidelines, and Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) officials have detained students and parents on and around school grounds. This has sparked significant fear among immigrant communities and has led to widespread consequences, including many students who are simply choosing to no longer attend school. Some school districts have experienced rates of absenteeism as high as 40% following local immigration raids.

School leaders and teachers are facing an immense challenge in attempting to help students maintain a normal school routine while dealing with the aftermath of immigration enforcement that affects their families. Recent research from the University of California, Riverside confirms that the fear among immigrant parents and students has resulted in mental health problems that affect students’ academic performance.

Even when undocumented and immigrant students attend school, they face a variety of challenges impacting their capacity to learn that other students may not typically face. English proficiency can be a major barrier for these students, as 44% of undocumented students over the age of five speak English “not well” or “not at all.” Other factors that affect these students are fear and concern for them or their families due to a rise in anti-immigrant sentiment. This can often lead to increased bullying from inside the school.

Additionally, according to the Migration Policy Institute’s most recent data, only 18% of undocumented citizens 25 years or older have received a high school equivalent degree. These individuals also frequently encounter challenges when applying for college or employment. The College Board estimates that only 5% to 10% of undocumented students attend college. Although federal law does not prohibit undocumented students from attending U.S. colleges or universities, most states do not allow them to pay in-state tuition, and they are not eligible for most federal loans, financial aid, and scholarships.

National Principals Association Position

- National Principals Association believes that every child is entitled to an excellent public school education regardless of their immigration status.
- National Principals Association believes that all students should graduate from high school with the skills to help them succeed in postsecondary education and the workplace.
- The federal government should return to the previous longstanding policy that designated schools and associated areas (i.e., bus stops, extracurricular event sites) as “sensitive areas” where immigration enforcement actions are prohibited.
- National Principals Association’s members-only [Resource Library](#) offers information and resources on immigration issues to support school leaders.
- National Principals Association has separate policy issue briefs on [Culturally Responsive Schools](#), [Trauma-Informed Schools](#), [Mental Health in Schools](#), and [School Safety](#) that provide additional recommendations and resources.

Recommendations for Federal Policymakers

- Enact into law the previous federal guidance that designates schools as “sensitive areas” where federal immigration enforcement actions are prohibited.
- Require immigration agents and local law enforcement agencies to consult with school officials to mitigate the negative impact of impending immigration raids on children.
- Clarify federal policy regarding undocumented students’ attendance at U.S. colleges and universities.
- Encourage states to charge in-state tuition for undocumented students.
- Enact legislation to help young undocumented immigrants—who were brought to the country illegally by their parents—attain U.S. citizenship and encourage them to do so.
- Increase federal support for programs that provide benefits to undocumented students’ learning capacity, such as initiatives for English language learners.
- Oppose harmful federal policies or rules that place unnecessary burdens on undocumented students or their families that can affect a student’s ability to focus and learn.

Recommendations for State Policymakers

- Establish guidelines for district policy regarding what is acceptable and required as evidence that a student resides in a district and is therefore eligible for public school enrollment.
- Ensure undocumented students are eligible for in-state tuition at postsecondary institutions.
- Encourage districts to enact policies that promote positive interaction between undocumented immigrants and law enforcement, while also protecting the status of said immigrants from persecution.
- Implement safe-zone policies at schools.

Recommendations for District Leaders

- Provide school personnel with information and training on the rights of students who are undocumented and other immigration-related issues and policies.
- Set clear policies concerning the individuals who are allowed to be on school grounds and under what circumstances.
- Establish policies and operating procedures to protect the safety of students and the information contained in their education records, including immigration status or place of birth.
- Respond to immigration agents' request for data from a student's education records by requiring a subpoena or warrant and consulting the school district's attorney before releasing any information.
- Collect information about all parents' and guardians' employers so that school leaders can share information with children in case their parent or guardian is affected at the site of immigration raids or in the case of other emergencies.
- In the event of a workplace immigration raid in the district, implement a plan to protect the safety of all immigrant students and brief principals and other school staff about their roles in ensuring child well-being, coordinate with churches and community organizations to ensure that each student has adult supervision at home, and assure parents that schools will be a safe haven for their children.
- Develop operational procedures to protect students, collaborating with community agencies and organizations to ensure that schools will be safe havens for their children.
- Provide school faculty with information and guidance on any changes to state immigration law that could impact undocumented students.

Recommendations for School Leaders

- Stay informed of and comply with your state's laws on undocumented students and related changes to state or district policies.
- Require students seeking enrollment to provide no more than the requisite documentation to support public school enrollment.
- If an undocumented student discloses their immigration status, encourage the student to seek legal assistance immediately and connect the student with a reputable legal service agency if requested.
- Assist undocumented students as they navigate the immigration process by helping them prepare the appropriate documents and supporting their attendance at immigration-related appointments.
- When faced with a legal request by an immigration agent to interview a student, seek guidance from the school district's attorney and officials, remind the student being interviewed that they are free to refuse to answer questions, and follow standard procedures and policy regarding notification of the student's parent or guardian.
- In the event of student displacement as a result of an immigration raid, ensure that each child knows what to do and whom to call if there is no adult supervision at home and communicate directly with families to assure them that their children will continue to be safe at school, during off-campus school activities, and on school buses.

POLICY ISSUE BRIEF: IMMIGRATION SUPPORT FOR SCHOOL LEADERS

- Offer school counseling and mental health services to children of parents who have been detained or deported in an immigration raid.
- Provide mental health and counseling supports in schools for students that are emotionally or mentally impacted by immigration raids.
- Ensure that students are exposed to learning experiences that focus on developing college aspirations and preparing students for entry into higher education to help all students have access to higher education.
- Provide information about scholarships and other financial aid that may be available to undocumented students.
- Conduct training for staff to notice signs of bullying targeting undocumented students and provide supports for students who have been the victims of harassment.