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KEY FACTS

- Anti-immigrant sentiment and fear of immigration enforcement in the United States negatively impact academic performance among immigrant students.
- School social workers are uniquely placed to connect families to resources, cultivate a more welcoming climate in schools, and provide trauma-informed interventions for immigrant students.
- Many school social workers advocate for immigrant students and take action to connect with their families, develop trust, and be a bridge between schools and families.

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Knocking Down Barriers to Inclusion: School Social Workers, Advocacy, and Equity for Immigrant Students

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Immigration Initiative at Harvard Policy Brief 8.



Introduction

Immigrant students face numerous barriers to equity in public K-12 schools. Extensive research has enhanced our understanding of these barriers, their impact on immigrant children, and how educators and administrators address them. [1] Schools are complex organizations with a range of personnel who ideally work together inside and outside of classrooms to ensure that all students have access to quality education. A complete picture of how schools are supporting immigrant students—and why, at times, they may fall short—must therefore explore how all school-based actors contribute to advancing equity. This issue brief summarizes findings from a study of school social workers to explain their role and contribution in this collective effort.

Immigration, Students and Educational Equity

Just as immigrant students represent extraordinary cultural, racial, and socioeconomic diversity, the barriers they encounter to educational access and quality vary widely. Some immigrant students have experienced pre-migration trauma in their country of origin or human

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rights abuses while in transit, [2] and many are the targets of xenophobic and racist rhetoric. Those who are undocumented or from mixed-status families live under constant threat of deportation or family separation due to heightened immigration enforcement, workplace raids, and restrictive policies. [3] The adverse effects of this climate have led to increased rates of depression, anxiety, and traumatic stress among immigrant children which have negatively impacted their school performance, attendance, concentration, and behavior. [4] Wary and fearful, many immigrant families are hesitant to seek help, even if they are eligible for services or assistance.

These factors can widen the gulf between schools and immigrant students (and their families), making it difficult for educators to address—or even understand—the array of obstacles immigrant students experience in the classroom. Covid-19 has only increased these existing challenges and inequities due to a range of risk factors such as a higher incidence of poverty, overrepresentation of parents in jobs that do not allow for social distancing, limited access to resources, and language barriers. [5]

Despite these challenges, local schools are often one of the few mainstream institutions with which immigrants have routine contact. If schools can remove barriers to equity for immigrant students within the building, they may also be able to develop trust with immigrant parents and connect them to resources and services in the community. These resources and connections cannot eliminate the numerous and complex obstacles linked to anti-immigrant sentiment, discrimination, and legal status, but they can lessen their impact. The problem is that while educators agree that schools need to improve community outreach to provide immigrant families with more information and support, most schools do not know how to do so. [6]

Understanding the Role of School Social Workers

There are an estimated 8,500 school social workers in the United States. School social workers are mental health professionals with specialized training in school-based practice who provide support to students, parents, teachers, and administrators in a variety of capacities, including implementation of interventions and programs, ensuring the social-emotional health of students, positively influencing school climate, and cultivating community supports. Federal legislation mandates a role for school social workers in serving children with disabilities [7] and states determine certification and degree requirements. [8] However, despite this federal and state recognition of their role in schools, district funding for their positions is uneven and when schools face budget challenges they are often among the first to be cut. [9]

“ During this pandemic I have families struggling to get to a meal distribution site because they don't have transportation or have lost the jobs they held. ”

Social workers contribute to the educational mission of the school by addressing barriers to learning such as mental health or attendance, providing consultation and training to teachers, and advocating for students and families. [10] They attend Individualized Educational Plan (IEP) meetings, help organize informational events for parents, and often provide services for the student's entire family—even in the home if necessary. School social workers are trained to see and respond to student concerns from a systemic perspective which accounts for family and community context and school climate issues. They connect students and families to the resources and services they need, both in the school and in the community, and advocate for systemic changes at the school level that increase access and equity.

Given their role, school social workers in immigrant-serving schools provide a valuable and distinct perspective on the barriers to equity experienced by immigrant students. Moreover, a better understanding of what school social workers do to support immigrant students provides additional insights into how and to what extent these barriers are being addressed.

Methodology

Data for this report come from a mixed-methods study of school social workers. We administered an online survey of school social workers (N=515) from April – June 2020 and conducted follow-up interviews with a subsample of 30 respondents from October 2020 – February 2021. The survey instrument included questions about the characteristics of immigrant students in the respondent's school, the barriers these students experience, and what school social workers do to intervene. The majority of the survey consists of close-coded questions, but several open-ended questions asked respondents to comment on issues such as trust, the impact of immigration enforcement, and school climate.

There is no existing database of school social workers, but many are members of their local and national school social work associations. With the permission of these associations, we invited members to participate in the study. To avoid sampling exclusively on association member roles, we also contacted 1,500 school social workers in schools located in unified school districts where immigrant residents represented at least 30% of the total population (ACS 2014-2018). To be eligible, participants

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needed to be practicing school social workers in schools that had immigrant students, which we define broadly as the children of immigrant parents. This includes both foreign-born students and native-born students with at least one foreign-born parent. [11]

A total of 515 school social workers participated in the survey, representing schools in 39 different states. Many were from traditional immigrant ‘gateways’ such as Illinois (8%), Florida (12%), and New York (12%), but a significant percentage were from states in the South and Southeast (34%) that historically have not had large immigrant populations. Just under half (47%) work in urban schools, 39% are in the suburbs, and 15% are employed by schools in small towns or rural areas. Latinx school social workers represent 29% of respondents, 13% are Black, and 15% identify as immigrants. On average, approximately 35% of the students in their schools were immigrants and respondents estimated that 21% of their school’s immigrant students were undocumented. Nearly all respondents (92%) indicated that at least some immigrant students in their school had recently arrived in the U.S. (within the last 5 years).

Brokering Equity

Our findings suggest that school social workers can be important catalysts who strengthen trust between schools and immigrant families. As advocates, school social workers help to improve ties between immigrant students, their families, and educational resources. They are also an important bridge to community-based organizations, mental health providers, food pantries, and other local services. These brokering actions improve equity for immigrant students. Yet, while most school social workers are persistent in their attempts to support immigrant students and families, we also found that school social workers were often overburdened and under-resourced.

These are constraints that limit their advocacy efforts. These dynamics suggest three interrelated components that shape how school social workers improve equity for immigrant students: seeing barriers, building trust, and advocacy.

Addressing barriers in a climate of fear

Barriers to access and equity arise before immigrant students even enter the school building. The majority of respondents (73%) reported that immigrant newcomers encounter language barriers at the point of registration, but many also identified other problems during enrollment, including paying fees (22%), producing a birth certificate (40%), and proving residency (42%). Over one third of respondents (36%) indicated that newcomers at their school faced three or more of these barriers. These barriers are common for immigrant newcomers, as families may not have a copy of their child’s birth certificate from their country of origin, for example. Immigrant families that have only recently arrived may also lack certain proofs of residency, such as a utility bill or a housing lease (they may be paying bills with cash).

Over half (51%) of school social workers said they sometimes help immigrant students navigate the process of enrollment, and 18% did so frequently. While assisting with enrollment is not a typical role for school social workers generally, those working with immigrants understand how important it is to facilitate system navigation from enrollment to graduation. As a school social worker from Illinois commented, ‘being able to help new families through the registration and enrollment process in their native language makes a huge difference.’

“ **Immigration enforcement is part of our students’ daily lives.** ”

Other barriers to equity concern limited access to community-based supports. School social workers reported frequently referring immigrant families to legal service providers (47%), counseling services (55%), and medical clinics (53%). But making these referrals can be difficult, particularly if legal status is required for eligibility, if fees are too high, local services lack culturally responsive

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and bilingual services, or if families do not have insurance. Many respondents also reported that immigrant parents turn down services because they fear it may interfere with adjusting their status—a concern exacerbated by the Public Charge rule that went into effect in 2020. [12] In other cases, particularly in rural and suburban areas, services are far away or not available at all. Such barriers have been accentuated by the Covid-19 pandemic. A social worker from Florida commented,

‘During this pandemic I have families struggling to get to a meal distribution site because they don’t have transportation or have lost the jobs they held. They don’t qualify for stimulus funds or government assistance due to their legal status and can’t focus on ensuring their child participates in distance learning—or that their internet is paid when they don’t have food to eat.’

Building trust

Fear and uncertainty also affect direct services that school social workers offer immigrant students and their families. Building trust therefore requires persistent outreach and efforts on the part of school social workers. Under the Trump administration, such fears were reported to be especially high—the research included examples of families refusing to take sick children to the doctor for fear of deportation. A school social worker from Florida explained,

‘Unfortunately, there seems to be a lot of caution and hesitancy on the part of students and families to accept services from me as the school social worker...Even after I work with families several times, it takes multiple instances before trust is developed.’

School social workers also build trust with immigrant students and families by creating a more welcoming school climate. One way they do this is by serving as a bridge between immigrant parents to schools: 52% of respondents

“ There seems to be a lot of caution and hesitancy on the part of students and families to accept services from me as the school social worker. ”

met frequently with immigrant parents, and 41% frequently facilitated parent/teacher interactions. Establishing trust often requires time, patience, and actions that demonstrate that a school social worker is a potential advocate. A respondent from Massachusetts commented, ‘I’ve worked in the district for 10 years...I’ve learned and educated myself on immigration info so I can better help my students and their families navigate complicated systems. I am a fierce advocate when they are discriminated against and word of mouth travels. Students tell other students, siblings tell their sibling, and staff tell students they can trust social workers.’

Awareness and advocacy

To be an advocate for immigrant students, school social workers must have an awareness of the impact of immigration policy and enforcement on students’ lives. National and local policies constrain their work, and regardless of school-level support and region of the country, we found statistically significant relationships between school social worker advocacy and interventions, and their perceptions of immigration enforcement. Many respondents stated that they were constantly aware that immigration enforcement impacts their students: ‘immigration enforcement is part of our students’ daily lives,’ remarked a school social worker from Oklahoma.

School social workers who work with students directly impacted by deportations are prompted to accompany students and their families as they navigate the immigration system and become advocates. As one respondent from Florida said: ‘I have students with removal orders, which requires me to become an immigration advocate, becoming knowledgeable of the law and linking with local politicians.’ Yet even these social workers are often overworked in schools that are under-resourced, despite their attempts to advocate. As a result, many are triaging the needs of select students because they lack the time and resources to address systemic causes of educational inequity. Other school social workers in our sample seemed less aware of the particular needs of their immigrant students, or of the harmful impact that enforcement has on them and their families.

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Conclusion

Not all immigrant students have equitable access to the core elements of a quality education. School social workers are an important member of school-based support teams that can lower barriers to equity for immigrant students, build trust with their parents, and help distribute important resources and information. Yet, to be effective as advocates and resource brokers, schools need to provide them with the time, resources, and training that this kind of work requires. Ultimately, achieving equity for immigrant students will require structural changes and policy shifts that are beyond the influence of any one social worker or school district, but our research also affirms the important contribution of individual actors—like school social workers—to advance the educational opportunities and individual rights of immigrant students one school at a time. As such, we propose the following policy and practice recommendations, based on our research:

School social workers and educators should:

- Build alliances with community-based organizations to extend networks of support to immigrant families;
- Receive trainings on immigration policy, enforcement practices, and the trauma experienced by many immigrant students and their families;
- Develop trust with immigrant families to improve access to community resources;
- Engage in persistent outreach to strengthen trust with immigrant families.

Schools and districts should:

- Develop asset-based programs and systems to support immigrant families;
- Provide professional development and knowledge-sharing opportunities for all school personnel to improve awareness about the needs of immigrant students and their families.

Federal and state policy-makers should:

- Propose and enact legislation to support funding for school-based personnel such as school social workers, particularly in immigrant-serving schools;
- Encourage implementation of national standards for school social worker training that includes competencies relevant to serving immigrant students.

How to cite:

Rodriguez, S., Roth, B., Villarreal Sosa, L. (2021), “Knocking Down Barriers to Inclusion: School Social Workers, Advocacy, and Equity for Immigrant Students,” Immigration Initiative at Harvard Issue Brief Series no. 8, Cambridge MA: Harvard University.

This issue brief is also available in Spanish.

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Endnotes

1. Ee & Gándara (2020). *Under siege: The disturbing impact of immigration enforcement on the nation's schools*. Immigration Initiative at Harvard, Issue Brief Series.
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7. Education for All Handicapped Children Act (P.L. 94-142)

8. Shaffer, G. L. & Fisher, R. (2017). History of school social work. In L. Villarreal Sosa, T. Cox, & M. Alvarez. *Social Work in the School: National Perspectives on Practice in the Schools*. Oxford.

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10. Bye, L. Shepard, M., Partridge, J., & Alvarez, M. (2009). School social work outcomes: Perspectives of school social workers and administrators. *Children & Schools*, 31(2), 97-108. <https://doi.org/10.1093/cs/31.3.97>.

11. We are unable to generalize findings to the larger population of school social workers due to the limits of our sampling approach, and the nature of self-report data introduces potential bias. Despite these limitations, we are confident that this unique dataset provides a valuable window into how school social workers advance equity for immigrant students.

12. ILCR (2020) Public Charge: A Quick Legal Background. <https://www.ilrc.org/public-charge-quick-legal-background>

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ABOUT IIH

The Immigration Initiative at Harvard (IIH) was created to advance and promote interdisciplinary scholarship, original research, and intellectual exchange among stakeholders interested in immigration policy and immigrant communities. The IIH serves as a place of convening for scholars, students, and policy leaders working on issues of immigration—and a clearinghouse for rapid-response, non-partisan research and usable knowledge relevant to the media, policymakers, and community practitioners.



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