



HOW TO SUPPORT IMMIGRANT-ORIGIN STUDENTS

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Dear Colleagues,

Recent national discourse has placed immigration at the center of public debate and policy considerations. While much of the attention has been focused on adults, we must consider the profound implications for children growing up in immigrant families.

THE IMPORTANCE OF BELONGING

In the United States, immigrant-origin children make up the fastest-growing student population. Twenty-six percent of all children in this nation have an immigrant parent and a third of young adults have at least one immigrant parent. [See [Immigration Initiative at Harvard](#)].

The cascading effects of anti-immigrant rhetoric create multiple, interrelated threats to young people's sense of belonging in their schools and communities. Many immigrant-origin children live with the constant, gnawing fear that they, their parents, or other loved ones may be detained or deported at any moment, creating a persistent state of anxiety and uncertainty with [worrisome developmental implications](#). They may routinely experience rejection and exclusion based on how they look or sound, marking them as perpetual outsiders regardless of their citizenship status or length of time in the country. Research documented substantial increases in bullying following the

2016 election, particularly targeting students perceived as immigrants [See [Ee & Gandara, 2020](#); [Rogers, et al., 2019](#)].

Throughout their development, these young people must navigate complex identity challenges as they attempt to forge a sense of belonging in their new homeland while maintaining connections to their heritage culture. This already challenging developmental task is made exponentially more difficult in an environment of heightened anti-immigrant sentiments and exclusionary practices.

MOVING TO ACTION

Those whose responsibility it is to serve this significant population of young people may well be experiencing a range of emotions. Helplessness, however, is neither productive for change nor wellbeing.

Consider your sphere of influence and what you can do within that immediate sphere. Below I offer some suggestions on how you might support these children and youth within your spheres of influence.

FOR K-12 ADMINISTRATORS

CREATE WELCOMING SCHOOL ENVIRONMENTS

- Provide comprehensive training on [anti-bullying](#), [upstanding](#), and [cultural responsiveness](#) for all community members
- Display multilingual signage
- Create parent resource centers
- Represent diverse cultures in school materials
- Establish cultural celebration events

BUILD STRONG FAMILY-SCHOOL PARTNERSHIPS

- Hire bilingual family liaisons
- Establish regular communication channels
- Provide translation services
- Create flexible meeting times
- Partner with and connect students and families with tried, true, and vetted resources (e.g., faith-based spaces, community organizations, etc.).

DEVELOP COMPREHENSIVE ANTI-BULLYING PROTOCOLS SPECIFICALLY ADDRESSING ANTI-IMMIGRANT RHETORIC AND BIAS-BASED INCIDENTS

- Train staff to recognize and respond to subtle forms of anti-immigrant bullying
- Establish systematic monitoring and data collection procedures
- Conduct regular climate assessments to identify patterns of bias
- Implement clear reporting mechanisms
- Establish consistent consequences
- Create response teams

ESTABLISH TRAUMA-INFORMED SCHOOL-WIDE PRACTICES

- [Train all staff in trauma-informed approaches](#)
- Create safe spaces for students
- Implement restorative justice practices
- Develop crisis response protocols

DEVELOP PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMS

- Cultural competency training
- Immigration law basics
- Trauma-informed practices
- Anti-bias education
- Mental health first aid

FOR K-12 EDUCATORS

CREATE CULTURALLY SUSTAINING CLASSROOMS

- Incorporate students' cultural knowledge
- Validate diverse experiences
- Include diverse literature
- Incorporate multicultural and multilingual resources
- Display a butterfly to signal allyship

FOSTER POSITIVE STUDENT RELATIONSHIPS

- Build classroom community
- Monitor bullying and intervene immediately
- Implement peer mentoring
- Create buddy systems
- Use cooperative learning strategies

IMPLEMENT TRAUMA-INFORMED TEACHING PRACTICES

- Establish predictable routines
- Create calm-down spaces
- Use relationship-building strategies
- Recognize trauma triggers

MONITOR AND RESPOND TO STUDENT WELL-BEING

- Observe behavioral changes
- Track attendance patterns
- Maintain communication with families
- Connect with support services

FOR HIGHER EDUCATION ADMINISTRATORS AND EDUCATORS

ESTABLISH COMPREHENSIVE SUPPORT SYSTEMS

- Create immigrant student resource centers

- Have readily on hand referrals of vetted resources and make the information easily available (e.g., legal resources, mental health and social supports, etc.).
- Provide legal assistance referrals
- Develop emergency funding programs
- Offer mental health services
- Create peer support networks

IMPLEMENT INCLUSIVE POLICIES

- Establish comprehensive student safeguarding policies
- Create flexible documentation requirements
- Establish in-state tuition policies where possible
- Protect student privacy
- Provide alternative identification options

FOSTER CAMPUS CLIMATE INITIATIVES

- Recognize the isolation and challenges around trust this population may experience and develop proactive strategies to reach out to and support vulnerable students.
- Create safe spaces
- Support student organizations
- Provide training to staff around specialized needs

BUILD COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

- Connect with immigrant-serving organizations
- Develop service-learning opportunities
- Create internship programs
- Establish community advisory boards
- Partner with legal services

SUPPORT ACADEMIC SUCCESS

- Create targeted mentoring programs
- Offer academic coaching
- Develop study groups
- Provide writing and language support
- Create summer bridge programs

FOR RESEARCHERS

DOCUMENT THE IMPACT OF ANTI-IMMIGRANT RHETORIC AND POLICIES

- Study the developmental consequences of xenophobic environments
- Track mental health outcomes in immigrant-origin youth
- Examine the effects on academic performance and engagement
- Analyze the long-term implications for sense of belonging
- Measure the impact on civic participation

DEVELOP AND EVALUATE INTERVENTIONS

- Design trauma-informed educational practices
- Create culturally sustaining pedagogical approaches

- Test strategies for fostering belonging
- Evaluate anti-bullying programs
- Assess family engagement initiatives

ENGAGE IN PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH

- Design research questions in partnership with communities to address their self-identified needs and priorities
- Include youth voices in research design
- Collaborate with educators and schools
- Work with community organizations
- Involve families in research processes

DISSEMINATE FINDINGS STRATEGICALLY

- Translate research for multiple audiences
- Create policy briefs and recommendations
- Develop practitioner-friendly resources
- Share findings through multiple channels
- Counter misinformation with evidence

FOR POLICY MAKERS

FOSTER INCLUSIVE ENVIRONMENTS

- Develop anti-discrimination and anti-bullying policies
- Fund and monitor school climate initiatives that recognize immigrant students
- Create safe reporting mechanisms
- Establish accountability measures
- Fund belonging and inclusion training programs

PROTECT EDUCATIONAL ACCESS

- Maintain (or develop) school sanctuary policies
- Ensure enrollment regardless of status
- Preserve in-state tuition policies

INCREASE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES

- Fund trauma-informed training
- Support professional development
- Provide mental health services
- Invest in multilingual education and language support programs

STRENGTHEN SUPPORT SYSTEMS

- Create emergency assistance funds
- Establish legal support networks
- Develop crisis response protocols
- Fund community liaison positions
- Support wrap-around services

PROMOTE EVIDENCE-BASED POLICIES

- Use research to inform decisions
- Evaluate policy impacts
- Monitor implementation effectiveness
- Track educational outcomes
- Assess unintended consequences

GUIDING PRINCIPLES FOR THIS WORK

BE AN UPSTANDER, NOT A BYSTANDER

In these challenging times, we must actively engage in supporting our vulnerable students and families. This means speaking up decisively against discrimination as well as anti-immigrant rhetoric and practices when we encounter them, taking concrete steps to create safe and inclusive environments, and fostering spaces where all students feel protected and valued. Being an [upstander](#) requires courage, commitment, and consistent action to ensure our educational spaces remain havens of learning and growth for all students.

PRACTICE CULTURAL HUMILITY

Essential to supporting immigrant-origin students is recognizing the limitations of our own cultural knowledge and experience. Cultural humility requires us to approach our work with genuine openness, acknowledging what we don't know while carefully listening to community voices about their experiences, needs, and aspirations. This stance demands continuous learning and reflection as well as an understanding that cultural competence is not a destination but rather an ongoing journey of growth and understanding. Through this approach, we create spaces where authentic dialogue can flourish and where communities feel truly heard and valued.

LEARN WITH COMPASSIONATE CURIOSITY

At its core, compassionate curiosity combines empathetic awareness with genuine inquiry to create deeper understanding of immigrant-origin students and families. A first step is to learn as much as you can. You can do this by reading [IIH EdBriefs](#), and you can do this by listening. This approach invites us to move beyond our assumptions and by creating safe spaces for authentic sharing while maintaining awareness of their own cultural limitations. By acknowledging both the expertise of lived experience and the complexity of navigating multiple cultural contexts, we can better support and understand our students' experiences, their immigration journeys, and their bicultural worlds.

REMEMBER OUR SHARED FATE

This nation's foundation and continued vitality rest upon the dreams, travails, and contributions of immigrants throughout our history. Today's immigrants continue this legacy, strengthening our economy and enriching our society in countless ways. The children growing up in this moment will shape our collective future, making it imperative that we create environments where they can thrive and develop a strong sense of belonging. Their success is inextricably linked to our nation's future prosperity and social cohesion.

IN CLOSING

The children of immigrants—the majority of whom are U.S. citizens—are growing up here and now. Most will remain long after this challenging period passes. But what will these formative experiences mean for their sense of belonging? How will they learn to trust in a society that once rejected them?

The children of immigrants are OUR children. We must ask ourselves: If not us, who will stand up for these young people? If not now, when?

In solidarity,



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