



Policy Brief

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IMMIGRATION
INITIATIVE

School Climate Matters for Students of Immigrant-Origin: Why Including Immigrant Generations in School Climate Assessments is Critical

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Key Facts

- Students of immigrant-origin are the fastest-growing school population in the U.S., with 80% of Asian and 66% of Latine students having immigrant parents
- First-generation immigrant students report more negative perceptions of physical safety at school than their third-generation peers
- None of the 26 school climate surveys approved by the US Department of Education collect data on immigrant generation—as such they are invisible in school climate assessments
- Key characteristics of school climate (like positive relationships and sense of safety) relate to higher school belonging which in turn are linked to better academic as well as wellbeing outcomes for immigrant-origin students

Introduction

School climate has become a cornerstone of educational improvement efforts across the United States, with increasing recognition of its profound impact on student outcomes. Currently, 14 states incorporate school climate surveys in their accountability or reporting systems, reflecting a growing understanding that positive school environments are fundamental to effective learning and development.¹ Research consistently demonstrates that school climate quality influences school belonging,² academic achievement,³ and healthy developmental outcomes⁴ for all students.

However, a critical gap exists in these assessment practices. Despite students of immigrant-origin representing the fastest-growing school population in the United States—26% of all children have at least one immigrant parent⁵—most standardized school climate measures fail to include immigrant generation as a demographic variable.⁶ Of the 26 school climate surveys approved by the US Department of Education's Office of Safe and Supportive Schools, none ask participants whether they or their parents were born in another country.⁷

This oversight occurs against a backdrop of increasing xenophobia and anti-immigrant sentiment in the sociopolitical landscape. Recent policy proposals like Project 2025 explicitly demonize immigrants, referring to them as “illegal aliens” who “infiltrate” the U.S. and “commit crimes.”⁸ Schools have been stripped of their long-standing protections as “sensitive locations” for ICE enforcement.⁹ As deportation within school walls becomes a reality, school personnel report “panicked calls from parents, more empty desks in classrooms, and higher anxiety.”¹⁰ Qualitative as well survey evidence suggests that the negative animus from intensified media and political rhetoric along with escalated enforcement measures cascade into school settings with increases in derogatory comments directed at students of immigrant origin¹¹

as well as bullying.¹²

This policy brief outlines why students of immigrant origin may experience less optimal school climates and presents emerging evidence on how their experiences differ across generations.

What is School Climate and Why Does it Matter for Students of Immigrant-Origin?

School climate encompasses the collective experiences of all members within a school context, including the quality of interpersonal relationships, physical and psychological safety, teaching and learning practices, and physical environment conditions.¹³ This multi-dimensional construct has been established as a cornerstone of educational improvement efforts, with increasing recognition of its profound impact on an array of student outcomes.

Research consistently demonstrates that positive school climate is associated with improved student motivation and achievement,¹⁴ reduced achievement gaps,¹⁵ increased high school completion rates,¹⁶ and enhanced sense of belonging.¹⁷ School belonging—defined as the extent to which students feel valued, accepted, respected, included, and supported by others—plays a particularly critical role in mediating the relationship between school climate and student outcomes.¹⁸

Students who report stronger school belonging demonstrate greater academic engagement and motivation,¹⁹ improved academic performance,²⁰ and better psychological wellbeing.²¹ A longitudinal study found that students' sense of school belonging was significantly associated with students' intrinsic valuing of school and academic achievement across high school years.²² Conversely, social exclusion and unsafe learning environments have established negative effects on both academic and wellbeing outcomes.²³

Students of immigrant origin are

particularly vulnerable to experiencing negative school climates. Research indicates that first-generation immigrant students often report more negative perceptions of school physical safety than their third-generation peers,²⁴ consistent with studies finding heightened bullying victimization among newcomer students.²⁵ This vulnerability may stem from language barriers, cultural differences, and religious distinctions that can lead to exclusion and marginalization.²⁶ Additionally, institutional racism in schools can threaten the safety of immigrant students across multiple dimensions, including racial-cultural, academic, and social-emotional domains, further complicating their experiences of school safety.²⁷

The current sociopolitical context further exacerbates these challenges. Xenophobia, inflammatory speech, and exclusionary policies have proliferated in recent years²⁸ with evidence emerging that this distal ecological context is cascading into students of immigrant origin's proximal school contexts.²⁹ A national survey of more than 500 U.S. schools found that 60% of participating principals reported issues with negative comments directed towards immigrants in their schools.³⁰ Another survey of 3,600 U.S. educators found a particularly high number of bullying incidents toward immigrant students in schools with higher percentages of White students.³¹

For students of immigrant origin, schools play an especially important role in their trajectories of acculturation and identity formation.³² School climates may be particularly important in signaling social belonging for students of immigrant origin in their new settings.³³ This is concerning given that children from immigrant backgrounds often report experiencing a weaker sense of connectedness to their school community than students from non-immigrant backgrounds.³⁴

Despite the clear importance of school climate for students of

immigrant origin, a critical gap exists in assessment practices. Of the 26 school climate surveys approved by the US Department of Education’s Office of Safe and Supportive Schools, none ask participants whether they or their parents were born in another country.³⁵ This invisibility in data collection limits researchers’, practitioners’, and policymakers’ capacity to effectively understand and address the unique school climate experiences of students of immigrant-origin.³⁶ Without systematically gathering data on immigrant generation alongside other typically collected demographic variables, schools cannot identify which dimensions of school climate most matter for which students, nor can they develop targeted interventions to support all students in increasingly diverse educational environments.

METHODS

In 2022, IIH collaborated with [YouthTruth](#) and [Re-Imagining Migration](#) to develop demographic questions tapping into key identity markers for immigrant students based on decades of research and input from a nation-wide network of experts on immigrant education, as well as cognitive interviews with educators. These demographic questions were added to the YouthTruth’s standardized protocol to pilot in schools.

Data was collected from 2,706 students across 8 schools in five states (California, Colorado, Maryland, Massachusetts, and New Mexico). School context ranged from large cities to rural locations, with varying proportions of students of immigrant origin. The sample included students from diverse backgrounds, with 7% first-generation (foreign-born), 37% second-generation (born in the U.S. with foreign-born parents), and 56% third-plus generation students.

Students completed the surveys assessing their perceptions of school physical safety, teacher-student

relationships, school belonging, psychosocial wellbeing, academic motivation, and academic expectations. Structural equation modeling was used to examine relationships between the variables below with particular focus on the differences by immigrant generation. The model revealed an acceptable fit to the data.

KEY FINDINGS

First-Generation Students Report Less School Safety

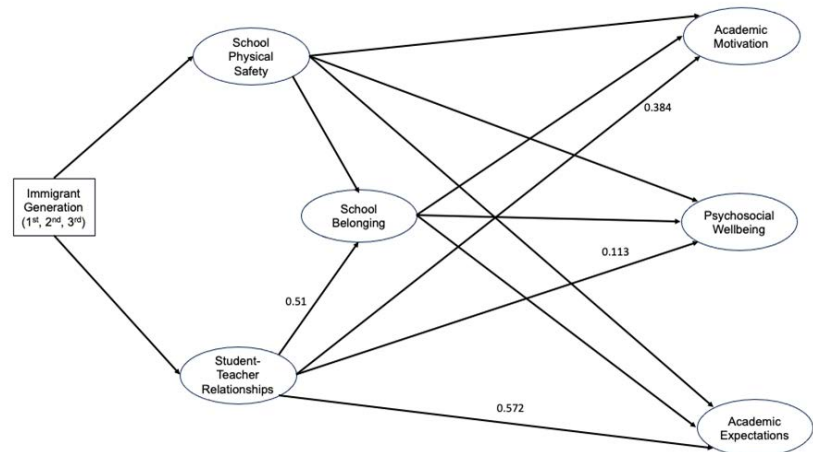
We found that first-generation students reported more negative perceptions of school physical safety than their third-generation peers. In turn, lower levels of school belonging negatively predicted academic motivation and psychological well-being. As prior research has found heightened victimization of newcomer students, our finding supports that assessing the physical safety dimension of school climate is critical for students of immigrant origin.

The Importance of Teacher-Student Relationships

As prior research has shown, for all student groups, perceptions of greater school physical safety were associated with better teacher-student relationships. In the current study, greater school physical safety and better teacher-student relationships were associated with sense of school belonging which in turn was related to higher academic expectations as well as motivation. This highlights the critical role of teacher-student relationships in creating positive school environments for all students—including students of immigrant-origin.

School Belonging as a Critical Mediator

As noted earlier, prior studies have established that school belonging plays a mediating role between sense of safety and school relationships with academic and wellbeing outcomes. Our findings also pointed to school belonging’s bridging function to more favorable outcomes for students.



Without systematically gathering data on immigrant generation alongside other typically collected demographic variables, schools cannot identify which dimensions of school climate most matter for which students, nor can they develop targeted interventions to support all students.”



Perceptions of greater school physical safety and stronger teacher-student relationships were associated with enhanced school belonging, which in turn predicted improved psychosocial wellbeing, academic motivation, and academic expectations.

Cascading Effects on Academic and Wellbeing Outcomes

Our study found direct associations between heightened school belonging and enhanced psychosocial wellbeing, elevated academic expectations, and bolstered academic motivation across all groups. This suggests that interventions targeting school belonging could improve multiple outcomes for all students. Students of immigrant-origin would be especially likely to experience improvements from school belonging interventions—in both experiences and outcomes—as their sense of school belonging is often most under threat.

CONCLUSION

Our research underscores the importance of including immigrant generation in school climate assessments and developing targeted interventions to support students of immigrant-origin. First-generation students appear especially vulnerable to feeling unsafe in their schools, which adversely impacts their sense of belonging and, consequently, their academic motivation and psychological wellbeing. As such, schools should implement comprehensive approaches that address the unique needs of students of immigrant-origin and foster inclusive, supportive learning environments. Given that these students make up over a quarter of our nation's children the consequences are far reaching—for their own prospects as well as the nation's.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Here, we make a series of specific recommendations to address this issue.

Policymakers Should:

- Mandate the inclusion of immigrant generation in approved school climate surveys
- Develop policies that protect immigrant students from discrimination and ensure equitable educational opportunities
- Allocate resources for schools with high proportions of immigrant students to implement comprehensive support programs
- Fund research on effective interventions for improving school climate for students of immigrant-origin
- Support teacher education programs that prepare educators to work effectively with immigrant-origin students

Schools and Districts Should:

- Include immigrant generation in school climate assessments
- Implement restorative justice-informed approaches to address bullying and discrimination
- Provide professional development on culturally responsive teaching and trauma-informed care
- Create tiered support systems that address the academic, social-emotional, and linguistic needs of students of immigrant-origin
- Foster school belonging through intentional programming and inclusive practices

Educators Should:

- Establish classroom norms that include inter-group respect and anti-bullying policies
- Implement culturally sustaining pedagogical practices that center the cultures and languages of immigrant students
- Build positive relationships with immigrant students and their families
- Adopt trauma-informed approaches that recognize the unique challenges of immigration

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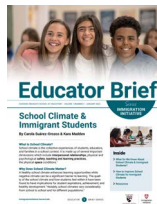
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