Educator Brief

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Series
IMMIGRATION INITIATIVE

When Fear Comes to School: Recommendations for Supporting Immigrant-Origin Students and Families

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In today's climate of elevated immigration enforcement, racial profiling, and xenophobic rhetoric, fear and uncertainty are an existential reality of many immigrant-origin children and their families. School staff are reporting anxiety, avoidance, and distress among their students, with disconnects in attendance, relationships, and achievement evident in recent data and personal accounts. This brief acknowledges this reality for children whose families are facing uncertainty—or forced to learn "in the shadows." The difference between a school that is a haven and one that feels unsafe could not be more profound. Educators everywhere urgently need specific, research-based recommendations to restore the safety, dignity, and hope—qualities that are increasingly difficult to sustain in today's climate.

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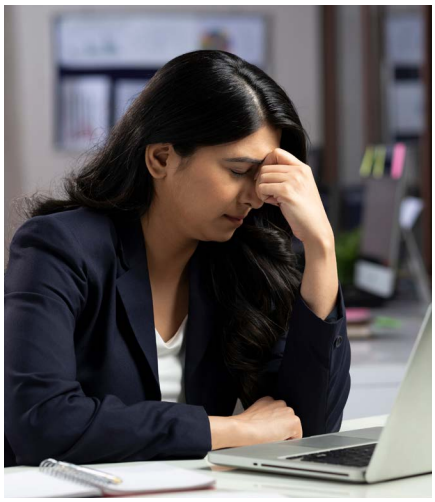
Immigration Initiative AT HARVARD



FOUNDATIONAL PRINCIPLES FOR ALL EDUCATORS

Every educator—whether a teacher, counselor, or administrator—shares a universal responsibility to cultivate a learning environment where ALL students—including immigrant-origin students who make up over a quarter of the U.S. student population—feel safe, valued, and supported.

Our actions should be guided by an understanding of what scholars term "legal violence"—the profound harm and suffering caused by the immigration system itself. This systemic hostility manifests not only in high-profile raids near schools and within daycare centers but in the daily, ambient fear of family separations. To counter this, a firm grasp of the legal landscape, the psychological impact of current policies, and the rich cultural strength of our students is the bedrock upon which all other supportive actions are built.

- **Recognize School as Sanctuary**: Research is clear: When students and families fear that school is not a safe haven, attendance declines, achievement suffers, and distress rises throughout the school community.

- **Defend the Right to K-12 Education**: Constitutional protections—Plyler v. Doe—guarantee all children the right to a public education regardless of status.

- **Do Not Inquire About Immigration Status and Protect Privacy**: FERPA bars sharing of student and family data with authorities. Educators and school staff should never ask students or families about their immigration status, nor should such information ever be solicited or recorded in any manner—that is both a legal and ethical imperative.

- **When Immigration Status is disclosed, respond with compassion and discretion**: There will be moments when a student or family member chooses to disclose their own or a loved one's immigration status, often motivated by acute concerns or a search for guidance. Such disclosures place extraordinary trust in the educator, signifying vulnerability and hope for support. When this occurs, educators should:
- **Acknowledge the trust shown:** Express appreciation for the courage it takes to share such personal information.

  - **Affirm confidentiality:** Assure the student or family that their disclosure will be kept confidential to the fullest extent permitted by law (FERPA) and clarify specifically how privacy is protected within your school context.

- **Offer emotional support:** Respond with warmth, empathy, and nonjudgmental presence, recognizing the emotional weight families carry.

- **Know your limits:** Do not offer legal advice but be prepared to connect families with trusted legal and community resources.

- **Communicate clearly:** Explain that school policies prohibit sharing information with immigration enforcement and outline what supports, protections, or referrals are available.
- **Document appropriately:** Do not enter immigration status information into any official records or student files.

By responding in these ways, educators underscore their commitment to being both protectors and advocates—helping students and families retain trust in their school as a safe space even amid profound uncertainty and fear.

- **Normalize (Im)migration:** Educators should foster educational spaces

where immigration is normalized as part of this country's legacy (everyone, except for Indigenous peoples, has a family history of voluntary or forced migration) and current reality (with over a quarter of its children living in immigrant families). Immigration should never be made a topic of shame and can and should be integrated into curriculum as appropriate. Display a butterfly as a symbol of alliance (similar to the display of the rainbow for the LGBTQ community).

- **Commit to Cultural Competence:** True support requires cultural competence, which involves a three-pronged approach: self-awareness of one's own cultural heritage and biases; knowledge of the cultures of the students and families we serve; and the skills to interact effectively across cultural lines. We must actively learn about the traditions, values, and inherent strengths of our immigrant communities to engage with them respectfully and effectively. We should also reaffirm that the U.S. is a country built upon immigration and that everyone, except for Indigenous peoples, have a family history of voluntary or forced migration (whether or not it is recalled or affirmed).

- **Use Precise and Dignified Language:** Words matter. We must use accurate, non-stigmatizing terminology. Terms like "undocumented" or "unauthorized" are preferable to "illegal." It is also crucial to focus on a person's status as a condition, not an identity—for example, say "a student without legal status" rather than "an illegal student." Precise terms such as "mixed-status families" and "DACA" (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals) allow for clearer and more compassionate communication.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR K-12 TEACHERS

As the primary point of contact

for immigrant-origin students, the classroom teacher is a central figure in their daily lives. Your actions can potentially mitigate the anxiety students experience, both directly and vicariously. Now more than ever, you play a critical role in fostering a sense of security and belonging essential to fostering academic engagement and success.

- **Build Trust and Predictability:** Pervasive uncertainty and anxiety affect the ability to focus and learning. Providing predictable, safe, and welcoming learning environments is an important responsibility for all educators. Consistent routines, predictable responses, and affirming gestures anchor students whose daily lives feel precarious.

- **Foster Critical and Compassionate Dialogue:** Structured opportunities for discussing immigration, belonging, and social justice empower students and foster resilience.

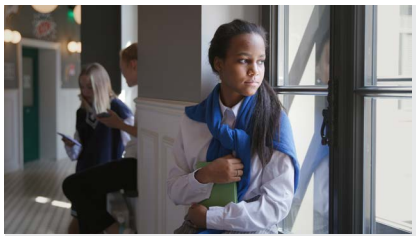
- **Integrate Trauma-Informed and Culturally Responsive Pedagogy:** Select texts and curriculum materials that reflect students' backgrounds. Collaborate with school-based mental health staff to recognize signs of distress and refer as needed.

- **Communicate Openly and Translate Materials:** Families facing deportation risk or ongoing uncertainty need proactive outreach. Provide all communications in home languages and clarify school policies against sharing family data with authorities.

- **Watch for Behavioral Distress Signals:** Teachers should monitor for behavioral distress, such as withdrawal from academic or social events - including college fairs and informational sessions - and decreased parental involvement in education. These changes may reflect fear and shifting priorities toward safety rather than apathy. Accurately interpreting these behaviors is essential for supporting student wellbeing, belonging, and academic engagement.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SCHOOL COUNSELORS AND SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGISTS

School counselors and psychologists are uniquely positioned to address the profound mental health challenges faced by immigrant-origin youth. Your work is essential for mitigating the effects of trauma, fostering resilience in the face of



systemic enforcement related adversity helping students and families navigate complex institutional barriers.

Provide Trauma-Informed Mental Health Services

- **Demystify the Enrollment Process:** Guide families through enrollment procedures and ensure school staff are compliant with the law. Clarify that schools cannot require a driver's license, social security number, or custody papers for enrollment and must accept foreign birth certificates.

- **Champion a Comprehensive Service Model:** Advocate for an expanded role that moves beyond a primary focus on special education evaluations. Push for a more comprehensive, preventive mental health service model that serves all students, addressing the documented discrepancy between the actual and ideal practices of school-based mental health professionals.

- **Recognize Separation Trauma and Crisis:** Mental health staff must be equipped to recognize and address the extreme stress and trauma associated with family separation, including signs of distress. This responsibility includes responding to children's questions about guardianship and supporting families instructed to plan for potential separation. Effective support requires active communication between staff and leadership to develop rapid response plans for students showing acute separation-related fears.

- **Organize Parent Workshops:** Facilitate informational sessions for parents on key topics such as the centrality of their children's educational rights, understanding the structure of the U.S. school system, and the importance of developing a family preparedness plan (such as designating trusted guardians, gathering vital documents, and establishing emergency contacts) in the event of an ICE raid or detention.

- **Connect Families with Essential Services:** Act as a vital link between families and crucial community resources. This includes maintaining and sharing updated lists of pro bono legal aid services, local health clinics, and immigrant advocacy organizations such as the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund (MALDEF) and the National Immigration Law Center (NILC). This information must be provided in the families' first language to ensure comprehension, accessibility, and trust.

- **Provide Direct Counseling:** Offer individual and group counseling to address the specific stressors immigrant-origin students face, including migration trauma, family separation, discrimination, and the chronic anxiety associated with precarious legal status. Key components of these interventions include psychoeducation, relaxation techniques, cognitive therapy, and social problem-solving.

- **Teach Coping and Externalization Techniques:** Equip students with practical skills to manage overwhelming stress. For example, the cognitive diffusion technique of externalizing sociopolitical issues (e.g., reframing thoughts to "I am not the problem. Immigration policy is the problem.") can increase a student's sense of self-efficacy and reduce self-blame.

- **Utilize Evidence-Based Interventions:** Implement proven programs like **Cognitive Behavioral Intervention for Trauma in Schools (CBITS),** which has been shown to be effective in decreasing symptoms of trauma and depression among Latinx youth (many of whom are immigrant origin) exposed to stressful events. This approach can and should be extended to immigrant origin students from other backgrounds.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR K-12 ADMINISTRATORS AND DISTRICT LEADERS

This critical combination of direct service and systemic advocacy is vital, but its impact is maximized when school leadership transforms these efforts into institution-wide policy, setting a clear and unwavering standard of protection for the entire community.

The school administrator's leadership is pivotal in shaping an institution's climate and policies. Their actions equip school counselors, psychologists, and teachers with the targeted up-to-date steps and considerations needed to address students' educational vulnerability. Through decisive leadership, schools can be transformed from passive institutions into educational communities that purposefully protects and supports immigrant students and their families.

Establish Schools as "Safe Zones"

- **Adopt and Implement Sanctuary Policies:** Formally adopt "safe-zone" or "sanctuary" resolutions for your school or district. Research shows that such policies are positively correlated with improved prosocial behavior and reduced behavioral problems among children in mixed-status households. Key components must include:

    - Prohibiting Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) or Customs and Border Protection (CBP) agents from entering school property without a judicial warrant.

    - Banning all staff from inquiring about or disclosing a student's or family member's immigration status.

- Limiting the school's cooperation with federal immigration authorities.

Communicate and Reassure the Community

- **Issue Clear Public Statements:** Follow the lead of officials like the NYC Schools Chancellor by issuing unambiguous public statements that reaffirm the school's commitment to educating and protecting all students, regardless of immigration status. This messaging helps to counter the pervasive climate of fear.

- **Disseminate the Policy Widely:** Ensure the "safe-zone" resolution is published on the district website, posted prominently in every school building, and translated into all languages spoken by students' families to ensure the message of safety reaches everyone.

Ensure Legal Compliance and Ethical Practices

- **Audit Enrollment Procedures:** Mandate a thorough review of all enrollment forms and procedures to ensure full compliance with Plyler v. Doe. Eliminate any practices that create barriers for undocumented families, such as illegally requiring social security numbers or proof of legal residency.

- **Reinforce Student Privacy Protocols:** Provide explicit, repeated guidance to all staff on their obligations under FERPA to protect student data from being shared with immigration authorities.

Invest in Professional Development

- **Provide Mandatory, Ongoing Training:** Implement recurring training for all teachers, staff, and administrators on the legal rights of immigrant students, trauma-informed practices, and strategies for creating a culturally competent and welcoming environment. This training is essential for helping educators confront their own biases and become effective allies.

Build Community Partnerships and Preparedness

- **Forge Alliances with Community Organizations:** Actively collaborate with local community-based organizations, legal aid services, and immigrant advocacy groups to create a robust, wrap-around support network for students and their families.

- **Distribute a Family Preparedness Plan:** Proactively help families prepare for worst-case scenarios. Use resources from organizations like the Immigrant Legal Resource Center to create and distribute a comprehensive Family Preparedness Plan. While this preparation may feel stark, providing families with these tools is a profound act of care, empowering them with a measure of control in a situation that feels overwhelmingly uncontrollable.

As students transition from K-12 schools to postsecondary education, the nature of these threats evolves, demanding an equally robust and specialized response from leaders in our colleges and universities.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR EDUCATORS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Undocumented, DACA, Temporary Protected Status (TPS), and international students in higher education face a unique and severe set of challenges. Policy threats from the current administration directly target their ability to enroll, persist, and build careers, making proactive and robust institutional action an urgent moral and educational imperative.

Analyze and Respond to the Policy Landscape

- The first step is understanding the specific threats. According to analysis from the Presidents' Alliance on Higher Education and Immigration, key risks include the effective termination of DACA, new restrictions on in-state tuition and financial aid, expanded interior immigration enforcement on campuses, reinstatement of the "public charge" rule, and severe limitations on post-graduation work opportunities like H-1B visas and Optional/Curricular Practical Training (OPT/CPT). Institutional responses must be designed to counter these specific threats.

Create Institutional Support Systems

- Establish dedicated, well-funded resource centers that act as "safe spaces" for undocumented students. These centers must offer integrated services, including trustworthy legal assistance, specialized academic and financial aid advising, and mental health support.

- Provide comprehensive mental health services specifically equipped to address the chronic stress, anxiety, and fear of deportation that students experience due to legal violence and the constant threat of enforcement actions like checkpoints.

Educate the Campus Community and Foster Inclusive Practices

- Implement mandatory training programs for all faculty and staff to educate them on the specific academic, financial, and psychological challenges undocumented students face. This knowledge is essential for

fostering a campus environment of genuine inclusion.

- Advise faculty to adopt flexible policies regarding attendance and deadlines, recognizing that students' lives and ability to focus can be severely disrupted by immigration enforcement actions affecting them or their families.

Advocate for Protective Policies and Financial Support

- Institutions must become powerful advocates, actively lobbying for state-level policies that protect students, such as laws granting in-state tuition and state-funded financial aid to undocumented residents.

- Internally, colleges and universities should create and expand institutional scholarships and emergency aid funds that are not contingent on federal eligibility, providing a critical financial lifeline for students excluded from federal programs.

Provide Targeted Legal and Career Development Resources

- Ensure all students have access to competent and trustworthy immigration legal services to help them navigate their complex legal challenges.

- Career services offices should also develop specialized support for undocumented students, helping them understand work authorization limitations (or the lack thereof) and explore entrepreneurial, independent contractor, or other viable career pathways after graduation.

IN CONCLUSION

In this period of unprecedented hostility, and fear, and uncertainty, our schools must become more than sites of instruction; they must be sanctuaries of hope and protection against the comprehensive distress felt by the community.

Schools must respond by becoming bastions of compassion, courage, and unwavering solidarity. Please draw upon these recommendations to advance safety, dignity, and opportunity for every student in your care.

Additional Credits

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About The Immigration Initiative at Harvard (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.