# Educator Brief

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Series
IMMIGRATION INITIATIVE

## Assessing School Climate for Immigrant-Origin Students in "Fearsome Times": Insights from Administrators

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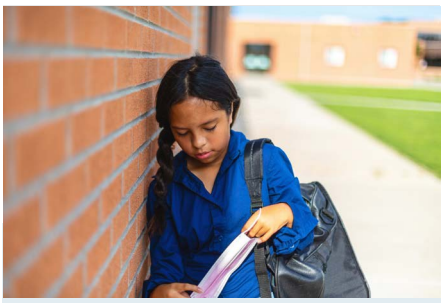

### Inside



### INTRODUCTION: WHY THIS STUDY NOW?

The Immigration Initiative at Harvard (IIH) is committed to advancing research and practice that supports the thriving of immigrant-origin students in U.S. schools. Decades of fieldwork and research have consistently unveiled both the promise and the peril embedded in the school climate experiences of these students. While some schools are sites of possibility and growth, too often newcomer and immigrant-origin youth encounter exclusion, bullying, and a lack of

belonging within their learning environments. These negative experiences are not only widespread but also persist across varied school contexts and are well documented in research linking school climate to academic engagement, motivation, and well-being.

Despite this reality—and the fact that immigrant-origin students now comprise more than a quarter of all U.S. students—immigrant status has long been absent from standardized school climate assessments. This critical omission means that the challenges and strengths of this rapidly growing student population have remained largely invisible in the very data meant to guide school authorities' decisions toward greater equity and continuous improvement for all students.

Guided by these concerns, we conducted a study to understand how key stakeholders—school administrators, immigrant parents, and immigrant youth—perceive the inclusion of immigrant-origin as a demographic in school climate assessments. Specifically, we sought to explore what value stakeholders attribute to such data, what reservations or risks they foresee amid the current intensified sociopolitical climate, and how a demographic question on immigrant origins might best be worded to both inform practice and safeguard students and families' sense of safety and security.

This Educator Brief distills what school and district administrators agree can be done to support immigrant-origin students' safety and belonging with regards to school climate assessments in "fearsome times." Drawing on interviews with 20 school leaders from diverse regions and roles, it highlights both the promise and the limits of school climate assessment when fear and surveillance shape daily life in schools.

## WHAT WE DID

### The Study Overview: Aims, Methods, and Evidence Base

The study examined how school climate is experienced and assessed for immigrant-origin students in the United States at a moment of intensified anti-immigrant politics and the rollback of long-standing "sensitive locations" protections in schools.[1] The overarching aim was to understand both the value and the risks of explicitly attending to immigrant origins in school climate assessment and to generate guidance for districts navigating these fearsome times.

### The research addressed three core questions:

1. How do immigrant youth, immigrant parents, and school administrators view the importance of understanding school climate specifically for immigrant-origin students?
2. What apprehensions do they have about collecting information on immigrant origins in the current political environment?
3. What strategies do they recommend to assess and improve school climate for immigrant-origin youth safely and ethically?

To answer these questions, our team conducted in-depth qualitative interviews with three stakeholder groups: approximately 20 school and district administrators (superintendents, principals, central-office leaders) across diverse regions and political contexts; 20 first-generation immigrant youth (currently between the ages 18–24) who arrived from an array of countries between the ages of 8 to15 and had experienced U.S. middle and high schools; and 20 first-generation immigrant parents from a wide range of countries with children currently enrolled in U.S. public middle or high schools.

***In this Ed Brief, we focus on the findings drawn from School Administrator perspectives.***

Crucially, data collection began just before, and then unfolded through, the 2025 federal policy shift that rescinded long-standing guidance limiting immigration enforcement in schools. This abrupt policy provided an opportunity for stakeholders to reflect on how the new enforcement landscape was shaping school climate for immigrant-origin youth.

**Note:** For more detail on the methods and the findings presented here, please see the link ***School Climate Perspectives White Paper***.

## WHAT WE LEARNED

### Key Finding 1: Immigrant-Origin Students Are Central to Schools but Invisible in Climate Data

Administrators overwhelmingly recognized that students with immigrant parents are now a core part of their districts—often more than a quarter of the student body—yet remain largely invisible in formal climate assessments. Standard district or state climate surveys routinely collect data on race, gender and sexual identity, and sometimes disability status, but almost never on immigrant generation or country of origin. As a result, leaders cannot see whether immigrant-origin youth experience exclusion, bullying, belonging, safety, or adult support differently, nor can they track the impact of interventions targeted to these students.

Administrators explained that while immigrant-origin students are included in race or (sometimes in) home language categories, they are not recognized as a distinct group, leaving their experiences blurred into broader averages. Several administrators noted that immigrant origin students were an "invisible" demographic.

This invisibility is not merely technical; it has material consequences. Without identifiable data, immigrant-origin youth are less likely to be considered in resource allocation, targeted mental health services, social skills, building workshops and activities, cultural celebration events and calendars, or climate improvement planning.

### Key Finding 2: School Leaders See Strong Value in Assessing Climate for Immigrant-Origin Youth (In Principle)

Across interviews, administrators agreed that understanding school climate specifically for immigrant-origin students is vital for equity and educational improvement. Administrators saw more precise immigrant-origin data as essential to:

- Identify whether immigrant-origin students face distinct patterns of bullying, academic expectations, or exclusion.
- Justify newcomer and bilingual supports to boards and funders.
- Tailor mental health services and language-learning support, newcomer parent workshops on navigating the school system, and college application information sessions to the needs of specific groups (e.g., recently arrived refugees versus long-resident second-generation youth).

However, as described below, this theoretical support collided with deep concern once questions turned to how and when to collect immigrant-origin data in the current enforcement climate.

### Key Finding 3: Administrators Are Torn Between the Need for Better Data and the Risks of Asking

Administrators clearly articulated the potential benefits of collecting immigrant-origin information but were sharply divided on whether it is feasible—or ethical—to do so under current

> **"The benefits are clear. The more data we have on our students, the better we can support and understand them."** Superintendent, Southwestern District

immigration policy environment. Many expressed doubts about the benefits and a certain moral and professional tension in weighing in the potential advantages against the possible negative effects; they understood that without better data, immigrant-origin students remain invisible, yet they feared that directly asking about birthplace or parents' origins could itself cause harm.

**Concerns clustered around three issues:**

- ***Safety and surveillance***: Leaders worried they could not credibly guarantee that data would never be accessed or misused by higher authorities, especially in districts already under strong political scrutiny.
- ***Anonymity in small populations***: In schools with relatively small immigrant populations, leaders feared that even aggregate data could render specific students easily identifiable and potentially exposing them to targeting by immigration enforcement agencies such as ICE.
- ***Trust and participation***: Administrators anticipated that direct questions about immigrant or parental birthplace might depress survey participation or yield misleading data, as students might skip or misreport items out of fear.

A few leaders in more protective state contexts expressed greater openness to cautious, indirect measurement strategies, but even they emphasized the need for careful communication and strong data protections.

### Key Finding 4: A New Climate of Heightened Fear is Reshaping School Life

The policy shift that removed schools' de facto status as protected spaces against immigration enforcement profoundly reshaped school life and altered stakeholders' perceptions of everyday life for immigrant students and their families. Every administrator we interviewed described a palpable rise in anxiety not only among immigrant-origin families and youth but also among school staff, who felt uncertain about what actions are both appropriate and safe to protect the school community in these fearful times.

**Administrators reported:**

- Parents calling in panic after media reports of possible enforcement near schools.

> **"Asking about language spoken at home would be better than nothing until we return to less fearsome times for these students and their families."** Superintendent, Northeastern District

- Increased incidents of bullying by peers evoking ICE "jokes" as well as threats against immigrant students and their family members
- Noticeable increases in absences or sudden withdrawals among immigrant-origin students.
- Staff confusion, fear, and demoralization about how to respond if immigration agents appeared on or near campus.

In this context, even well-intentioned data collection efforts—especially anything that references birthplace, citizenship, or parental origins—are interpreted through a lens of potential threat. ***Our study suggests that now is not the time to ask directly about immigration background in school study assessments.*** Any work on school climate and immigrant-origin measurement requires clear and fundamental assurances of safety.

## IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The multistakeholder perspectives gathered in this study underscore the profound importance of school climate for immigrant-origin students' academic success, sense of belonging, and overall well-being, while acknowledging stark inequities in their experiences. Immigrant youth and parents described school environments that range from nurturing and supportive—particularly in specialized programs like ESL classes—to deeply exclusionary, marked by peer isolation, xenophobic bullying, and inconsistent educator support and perceptions of unfair treatment. Administrators, in turn, testified to the persistent invisibility of immigrant-origin students in formal climate assessments, emphasizing that without demographic data on immigrant generation, schools cannot effectively identify patterns of risk (such as lower perceptions of safety) nor allocate resources to address them. This invisibility perpetuates a cycle where immigrant-origin youth—now over one in four K–12 students—remain sidelined in equity efforts, despite their critical role in diversifying and enriching U.S. classrooms.

That said, school administrators reported a highly disrupted school environment in the wake of the January 2025 policy changes that rescinded federal protections for schools as "sensitive locations" against immigration enforcement. Consistent with larger scale survey and interview research,[2] fear emerged as a prevailing concern that manifests in increased student absences, parental withdrawal from school activities, and a pervasive anxiety that undermines learning and trust in educational institutions. Recent national data confirm this; educators report that 75% of immigrant-origin students' fear or anxiety is interfering with their academic engagement "some" or "a lot," with enrollment of newcomer students dropping dramatically in districts from Miami to Denver—down as much as 80% in some cases—due to deportations, voluntary returns, and families avoiding public spaces.[3]

In this fearsome context of normalized xenophobia, mass deportation threats, and eroded safe zones, it is simply not an ethical moment to recommend collecting direct demographic data on immigrant background, as such questions could exacerbate distrust, depress participation, and inadvertently heighten vulnerability for families already on edge.

Given these realities, we urge a cautious, phased approach to school climate improvement that prioritizes safety and trust without relying on sensitive data collection at this time. Recommendations for educators and administrators include:

- **Build foundational safety and relationships first**. Publicly reaffirm schools' commitment to protecting all students and their families regardless of immigration status and invest in universal strategies like trauma-informed training for staff, culturally responsive teaching, and anti-bullying programs that address xenophobia without singling out immigrant-origin youth.
- **Use indirect, low-risk methods to gauge needs**. In the interim, rely on proxies such as home language for climate insights into this population, supplemented by voluntary, confidential focus groups or listening sessions facilitated by trusted community partners. Avoid any questions about parental birth-place or citizenship to preserve anonymity and participation and always provide the option "prefer not to respond" for demographic items. Lastly, clearly communicate the purpose and benefits of participating in climate surveys.

- **Foster inclusive practices that promote belonging**. Strengthen peer support networks, newcomer orientation programs, and family engagement in non-survey formats (e.g., multilingual events or "know your rights" workshops with local organizations) to counteract isolation and fear, as evidence shows that positive relationships buffer against immigration enforcement-related stress.

When we return to more humane times, where normalized xenophobia and mass deportation are no longer the norm and the Statue of Liberty once again symbolizes our nation's welcoming ethos, immigrant background should be included as a standard demographic in school climate assessments. The inclusion of indicators of immigrant background in climate assessments would enable schools to track and respond to immigrant-origin students' unique experiences with the same rigor applied to race, gender, or socioeconomic status, ultimately fostering environments where all youth can thrive. Until then, the focus must remain on immediate actions that rebuild security and equity in the face of uncertainty.

## FOR MORE INFORMATION:

- **IIH School Climate Perspectives White Paper** - Assessing School Climate for Immigrant-Origin Students: Multistakeholder Insights in "Fearsome Times"
- **IIH School Climate Educator Brief** - School Climate & Immigrant Students
- **IIH School Climate Policy Brief** - School Climate Matters for Students of Immigrant-Origin: Why Including Immigrant Generations in School Climate Assessments is Critical
- **IIH Sensitive Locations Policy Brief** - From Safe Zones to Uncertainty: State Responses to the Federal Rollback of Sensitive Location Protections in Schools
- **IIH Educator Brief** - When Fear Comes to School: Recommendations for Supporting Immigrant-Origin Students and Families
- **UCLA IDEA December 2025 Report** - "The Fear is Everywhere: U.S. High School Principals Report Widespread Effects of Immigration Enforcement."

## REFERENCES


1. Bui, D., Lovato, K, Suárez-Orozco, C. (2025). From Safe Zones to Uncertainty: State Responses to the Federal Rollback of Sensitive Location Protections in Schools. IIH Brief, 2(3). Immigration Initiative at Harvard. https://immigrationinitiative.harvard.edu/brief/from-safe-zones-to-uncertainty-state-responses-to-the-federal-rollback-of-sensitive-location-protections-in-schools/

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3. Payne, K., Vázquez Toness, B., & Salomon, G. (2025, November 16). Immigrant student enrollment is dwindling at schools across the US amid immigration crackdowns. Associated Press.https://apnews.com/article/immigrant-student-enrollment-trump-82faaaec6d9246e24a09cbc837bedb67


> **"I think being that we're in this kind of fear climate, I think this wouldn't be the best time to begin this kind of strategy. Honestly, in a time of fear, I don't think you would have a lot of buy-in."** Principal West Coast High School


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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.