

ASSESSING SCHOOL CLIMATE

FOR IMMIGRANT-ORIGIN STUDENTS:

MULTISTAKEHOLDER INSIGHTS IN

FEARSOME TIMES



SCHOOL CLIMATE PERSPECTIVES

WHITE PAPER

JANUARY 2026

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IMMIGRATION INITIATIVE AT HARVARD

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ASSESSING SCHOOL CLIMATE FOR IMMIGRANT-ORIGIN STUDENTS: MULTISTAKEHOLDER INSIGHTS IN “FEARSOME TIMES”

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Background

Immigrant-origin students are now among the fastest-growing groups in U.S. schools, yet most school climate assessments do not include immigrant background as a demographic variable rendering these students effectively invisible in data that could inform strategies to enhance their academic experience. At the same time, the contemporary federal administration—marked by renewed immigration enforcement, publicized raids, and politicized rhetoric—has heightened fear and mistrust among many immigrant families, students, and educators. This white paper examines whether - and how - schools can responsibly incorporate immigrant-origin background into school climate assessment under these conditions, drawing on in-depth interviews with school and district administrators, immigrant-origin youth, and immigrant parents across varied geographic regions, school types, and policy environments.

What We Found

Participants consistently affirm that school climate—particularly within the domains of belonging, safety, and the quality of relationships among peers and between adults—is central to the academic motivation, mental health, and long-term developmental trajectories of immigrant-origin students. They describe how positive climates can mitigate immigration-related stress, while hostile or indifferent climates exacerbate trauma, xenophobia, othering, and racialized bullying. Despite this, the commonly used instruments for assessing school climate do not systematically capture immigrant origin, such as immigrant generation, country of birth or country of prior displacement, rendering immigrant-origin students invisible in the data. Administrators report that measuring school climate for immigrant-origin students could uncover patterns of bullying or exclusion, inform the allocations of supports and resources, and allow the development of tailored services responsive to the needs of specific groups (e.g., newcomer programs for recently arrived youth).

Key Risks in the Current Era

The interviews also reveal deep ambivalence about adding immigrant-origin items, such as questions about where students were born. Especially in the current anti-immigrant sociopolitical climate, administrators see clear benefits — better identification of inequities in safety and belonging, more targeted supports, stronger justification for resources, and the ability to elevate effective practices in particular schools or programs. Yet, also arising out of this larger policy environment, participants voice serious concerns about risks of harm and misuse, including fears that data could be accessed by immigration authorities, weaponized by hostile actors, or used within schools to reinforce deficit-based stereotypes about “vulnerable” groups. Many administrators observe that families already under-report basic information (such as home language) and that educators have changed everyday communication practices to shield students from surveillance.

Recommendations

Based on these findings, this white paper advances a set of design principles and recommendations for school climate assessment in this age of exclusion.

- First, questions that directly inquire whether students or their parents were born in the United States or what country they were born in should be not incorporated to school climate assessments at this time. In the future when safety concerns are less formidable, the inclusion of immigrant-origin items should be optional—for example, asking country of birth with a “prefer not to say” option and pairing such questions with inquiries about language-use at home.
- Second, surveys must be accessible and trustworthy: translated into major community languages, administered in safe spaces (often by multilingual liaisons), and accompanied by clear explanations of purpose, confidentiality, and limits on data sharing.
- Third, districts should tightly control who sees disaggregated immigrant-origin data, relying on aggregated results for planning while pairing measurement with explicit anti-bias framing and professional learning to avoid reifying stereotypes.
- Finally, this paper underscores that measurement alone is insufficient to improve school climate. Administrators stress the importance of closing the feedback loop by demonstrating students and families how survey results translate into concrete actions and by investing in everyday practices that make schools safe and welcoming – such as culture-sustaining teaching, trauma-informed supports, proactive anti-bullying efforts, and structured opportunities for cross-group relationship building.

Taken together, these insights argue not for abandoning climate assessment that includes immigrant-origin students, but for reimagining it to center both safety and visibility in an era when fear too often comes to school.

STUDY BACKGROUND

School climate, a multifaceted concept encompassing the collective experience of the quality of school life (Thapa et al., 2013), has become a cornerstone of educational improvement efforts across the United States. Research has consistently demonstrated that the quality of school climate influences effective learning and critical outcomes like school belonging (Slaten et al., 2016), academic achievement (Berkowitz et al., 2017), and healthy development, with increasing recognition of its profound impact on student outcomes. School climate surveys are now routinely conducted as part of many districts' and schools' accountability or reporting systems (Aldridge & McChesney, 2018).

A critical gap exists in school climate assessment practices, however, for students of immigrant origin. Most standardized school climate measures fail to include immigrant origin as a demographic variable (Klevan et al., 2024; Suárez-Orozco & Madden, 2024; Suárez-Orozco, Cruz, & Karras, 2025).

Study Aims

This research addressed four primary objectives:

- To understand the perspectives of multiple stakeholders (i.e., school administrators, immigrant youth, and immigrant parents) on the **potential value of understanding and assessing school climate** for immigrant-origin students.
- To understand multiple stakeholders' **apprehensions** around assessing school climate for immigrant-origin students.
- To understand **multiple stakeholders' preferred formats** for assessing school climate for immigrant-origin students.
- To **identify recommendations for strategies to assess school climate** for immigrant-origin students.

Context and Evolution of the Study

Development of the study protocol, IRB attainment, research team training, and initial sample recruitment began in fall 2024. In January 2025, with the launch of the current presidential administration, the sociopolitical landscape for immigrants shifted profoundly (Bush-Joseph, & Putzel-Kavanaugh, 2026). The new socio-political landscape “made the United States more hostile to unauthorized immigrants while also altering how the government treats immigration and immigrants of all legal statuses and the communities in which they live” (Chishti, et al., 2026). Schools were stripped of their longstanding protections as “sensitive locations” for ICE enforcement (Bustillo & Martinez-Beltran, 2025; Bui, Lovato, & Suárez-Orozco, 2025). As deportation within school walls became a reality, school personnel reported “panicked calls from parents, more empty desks in classrooms, and higher anxiety” (Tamez-Robeldo, 2025).

Qualitative and survey evidence suggest that the negative animus from intensified media and political rhetoric, along with escalated enforcement measures, cascades into school settings with increases in derogatory comments as well as bullying directed at students of immigrant origin (Ee & Gándara, 2019; Rogers et al., 2019; Rogers et al, 2025; Suárez-Orozco, 2022). To capture stakeholders' perspectives on this rapidly changing environment, we added one additional question

to our protocols as we began interviews in February 2025: “Over the last few months, many things have changed in our society that affect immigrant students and their families. How do you think these changes may be affecting the school climate for them?”

This policy brief presents evidence on how stakeholders—immigrant youth, immigrant parents, and school administrators—view both the benefits and risks of assessing school climate in the current sociopolitical context and makes recommendations for conducting this work at this critical time.

Why School Climate Matters

School climate encompasses the quality of interpersonal relationships, physical and psychological safety, teaching and learning practices, and school environment conditions. It is recognized as essential for promoting academic motivation, achievement, and healthy development for all students (Berkowitz et al., 2017; Slaten et al., 2016; Suárez-Orozco, Cruz, & Karras, 2025). Positive school climate is associated with greater school belonging, which mediates improved outcomes including academic engagement, performance, and psychosocial wellbeing (Slaten et al., 2016). Conversely, exclusionary environments and unsafe conditions have demonstrable negative effects on both academic and wellbeing outcomes (Leary & Baumeister, 1995; Berkowitz et al., 2017).

Demographic Variability in School Climate Experiences

Demographic markers including gender and race are routinely collected in school climate assessments, enabling researchers to conduct subgroup analyses and examine how different segments of the population experience school climate. In addition to the more global snapshot provided by the data at large, such stratification allows for comparisons across and within groups. We may see how perceptions of school climate may differ between boys and girls, for example, as well as examine the variability within just the girls’ experiences, thus allowing educators to develop strategic interventions and policies to promote success.

Previous research on school climate indicates that even within the same school, different demographic groups report distinct experiences (Ramsey, Spira, Parisi, & Rebok, 2016; Voight, Hanson, O’Malley, & Adekanye, 2015). For instance, sixth-grade girls perceive significantly greater peer and teacher support than do boys, as well as greater clarity, consistency, and fairness at school (Way, Reddy, & Rhodes, 2007). Disparities are especially pronounced when one of the groups is marginalized. LGBTQ+ students have missed one or more days of school in the past month because they felt unsafe at rates twice as high as their heterosexual and cisgender peers (Greytak, Kosciw, Villenas, & Giga, 2016). Black students are ten times as likely as White students to perceive unfair treatment from teachers at their school (Peña-Shaff, Bessette-Symons, Tate, & Fingerhut, 2019). Findings from CAIR (2021) reveal that 56% of Muslim students feel unsafe, unwelcome, or uncomfortable at school because of their Muslim identity, illustrating how marginalization itself can profoundly shape climate perceptions.

Immigrant Student Invisibility in Formal School Climate Assessments

Students of immigrant origin represent the fastest-growing demographic within the U.S. school population, significantly influencing the structure and priorities of the educational landscape (MPI, 2024). Yet, xenophobic and exclusionary attitudes, policies, and practices have proliferated over the past decades (Bolter, Israel, & Pierce, 2022, Chishti, et al, 2026), with significant implications for immigrant students' experiences of school climate. Like other marginalized identities, immigrant-origin status confers on students a unique lens through which to perceive and experience their educational environment.

Research demonstrates that first-generation immigrant students—students born abroad who have immigrated to the United States—often report fewer positive perceptions of school safety and greater vulnerability to bullying compared to their third-generation peers (Maynard et al., 2016). These negative experiences are often exacerbated by language barriers, cultural differences, and exposure to xenophobia, which can increase risks of exclusion and marginalization (McCabe et al., 2024; Suárez-Orozco, 2025). Institutional and ecological stressors—such as anti-immigrant sentiment and discriminatory policies—further undermine feelings of safety, belonging, and school connectedness for immigrant youth (Suárez-Orozco, 2022, Suárez-Orozco, & Suárez-Orozco, 2024). Schools with higher proportions of immigrant-origin students often report elevated concerns regarding derogatory comments and bullying directed toward immigrants (Ee & Gándara, 2020; Rogers et al., 2019). Thus, belonging plays a particularly critical role for immigrant students in mediating the effects of climate on educational and psychosocial outcomes (Cemalcilar, 2010; Suárez-Orozco, et al., 2025).

Notably, data identifying students of immigrant origin are rarely included in standardized school assessments. Among the 25 school climate surveys approved by the National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments (2023), no instruments were identified that systematically inquire about students' immigrant status, rendering the perspectives of immigrant-origin students' perspectives indistinguishable from those of other groups. Some surveys included questions that could serve as proxies for immigrant status: four instruments asked about languages spoken at home; one asked about the frequency of school moves; three asked about current English language proficiency. However, since none of these measures/assessments capture the distinct experience of having arrived from another country, schools are unable to distinguish immigrant students' school climate experiences, which may vary significantly from that of the majority population. Only one published school climate study was identified that specifically asked whether the respondent or their mother was born abroad (Fan, Williams, & Corkin, 2011).

Without systematically collecting data on immigrant origin alongside other demographics, schools cannot identify and respond to the unique school climate experiences of immigrant-origin students or develop the targeted interventions they may need (Suárez-Orozco, 2025). Therefore, this study sought to examine the perspectives of immigrant youth, immigrant parents, and school administrators regarding their views on the value of assessing school climate for immigrant-origin students as well as their recommendations for conducting this type of work.

Interviews were conducted during the first eight months of the new federal administration, a period characterized by heightened uncertainty and pervasive fear. In January 2025, schools and bus stops lost their status as designated safe spaces, eliminating protections that once barred

immigration enforcement officials from entering (Bui et al., 2025), heightening fears for undocumented and liminal-status families that the simple act of sending children to school or picking them up at day's end could expose the entire family to risk. Many protective programs, such as humanitarian parole and Temporary Protected Status for several countries, were also terminated during this period, leaving many families in heightened vulnerability. Racial profiling for immigration enforcement was affirmed as legal by the Supreme Court, inviting discrimination. Even U.S. citizens were caught up in enforcement efforts. Moreover, English was designated as the official language in an Executive Order, and anti-immigrant rhetoric echoed from the highest offices of political power into the communities where we collected our data. In this brief, we present emerging evidence around how stakeholders view the benefits and risks of including demographic information about immigrant origins in school climate assessment under these conditions.

METHODS

Research Design

We conducted a qualitative, triangulated study that elicited perspectives from three key stakeholder groups: immigrant-origin youth, immigrant parents, and school administrators (including superintendents, principals, and district leaders). The study was designed to elicit observations, concerns, and potential solutions related to including immigrant-origin students in formal school climate assessments, and to identify convergences and divergences across stakeholder groups.

Participants

Administrators Serving Immigrant Students

The sample of 20 school and district leaders represented a broad range of roles and geographic contexts. Participants included superintendents, assistant superintendents, school board members, principals, deans, and district-level specialists (e.g., in English language learning, counseling, data, accountability). Administrators worked in districts across the Northeast, West, and Southwest, spanning large urban systems as well as smaller suburban, and suburban–urban–adjacent areas, providing a multifaceted view of school climate in varied educational and political contexts.

Sampling and Recruitment Strategy. Administrator participants were recruited using a multipronged purposive strategy. The goal was to engage leaders with experience serving immigrant-origin students in diverse political environments and who held influence over school climate assessment and improvement efforts. Recruitment occurred through professional networks and organizations (e.g., the Council of the Great City Schools) and through Harvard's Public Education Leadership Project and The Principals' Center. Recruitment was conducted on a

rolling basis from January to September 2025 and continued until the target of 20 administrators was met.

School and District Context. The schools and districts represented in the administrator sample serve highly diverse student populations in terms of language background, race/ethnicity, and socioeconomic status. The proportion of students classified as English Learners (ELs) in participating settings ranged from about 3% to 47%, compared to a national public-school average of approximately 10.6%. In some schools, students speaking a language other than English at home comprised up to 85% of the student body, particularly in urban and high-migration gateway areas. The sample included districts with majority-Black or majority-Latine enrollments, districts with substantial White majorities, and districts with no single dominant racial or ethnic group, reflecting shifting demographic patterns in U.S. schools. Many participating districts served high proportions of economically disadvantaged students, with some reporting that more than 60% of students qualified for free or reduced-price lunch, compared to national estimates of roughly 20–30% (see Table 1 below for details).

TABLE 1. DESCRIPTION OF ADMINISTRATOR SAMPLE (N=20)	
Role	Superintendent (n=7) Assistant superintendents (n=1) School board member (n=1) Principals (n=6) Retired Principal (n=1) District-level specialists (e.g., in English language learning, counseling, data, accountability) (n=3) Dean (n=1)
States	Massachusetts (n=15) California (n=3) Texas (n=2)
Population Density	Urban (n=14) Suburban (n=4) Suburban/urban-adjacent area (n=2)
Proportion of students classified as English (or Multilingual) Learners * in administrators' district/school	<10% (n=7) 11-20% (n=4) 21-30% (n=1) 31-40% (n=5) 41-50% (n=2) Data not available (n=1)
Proportion of low income* students in	11-20% (n=7) 31-40% (n=1) 61-70% (n=3)

administrators' district/school	71-80% (n=5)
	81-90% (n=3)
	Data not available (n=1)

- *Note: District and school information is drawn from available public data sources (e.g., Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE), Texas Tribune Public Schools Explorer, and U.S. News Education.*

Immigrant Youth

This study included 20 first-generation immigrant youth, all of whom were born outside the United States and self-identified as immigrant-origin. Eligibility criteria required that participants: (1) were between the ages of 18 and 24 at the time of participation; (2) migrated to the United States between ages 8 and 15; and (3) had attended U.S. public middle and/or high schools. These criteria ensured that youth had extensive schooling experience in their countries of origin as well as significant exposure to U.S. middle and secondary schools, thereby enabling reflective accounts of educational transitions, processes of adaptation, and perspectives/perceptions of school climate.

Sampling and Recruitment Strategy. Youth were recruited using a purposive, multi-pronged strategy drawing on prior approaches for engaging immigrant-origin populations. Initial outreach occurred through immigrant-focused community-based organizations, college campuses, and faith-based groups, supplemented by targeted social media outreach (e.g., Instagram, Facebook) and a study webpage hosted by the Immigration Initiative at Harvard. Snowball sampling followed, with enrolled youth invited to refer peers meeting eligibility criteria. Recruitment was conducted on a rolling basis from February to May 2025 until the target of 20 participants was reached.

Demographic and Background Characteristics. Youth participants resided in 9 states across the country, representing urban and suburban contexts, and hailed from 13 countries of origin, spanning Africa, Asia, the Caribbean, Latin America, and the Middle East. The sample was diverse in gender (11 women and 9 men), race and ethnicity, and languages spoken at home (10 different languages) (*see Table 2 below for details*).

TABLE 2. DESCRIPTION OF IMMIGRANT YOUTH SAMPLE (n=20)	
State of Residence	California (n=2) Illinois (n=2) Indiana (n=1) Massachusetts (n=3) New York (n=6) New Jersey (n=1) South Carolina (n=2)

	Texas (n=2) Wisconsin (n=1)
Countries of Origin	Brazil (n=2) China (n=4) Colombia (n=1) Dominican Republic (n=3) Ecuador (n=1) Egypt (n=1) Ethiopia (n=1) Mexico (n=2) Peru (n=1) Syria (n=1) Uzbekistan (n=1) Venezuela (n=1) Vietnam (n=1)
Gender	Female (n=11) Male (n=9)
Race/Ethnicity	Asian (n=6) Black/African (n=3) Latine (n=9) MENA (Middle Eastern/North African) (n=1) White (n=1)
Languages Spoken at Home	Arabic & English (n=1) Chinese (n=1) English (n=1) English & Amharic (n=1) English & Cantonese (n=1) Mandarin & English (n=1) Mandarin (n=1) Portuguese (n=1) Portuguese & English (n=1) Spanish (n=4) Spanish & English (n=4) Spanish & Kichua (n=1) Tajik (n=1) Vietnamese & English (n=1)

Immigrant Parents

Lastly, the study included 20 first-generation immigrant parents, all born outside the United States and self-identifying as immigrant-origin. Eligibility required that parents: (1) migrated to the United States after age 15; and (2) had at least one child currently enrolled in a U.S. public middle

or high school. These criteria ensured that parents had completed their own formative schooling abroad while actively navigating their children’s educational experiences in U.S. schools, allowing them to provide informed perspectives on cross-cultural educational transitions, processes of adaptation, and perceptions of school climate as observed through their children’s experiences.

Sampling and Recruitment Strategy. Parents were recruited using a purposive strategy like that used for youth. Initial outreach occurred through immigrant-specific community-based organizations and faith-based groups, supported by a dedicated study webpage hosted by the Immigration Initiative at Harvard. Snowball sampling was then used, with participating parents referring other eligible families. Recruitment proceeded on a rolling basis from February to July 2025 until the sample size of 20 participants was reached met.

Demographic and Background Characteristics. Parent participants resided in 6 states across three distinct geographic contexts: urban suburban, and mixed urban-suburban areas, and were born in 12 different countries, reflecting regions in Africa, Asia, the Caribbean, and Latin America. The sample included parents from a range of racial and ethnic backgrounds (e.g., Asian, MENA, Black/African, Latine, and White), and home languages such as Mandarin, Cantonese, Spanish, English, Japanese, Swahili, Tamil, Arabic, and several Ethiopian languages, including Amharic and Somali. Fourteen mothers and six fathers participated, supporting children enrolled across a variety of school contexts; their children were enrolled from grades 6–12, across varied geographic regions and state policy environments (see *Table 3 below for detail*).

TABLE 3. DESCRIPTION OF IMMIGRANT PARENT SAMPLE (n=20)	
State of Residence	California (n=3) Florida (n=2) Illinois (n=2) Texas (n=2) Massachusetts (n=8) New York (n=3)
Countries of Origin	Argentina (n=1) China (n=4) Colombia (n=1) Dominican Republic (n=1) Ethiopia (n=1) India (n=1) Iraq (n=2) Japan (n=1) Kenya (n=1) Mexico (n=4) South Africa (n=1) Venezuela (n=2)

Gender	14 mothers 6 fathers
Race/Ethnicity	Asian (n=6) Black/African American (n=3) Latine (n=7) MENA (n=2) White (n=2)
Languages Spoken at Home	Arabic (n=1) Chinese (n=3) Chinese & English (n=1) English (n=1) English & Swahili (n=1) English & Tamil (n=1) English & Arabic (n=1) English & Ethiopian (n=1) Japanese (n=1) Spanish (n=4) Spanish & English (n=5)

Procedures

Semi-structured interview protocols were developed specifically for this study, incorporating parallel core domains and tailored probes for each stakeholder group. Interviews with youth and parents were carried out in participants' preferred language (English, Spanish, Chinese, Arabic, Portuguese, and Japanese), while interviews with administrators were conducted in English. All interviews were held via Zoom, lasted approximately one hour, and explored participants' views on: (1) the dimensions of school climate that were most salient for them; (2) the potential benefits of representing immigrant-origin students in school climate surveys; (3) concerns and apprehensions about doing so; (4) preferred ways to ask about immigrant origins; and (5) recommendations for pursuing this work in the current sociopolitical context.

Analysis

All interviews were transcribed and, when needed, translated into English, then de-identified to protect participants' confidentiality. De-identified transcripts were stored on encrypted drives and uploaded into qualitative analysis software for coding and memoing.

The research team developed a coding framework that combined deductive codes informed by the study aims with inductive codes that captured emergent concepts from the data. Initial coding was followed by iterative refinement of code categories and extensive memoing to develop broader themes that reflected patterns across interviews. Because data were collected from three distinct stakeholder groups, triangulation was used to compare and contrast themes across

administrators, youth, and parents, highlighting both convergences and divergences in perspectives on school climate and the measurement of immigrant-origin experiences.

Limitations

This qualitative study drew on purposive samples of 20 school administrators, 20 immigrant-origin youth, and 20 immigrant parents, which limits generalizability beyond the participating districts and communities. While recruitment efforts sought diversity across regions, school contexts, and countries of origin, the sample does not capture the full heterogeneity of immigrant-origin experiences in U.S. schools. Notably, we likely underrepresented state and district contexts that are particularly immigrant hostile. Data rely on self-reported perceptions of school climate and sociopolitical conditions, which may be shaped by willingness to engage, recall limitations, social desirability bias, and differential knowledge of school policies and immigration enforcement. In addition, the “fearsome” policy context was rapidly evolving during the data-collection period, thus stakeholders’ perspectives reflect a specific political moment and may evolve as policies and enforcement practices change. Finally, as is typical in qualitative work, analytic decisions—including coding frameworks and thematic synthesis—reflect the interpretive lens of the research team, despite efforts to enhance validity through triangulation across stakeholder groups and systematic memoing.

FINDINGS

The Less-Than-Optimal School Climate Experiences of Immigrant Students

We asked immigrant youth about their own experiences of school climate, and we asked immigrant parents and school administrators about their observations around the school climate experience of immigrant students. Although experiences were varied, the overarching narrative reflected a suboptimal school climate, characterized by frequent experiences of isolation, incidents of bullying, perceived gaps in teachers’ cultural and linguistic responsiveness, and persistent concerns around safety.

In the current sociopolitical climate, which is characterized by heightened anti-immigrant rhetoric and escalated enforcement measures, stakeholders reported that school climate was worsening for immigrant students. This emerged as a profound concern across all three stakeholder groups: pervasive fear, worry, and anxiety when reflecting on the current sociopolitical context. These trends echo findings from prior literature and, as we will explain, both emphasize the importance of and introduce complexities in incorporating items that capture immigrant-origin characteristics in school climate assessments.

Isolation and Lack of Belonging

A widely reported challenge for many youths was navigating peer relations and achieving a sense of belonging. Many students of immigrant origin reported feeling excluded segregated by and from their peers. Due to cultural and linguistic differences, they often found themselves “left over”

when forming groups for activities. Sometimes being left out was related to unfamiliar cultural topics: “when they mention something, I have no idea what that is... If you have to ask questions, like, what that is every single time... it makes you stupid” [Y-201]. For others, the exclusion was more active. A Chinese girl, for example, poignantly described her demoralization in gym class for being “picked less” for teams and being made to feel “invisible” [Y-207]. Parents, meanwhile, often experienced exclusion from the U.S. school system that limited their ability to support their children. They described sadness when they could not guide their children through school experiences like changing classrooms or understanding recess games [P-312]. Many attributed their children’s isolation to language barriers and cultural differences and noted that it was sometimes exacerbated by other students: one mother, for example, noted that her daughter initially felt excluded because Latine peers who spoke both English and Spanish deliberately chose not to speak Spanish with her [P-316].

This social isolation often pushed immigrant students to seek out their own “in-group[s],” creating patterns of segregation. Several administrators noted that immigrant students who were excluded by peers then tended to group together with others who are “similarly feeling disrespected or marginalized,” sometimes leading to further alienating them from the rest of the school. Parents remarked on this as well, such as describing their Spanish-speaking children taking refuge with Latine peers [P-307]. This segregation was also noted between immigrant groups, with tension reported among different nationalities or language groups [A-119]. A superintendent in a highly diverse urban northeastern district noted that institutional structures unintentionally reinforced this dynamic when academic programs “silo” these student populations into separate tracks, leading to the appearance of “two schools” operating in one building [A-114].

Bullying, Harassment, and Xenophobia from Peers

Peer relations could devolve into outright bullying and harassment, contributing to a toxic school environment. A Syrian student recalled being frequently told, “go back to wherever you’re from,” and a Chinese student recalled being mocked due to their appearance: “He would make fun of my eyes because he would say my eyes are small” [Y-207]. One parent shared that her son in middle school was bullied and felt physically unsafe after being “jumped on, and they hit him” [P-307], while another noted that her youngest child felt so unsafe due to bullying that he refused to attend school for two days [P-317].

This harassment was amplified by external anti-immigrant rhetoric. Administrators observed that negative political messaging “is trickling now into schools” [A-103], manifesting through derogatory peer comments such as jokes about Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) such as, “what do you want with your drink? Oh, I want ICE!” [A-104]. A principal in the Northeast suggested that students felt comfortable making such statements because they were seeing similar rhetoric “everywhere” in media and social media. The administrator classified their school as a “tinderbox for some of these issues” due to its demographic shifts and tendency toward increasing conservatism [A-104]. A superintendent in the Southwest confirmed that, “some kids, you know — because kids can be mean — say things like, ‘Well, I’m gonna call ICE on you,’ or ‘I’m gonna call ICE on your mom.’” One student detailed an incident where a very close friend

threatened to call ICE to deport her family during an argument [Y-215]. The heightened anxiety had been linked to serious outcomes, including a harrowing event described by a school administrator where a middle school student who committed suicide after being bullied with threats that “ICE is going to detain and deport your parents.” [A-113]

Uneven Experiences with Adults at School

Positive anecdotes of nurture and support at school did come up some interviews. Several students praised particular teachers as influential role models or sources of exceptional emotional support. Some English Learner classes, for instance, were lauded by youth for providing a small-group, nurturing “ecosystem” [Y-217] that delivered “personalized teaching” [Y-210]. Parents also praised specific educators, noting that their children felt welcomed and comfortable because of a “warm reception” [P-316]. One father commended the “treatment from the teachers” who were respectful and supportive, sometimes even helping with groceries or food [P-320], while one mother expressed gratitude to the teacher who noticed and followed up on potentially worrisome poetry being written by her child in class, viewing this as evidence of the school’s concern for her child’s mental health [P-311]. Some school leaders perceived that school climate generally for immigrant students was likely more welcoming and supportive in buildings with large numbers of English Learners, where systems have been required to “come up to speed to be more supportive” [A-119], including valuing staff for their own immigrant experiences as a “beacon for some of our students” [A-104].

However, many youths reported negative experiences with school adults, particularly general education teachers and staff members who did not work as frequently with immigrant students. Certain situations reflected overt prejudice, like when a youth overheard a teacher complaining: “I’m not their ESL [English as a Second Language] teacher. It’s not my job to help them” [Y-217]. Many cases, however, were attributed to ignorance, a lack of prioritization, or more subtle bias. Students shared various examples, such as a high school counselor incorrectly advising an undocumented student that they could not attend college without the FAFSA, which the student euphemistically identified as “a little bit unfair” [Y-208]. In another case, instructors routinely failed to recognize a student’s need for help and overlooked her instead, which she attributed to the blinding effects of the Model Minority Myth that Asian students are universally gifted and academically successful [Y-201].

Some parents, too, reported that teachers sometimes failed to prioritize the integration of immigrant students, especially in high school, where staff would simply “let them go” and allow new students to “work alone” on projects if they didn’t find a group, showing little concern for their social development and belonging [P-309]. The perception was that teachers often didn’t “fully understand [the] background” of immigrant families [P-311].

School administrators recognized this issue—as one superintendent noted, “sometimes, teachers are the worst culprits: [A- 118]. Furthermore, some school leaders expressed concern that teachers hold low expectations, leading to a harmful tendency to create a “single story” [A-118] about immigrant students underperforming academically. Correcting this requires actively

addressing “negative adult mindsets and beliefs” [A-118] and ensuring that staff are “culturally responsive” and “more compassionate” [A-109].

Concerns Around Safety in School

Finally, fear around physical safety for themselves and their families was an overwhelming concern for immigrant participants. While many students reported feeling physically safe within school buildings, some brought up concerns around school shootings and violence at school that were unfamiliar from their countries of origin. A youth from Uzbekistan noted that routine lockdown practice felt unsafe: “hiding in a corner with everybody nearby... It was new to me, like, hey, are we okay?” [Y-210]. A Venezuelan student noted that frequent discussions about drills and the risk of violence made them realize that “everyone is so used to the fact that you can go buy a gun and come kill people at school” [Y-218]. While school shooting fear is not unique to immigrant-origin students, participants elevated this element of U.S. schools as particularly shocking and worrying compared to their experiences of physical safety at school in their home countries.

For many participants, fear of immigration enforcement was even more palpable, regardless of legal status but even more pronounced for those in liminal statuses. Administrators noted that families were “constantly under the threat of deportation, being separated from loved ones” [A-115], and they reported that many of their students worried daily about “getting home to mom and dad. Are mom and dad going to be there when I get home?” [A-107]. Youth corroborated these concerns, noting that many peers expressed fear of attending school and reported instances of being “stopped using public transportation” due to the perceived threat of deportation [Y-216]. This constant external pressure has created deep psychological distress, with one parent hearing a powerful anecdote about a child who asked a teacher if they could serve as his guardian in case his parents were deported [P-317]. This fear was heightened by visible enforcement, as ICE had been “making its presence very evident recently,” including by “hanging out around one of our middle schools” [A-110]. Even in schools where this was not the case, several students mentioned that the presence of security guards in the school made their parents feel intimidated, confusing security with law enforcement [Y-210]. School personnel reported “panicked calls from parents” and engaged in training on protocols for when “ICE shows up at our front door.” [A-116].

This pervasive fear translated directly into decreased engagement and participation in the school community. Students were losing opportunities, such as “staying away from applying to college” because they were scared about having to disclose information or feared for their parents. Parents were disengaging from the school community, as they were “scared to congregate” or attend resource fairs [A-101]. Many youths were simply not showing up at all. For some students, the climate created a de facto “form of house arrest” where parents felt compelled to be “more careful with [their] children” [A-117] and kids were therefore “instructed by their family” to stay home, leading to isolation and disengagement from school [A-120]. One superintendent noted that since the new federal administration took office, immigrant student “attendance had decreased, significantly” due to increased anxiety. Some families had even “chosen to go back to their native country” [A-113].

The narratives across all three stakeholder groups suggest that there is variability in experiences of school climate for immigrant-origin students, ranging from nurturing support systems to pervasive feelings of isolation, invisibility, and targeted discrimination rooted in language and culture. Some students reported positive experiences, but many reported negative ones as they navigated their entries into U.S. schools, especially around peer and teacher relationships, safety, and belonging. Some immigrant parents recalled the support that their children received, particularly in the earlier years of their children's schooling, but others witnessed their children's sense of exclusion and felt like outsiders themselves. Administrators recognized problematic peer interactions and teacher expectancies, as well as varying structural contributions that could lead to different school climate experiences for immigrant students. The challenges of the current sociopolitical climate emerged as a dominant theme across groups, as it infiltrated school walls and made many students and families feel unsafe.

Overall, the findings presented in this section underscore the need for more systematic disaggregation of school climate data for immigrant-origin students than is currently /achieved through existing school climate surveys. Without such disaggregation, the complex patterns of school climate experiences among immigrant-origin students invisible in summary metrics.

Administrator Perspectives on The Value of Assessing School Climate

As we reported above, when asked about their perspectives around school climate experiences, many immigrant youths clearly articulated experiences of marginalization and bullying in schools. Further, parents readily pointed to examples of concerns around these issues for their children. Yet for both immigrant youth and parents, our interviews revealed that generally, they did not have a clear sense of the use or value of climate assessments. As a Chinese immigrant student explained, "sometimes we don't know the intentions of the questions" [Y-201]. On the other hand, perhaps because school climate assessments have been part of the school improvement movement for over a decade now, school administrators, reported a much clearer understanding of the rationale for *measuring* school climate,

While administrators varied on which aspects of school climate were most important, all articulated ways in which school climate informs their professional responsibilities and influence student outcomes. Administrators not only emphasized the central role of school climate in shaping educational practice but also perceived benefits of systematically assessing school climate can be summarized into several key areas:

Informing Strategic Decisions and Resource Allocation

In recent years, a number of states and school districts have implemented systematic school climate survey assessments as part of their school improvement strategies and efforts to enhance positive educational experiences. As part of an evidence-based approach, districts leverage these assessment results to engage in targeted improvement strategies, promote stakeholder engagement, and foster environments conducive to student learning and well-being. Many school administrators viewed the formal assessment of school climate as a fundamental and

strategic tool for making informed, data-driven decisions about resources, guiding resource allocation, and programmatic interventions, rather than simply relying on anecdotal evidence.

As a Dean of Students on the West Coast shared, “We use school climate information to make strategic decisions” [A-105]. Data helps determine “which are the kind of programs that we should fund in public schools. And what’s going to help students feel connected” [A-101]. The use of surveys helps to “tailor the programs and the services that will help your students feel more connected to their schools and help improve climate in general for them and for their families” [A-101]. The data allows leaders to identify trends and needs, which directs the subsequent response, such as deploying support or creating new initiatives.

Driving Academic Improvement and High Expectations

Administrators linked a positive school climate directly to better educational outcomes, viewing measures of student perception as necessary components of ensuring effective teaching and learning. A school board member noted that positive climate “leads to better educational outcomes” [A-101]. School climate assessment, when done thoroughly, tracks indicators like “rigorous expectations,” which helps uncover unconscious bias or a “denial of opportunity” that occurs when the bar is lowered for some students [A-103]. As one administrator stated: “We actually ask students, do you feel like you’re being held to a high standard?... We monitor rigorous expectations pretty closely, and that’s one of the ones I watch like a hawk” [A-103].

Establishing Foundational Safety and Belonging

Assessing school climate allows leaders to gauge the effectiveness of their environment in meeting these basic needs for the student body. Administrators emphasize that safety (both physical and psychological) and a sense of belonging are prerequisites for any academic success. A high school principal noted that having measures helps them address the fundamental importance of safety: “Safety, physical and psychological, is fundamental” [A-108]. As an Assistant Superintendent of Student Services explained, “In order for our children to be successful, they have to have two things: they have to feel safe, and they have to feel like they belong” [A-107]. A superintendent emphasized that psychological safety is the foundation necessary “to be able to cultivate the growth” required for teaching and learning [A-108]. “Sense of belonging, I think, is fundamental to student success, and without that there’s sort of no bedrock from which to build upon,” summed up a school counseling administrator [A-111].

Thus, administrators stressed that a positive school climate leading to a sense of belonging is not only important for immigrant-origin students but for all students. They pointed out that everyone in the school community must coexist, collaborate, be kind to one another, and work together to build a context where all students can develop. As a principal reminded us, a positive school climate is important “for everybody, not just for marginalized students” [A-104] and requires supporting all members of the school community.

The Potential Value of Including Immigrant Background in School Climate Assessments

Administrators acknowledged the anti-immigrant climate affecting many students and identified this context as a key motivator for adding items related to immigrant origin to school climate surveys. Coming from an institutional school reform perspective, many school administrators agreed that formally assessing school climate for immigrant-origin students would confer significant benefits. As one superintendent in the Southwest succinctly stated, **“the benefits are clear. The more data we have on our students, the better we can support them and understand them”** [A-113]. The core advantages identified by school administrators include eliminating the existing invisibility and data gaps surrounding immigrant students, enabling targeted interventions, and fostering culturally responsive practices and deeper understanding for these students.

Eliminating the Data Gap and Invisibility

Administrators emphasized that immigrant-origin students currently represent an invisible demographic in school climate assessments, which prevents them from being adequately served and supported as a distinct group. Immigrant-origin students are currently “left out a lot on a lot of data collection and a lot of resources” [A-105]. They are categorized only by “ethnicity or race,” lacking “their own special category,” which means their perspective as an immigrant origin group is not understood [A-105]. This data gap persists because proxies like language status or race “don’t capture nuance” in the way specific immigrant background data would [A-108]. Collecting this data would be helpful for administrators “to be like, oh, okay, we’re not doing such a great job here with this group of students, and they are different, and they are unique” [A-107]. Furthermore, without intentional support, these students “can feel overlooked by educators” [A-114]. If effective integration strategies are absent, newcomers “can just drown” [A-114].

Enabling Granular Planning and Targeted Interventions

A primary benefit of collecting specific immigrant data, such as country of origin or time spent in the country, is the ability to move past monolithic assumptions to strategically design tailored programs and allocate resources. The goal of this data is “to be able to learn and understand where to provide intervention or service” [A-107]. Collecting data on immigrant generation is crucial because student experiences are “very different if you’re a first generation, second generation” [A-113], underscoring the need to recognize the diversity of students’ needs even within the immigrant-origin demographic group. Administrators require this data “to justify [newcomer] programming and understand how it’s working for students” [A-112]. The information can also be used to “tailor some of our mental health services, so that we’re not so generic when we talk about wellness and mental health” [A-101]. Additionally, the data would “help tailor better in language support” and “help us make better hiring decisions” for staff to meet student needs [A-101]. Ultimately, knowing a student’s background helps staff “better understand a student, a family, and helping students acclimate and be successful” [A-115].

Fostering Deeper Understanding and Cultural Responsiveness

Collecting demographic data on immigrant backgrounds, including things like country of origin, immigrant generation, and even religious affiliation, aids educators in understanding students' lived experiences and cultural assets, thereby promoting a more affirming school environment. This information is critical so that principals and teachers can “understand the backgrounds of their students,” which is viewed as “the key for teaching” [A-106]. Furthermore, the data can ensure that staff are aware of diverse values and customs of the students they serve. Finally, this practice provides a powerful way to “elevate student family and staff voice” and acknowledge the student’s context, which fosters stronger school connectedness [A-102].

Anticipated Sources of Resistance

Despite this recognition, several administrators anticipated significant resistance to including demographic items related to immigrant background in school climate assessments. They attributed these anticipated resistances to multiple sources, influenced both by the specific context of the school and the broader political environment.

Conservative Backlash

Resistance was anticipated in politically conservative, “red or purple” areas if the question were included [A-101]. Administrators noted that non-immigrant or “white, dominant group” families might resist, holding an “anti-woke” mindset that argues schools should simply assume “everybody is the same” [A-106].

Protective Instincts

School leaders also anticipated concerns from pro-immigrant constituencies. Resistance might come from engaged community and advocacy groups, with community leaders and civil rights lawyers viewing the collection of this data as a “red flag,” as noted by an attuned immigrant superintendent serving a school district with a high proportion of immigrant families. Additionally, some administrators anticipated that their school staff would push back out of a “protective instinct” for their students [A-103], perhaps based on valid fears of whether these data could be safeguarded from the federal government [A-115] or perhaps out of a “white savior complex” [A-110], believing they are protecting students by resisting data collection even if immigrant communities were the ones pushing for it.

Student Concerns & Resistance

Many administrators worried that given the current high-stakes sociopolitical context, families “are never going to believe” the information is protected, even if the survey is anonymous [A-102]. Administrators warned that asking these questions could be “triggering” [A-102] and might lead students and their families to not participate. Several administrators suggested that some students might not be forthcoming in their responses. “They may be dishonest because they just want to honestly fit in and be below the radar” [A-105]. A superintendent noted, “Because again, with the fear of mongering that’s going on, it might be like, ‘Are you trying to get me?’ ... And then I’d lie. Yes, I’m from the U.S., you know.” [A-118] The result could be that, particularly “if you’re in a red

area" but perhaps across the country, "you're not going to get active participation. We're not going to get accurate data" [A-101].

Preferred Way to Assess School Climate

The consensus amongst the participants is that the uncertainty and fear motivating the attention to immigrant origin students has made adding targeted questions complicated and currently inadvisable. Nonetheless, should the climate of fear diminish in the future, our data provides insights into the preferred phrasing to inquire about immigrant demographic background from the three stakeholder perspectives.

We asked each of our stakeholders to consider two different ways to inquire about immigrant origin as a demographic question for a school climate survey. The first was a binary option ("Were you born in the U.S.? Yes/No") and the second was a country pull-down menu option ("What country were you born in?"). A detailed comparison of preferences across administrators, youth, and parents revealed significant variations in priorities but shared concerns regarding safety.

TABLE 4: PREFERRED DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTION FORMAT			
	SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS	YOUTH	PARENTS
Binary Born in US? Yes/No	5 (25%)	7 (35%)	13 (65%)
Country Pull Down Menu	15 (75%)	13 (65%)	7 (35%)
n =	20	20	20

Results reveal that school administrators (75%) and immigrant origin youth (65%) strongly favor a specific country pull-down menu, while a majority of immigrant parents (65%) prefer a simple binary "Yes/No" option regarding U.S. birth.

Multi-Stakeholder Preferences for Demographic Inquiry

A significant divergence in preference emerged between those who provide the data and those who use it for district planning. misalignment reflects a complex interplay between the administrative need for actionable data and the visceral need for family protection in an era of widespread immigration enforcement.

Logistical Considerations and the Strategic Value of Granular Data

From a logistical standpoint, the binary "Yes/No" option is lauded by some for its simplicity and survey administration efficiency. A few administrators worried that searching for one's country of origin on a long list could impede "the efficiency of survey taking" and lead some students to abandon the survey altogether, thereby undermining the data collection efforts [A-116]. One parent explained that a binary choice is simply "easier, because it's a yes or no" compared to the effort of having to "type or select a country" [P-304].

Despite these logistical hurdles, administrators overwhelmingly argued that the utility of granular data justifies the more complex drop-down format. Leaders emphasized that “the more information I have, the better I can support our students” [A-115]. Specific country data allows districts to move past monolithic generalizations to tailor mental health services, newcomer programming, and linguistic supports based on the actual backgrounds of their students. Some students echoed this need for more fine-grained information, noting that the category of “non-U.S. born” is “too broad to generalize” and that a binary choice “doesn’t really capture statistical accuracy” [Y-203].

Identity Affirmation: Moving Beyond "Othering"

For many youth and school leaders, the country drop-down menu serves as an asset-based framing of immigrant identity. Rather than creating a binary that separates students into “American” and “Other,” the list of countries normalizes the experience of being foreign-born. Administrators noted that this approach communicates: “if you weren’t born in America...where were you born? That’s amazing. I want to know where you were born” [A-111].

Immigrant youth expressed that explicitly naming their country fosters a “sense of belonging” [Y-206]. One student explained that while a binary question can trigger a sense of being “inferior, doesn’t it?” selecting a specific country “makes you proud to be from that country” [Y-211]. Another student proposed an analogy to a job application: “It’s like applying for a job. You choose which university you’re from... there is no one being prioritized [over] others” [Y-202]. In this view, specificity acts as a form of validation, signaling that the student’s unique heritage exists and is recognized by the school.

A minority of parents agreed that the drop-down country menu option felt less U.S.-centric and divisive. A Chinese parent articulated their preference for the where were you born country menu option, responding: “the first one [Were you born in the US?] feels a bit black-and-white, like it splits people into two camps. The second [Where were you born?] feels more neutral—just collecting information” [P-311].

The Primary Barrier: Safety, Trust, and the Fear of Exposure

Conversely, the preference for a binary format appears primarily rooted in an acute need for safety and a fear of targeted discrimination. Many parents and a subset of youth argued that the binary option is the safer choice because it avoids disclosing details that could facilitate discrimination based on nationality. One parent explained that with the binary approach “they only know you weren’t born here...it doesn’t give any specific information about where you’re from” [P-314].

There is a profound concern that certain nationalities are currently “stigmatized”; as one parent noted, “if you say you’re from Afghanistan, people think you’re a terrorist. Or if you say you’re from Venezuela, people assume your parents are part of a gang” [P-319]. A parent from Mexico, echoing many other parents in our sample, felt more comfortable with the binary option “because that way, they only know you weren’t born here... it doesn’t give any specific information about where you’re from” [P-314]. This parent understood that asking this way would make the data less

“complete,” with administrators unable to differentiate by specific countries of origin, yet preferred it anyway “because of how things are going with this new president we have” [P-314] and the concern that specifying countries of origin could invite discrimination. A parent from Colombia elaborated: “I believe the best option is to ask if they were born in the United States or not, because... not all countries are favored as immigrants here in the U.S. There is discrimination based on nationality.... Some don’t like Colombians, some don’t like Venezuelans, or people from certain other countries. Then, to avoid discrimination, the best approach is to simply ask whether someone was born in the U.S. or not. That’s it. It doesn’t matter which country they come from—just knowing that they are an immigrant should be enough” [P-305].

Youth who preferred the binary option often did so to avoid targeted bias. A student from Brazil noted that the specific country question can feel like racially charged interrogations: “When they ask, ‘where were you born?’ I have people who just ask like this, ‘You don’t look American. You don’t look from here. So where were you born?’ It seems like they’re asking in that sense” [Y-213]. Other students worried that listed countries could become targets for hatred: “because of the fear, the hatred, and the attacks that currently exist—many of which are specifically directed at certain countries—many people might try to avoid answering that question due to these hate attacks, even from our own government.... I think it provides a bit more protection and protects anonymity” [Y-209]. A Chinese student imagined a scenario where political tensions might lead officials to “suspect you as a spy. So, if they actually ask for your specific country, then it might have stereotypes or bias” [Y-201].

Several administrators argued that the drop-down country menu is more useful because, “the more information I have, the better I can support our students. So, without having the concern that the data would be used against these children, I would want more data” [A-115]. Knowing countries of origin would help administrators understand where students come from and further contextualize the school climate data [A-101]. On the other hand, administrators in smaller districts worried that if a school has only a few students from a specific country, “you start to be able to figure out who the students are” [A-107].

Overwhelmingly, participants couched their preferences in light of the current political climate of fear and uncertainty. Fear about how these data might be used, and which authorities might gain access to them was pervasive and guided participants thinking about including immigrant background related questions in school assessments. As long as families believe their data could be used “to the detriment of our families” [A-120] or provide a database for detention and “arrest,” [A-116] any demographic inquiry will remain “fraught with peril” [A-112].

Safety Concerns Around Asking About Parents’ Country of Birth

We also asked administrators for their thoughts on inquiring where students’ parents were born when they are completing school climate surveys. The responses were mixed, with even greater concerns being raised about inquiring about parental birthplace in the current political climate. A handful of administrators noted that knowing where parents were born is considered crucial for understanding the unique dynamics and experiences of second-generation students. Asking about parents or grandparents was also suggested as a way to normalize immigration as a

fundamental part of the American experience [A-109]. When they supported the idea, administrators generally preferred the drop-down menu format for parents, mirroring their student preference. However, administrators worried that questions directed at parents would be perceived as a direct threat, triggering fear that they might be targeted for deportation, especially in contexts where undocumented status is common among parents. One administrator noted that asking about parents might be “a bridge too far, and the kids would feel like they’re potentially compromising their parents” [A-107].

Recommendations for Alternative Proxy Questions

Given the current anti-immigrant political climate, we asked participants if they had any suggestions on what other ways we might ask about immigrant origin in a more sensitive manner. Many participants across groups expressed hesitation about asking either the binary or drop-down question and supported qualified use of proxies in the interim. The most frequently mentioned proxy was asking whether a family speaks a language other than English at home. However, administrators acknowledged that this is an imperfect indicator because a student could be multilingual without being an immigrant or could be a first-generation immigrant from an Anglophone country (e.g., Jamaica or Guyana). Additionally, several recognized that relying on language status does not capture the different experiences of students from different country backgrounds. Moreover, some administrators noticed that even asking about language felt charged: “Even now, we have a lot of people who won’t put on their home language survey any language other than English. We’re just picking them up because we notice that the child isn’t fluent in English.... It’s not a question that people are very willing to answer.” [A-119].

In Summary: Data Collection During “A Time of Fear”

The depth and complexity of these safety concerns highlighted that the current socio-political environment was the overarching consideration driving perspectives on data collection. However, participants could not agree on which version of the question would feel most safe. Participants highlighted concerns with all versions of a question asking about immigrant origin, including both the binary option and the drop-down option. The pervasive sociopolitical stress instilled a general uneasiness about engaging in data collection efforts that might inadvertently expose students or their families, undermining the feasibility of implementing immigrant-specific demographic questions during this period.

As a result of these widespread fears, the majority of administrators concluded that the present context was not appropriate to inquire about immigrant origins. The pervasive climate of fear posed a significant barrier, leading many to either postpone or reject the practice. One leader summarized the feeling: “Our political climate today is really hard. 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, I don’t foresee that you would have good response... **[I]n a time of fear, I don’t think you would have a lot of buy-in” [A-105].**

Half of administrators stated they would not move forward on this kind of data collection right now, with sentiments like, “I would not allow it in my district. Absolutely not. Because of this climate” [A-113], and concerns that “Our data is no longer our data... I wouldn’t want to identify students and put them at risk” [A-115]. One long-time administrator stated, “I have never been more fearful to ask students about their immigrant status” [A-111]. Administrators worried they “no longer can safeguard it from the federal government” [A-115] and feared data kept in a database “could be requested by federal authorities in some way” [A-114]. They also worried about compromising trust, noting that families would never believe that the information could be protected even if the survey is anonymous [A-102]. The core apprehension was that federal agencies might “take database information that you keep and use it to their advantage,” leading to the fear that collecting data could be used “to the detriment of our families” [A-120] or provide “a database that could be accessed by the government to identify potential students for...arrest” [A-116]. Several administrators made statements that were a variation of this one: **“If you asked me a year ago, I’d say yes, it should [be] included . . . now, I don’t think we’re in the space to [do so] . . . It is simply too dangerous” [A-111].**

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR INTERIM PRACTICES: “UNTIL WE RETURN TO LESS FEARSOME TIMES”

Stakeholders agreed that the current sociopolitical climate makes it inappropriate to add direct immigrant-origin questions to school climate surveys. Heightened fear and discrimination have worsened immigrant students’ experiences and intensified the need for nuanced measures; however, these same conditions have made such questions potentially harmful. Further, administrators warned that inquiring now would only increase anxiety without yielding accurate data. Instead, they suggested proactive strategies focused on bolstering student safety and enhancing relationships, while relying on qualitative and proxy measures until the political climate improves.

⇒ Leverage Interim Proxies, Qualitative Data, and Human Connection

In the immediate term, administrators recommended workarounds that foreground qualitative and proxy data. To gain insight without explicitly asking about immigration background on surveys, they proposed using existing proxies, such as language spoken at home [A-110] and adding qualitative components to capture students’ experiences [A-110]. Administrators viewed such measures as temporary until conditions are favorable for incorporating direct questions without compromising safety.

Administrators emphasized prioritizing human connection and safety protocols to reduce the need for potentially compromising formal data collection. They argued that the most effective

approach is ensuring that staff know students, their names, and their circumstances: “The real solution is having systems in place where kids are intimately known — by name” [A-120]. Adults were urged to work harder to ensure a welcoming environment, especially for newcomers, with the expectation that staff actively engage new students: “We, as the adult, have to work harder to make them feel welcome” [A-112]. Registration and intake processes, they suggested, should be humanized by ensuring that “people who spoke to the families who were registering their kids” could make the process “more human” [A-106]. Clear safety protocols were also seen as critical to reassure families and staff regarding external enforcement agencies; one principal described how their district had its “legal team give us exact instructions, on how we were to proceed if anybody were to show up in our school” [A-117]. Administrators described the need for constant vigilance and proactive care, with adults “constantly watching our kids so that we can be proactive in addressing any needs that might escalate later” [A-117]. They also advocated for creating dedicated safe spaces where students dealing with heightened stress can “talk or not talk, reset, recalibrate, and get back into it” [A-111], as well as helping students contextualize the current moment and maintain hope that “there is a future, you know, like maintaining hope, positivity options” [A-111].

⇒ ***Employ Linguistically Responsive Data Collection Strategies***

Administrators shared how important it is to have data collection instruments available in all languages of the school community. As a district-level multilingual specialist emphasized, “one of my big complaints about this type of survey is that many times they’re not available in a student’s home language. So, students are responding to questions that they don’t fully understand. And they’re relying on someone like me to interpret the question, simplify it, and then...it becomes part of, like, well, am I gonna say this, because Ms. Murphy¹ might not like that I say that” [A-119]. The result is that English Learner students “often get a kind of mediated experience that’s different in the act of taking the survey than other students get” [A-119]. Any data collection strategies, particularly those that might ask for sensitive data, must therefore be made available in multiple languages, an aspect that is “critical in having honest feedback from students” [A-119]. It also conveys a sense of safety to students that an English-only survey might lack.

⇒ ***Prioritize Trust, Transparency, and Communication with School Climate Data***

Stakeholders also stressed that, if any form of climate data collection is pursued, trust and transparency in communication are non-negotiable. Administrators underscored that confidentiality and data storage practices must be carefully designed and clearly articulated: “Confidentiality. Where they’re collecting this information, where they’re storing this information. All of those things need to be thought through when a survey like this is used” [A-105]. Robust front-end communication was seen as essential, with one superintendent explaining, “I think that whatever we can share that says the purpose of the survey, and what we’re trying to glean from that

¹ Surname changed to protect participant privacy.

information might be helpful to those we're expecting to answer them" [A-118]. Others underscored the need for multi-layered messaging that includes "messaging to the community, messaging to the kids, and protecting anonymity, and giving them choice about participating or not" [A-103]. Proper framing of the assessment was also emphasized; surveys should be administered in a controlled setting by a trained, trusted adult who can clearly explain the "context for why we're asking for this" [A-114].

⇒ **Partner with Community Organizations**

Acknowledging that institutional actors such as schools are sometimes viewed with distrust, administrators proposed engaging trusted community resources and advocated for partnerships with community-based organizations (CBOs) that immigrant families already rely on. One administrator advised schools to "get your CBOs on board to do it, too. Like if you can partner with a trusted immigrant organization" [A-101]. Another noted that because such organizations are "viewed as an organization that's non-governmental," they are more likely to be trusted by immigrant communities [A-102]. Trusted ambassadors or liaisons within the school system were also seen as key; one board member suggested that liaisons should "go deep with these families as they're doing the intake [and] have a list of questions that can help unpack school climate as they're providing resources. That's really important" [A-101]. Administrators also saw value in delivering practical "know your rights" information, often in collaboration with civil rights groups and legal experts. As one principal detailed, "similarly, if someone in your family is picked up, here's how to reach out through civil rights groups. We did a number of sessions, even over the summer, about the 'know your rights' theme. So that was practical" [A-108].

⇒ **Strengthen Educator Capacity and Systems**

Finally, stakeholders underscored the need for capacity building among adults and infrastructure development to better support immigrant-origin students. They recommended funding a centralized welcome center to create a standardized experience for new families, ensuring they immediately receive consistent information and support—a place that offers a "standardized experience in terms of getting all the same information" [A-118]. They also urged districts to address negative adult mindsets directly, emphasizing that "mindsets and beliefs are some ways you need to fit that in there, because how adults who are dealing and receiving these families feel about them and their political beliefs and their mindsets play all into this messy soup" [A-118].

Supporting educator preparedness was viewed as essential so that all teachers—not only multilingual specialists—are equipped to serve immigrant students, with calls for "educator preparedness to be able to navigate new families" [A-118] and for teachers to be "culturally responsive" and "more compassionate" [A-109]. Lastly, administrators highlighted that staff morale is foundational to student climate, noting that when "they don't trust [in] administration, don't feel safe"" and experience a "sense of belonging", it becomes difficult to support students and families. They added that low morale within the school environment is apparent for students and families [A-117].

SUMMARY

These brief documents a core tension: immigrant-origin students urgently need to be seen in school climate data, especially in light of the current anti-immigrant context, yet this very context makes direct questions about immigrant background ethically fraught and potentially harmful. Multistakeholder interviews show broad agreement that school climate matters profoundly for immigrant-origin students' safety, belonging, and learning, while also revealing pervasive fear, mistrust, and concern about how demographic data could be misused.

Taken together, the findings suggest a pragmatic path forward. Schools and districts should avoid adding direct immigrant- or parental-birthplace questions to climate surveys **for now**, instead relying on carefully chosen proxies and complementary qualitative approaches, and investing in practices that build trust, dignity, and belonging for immigrant-origin students and families. These **interim strategies** can help protect immigrant communities while laying the groundwork for a future in which immigrant-origin students' climate experiences can be measured directly, safely, and meaningfully once the broader context is less fearsome.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We are deeply grateful to the immigrant youth, immigrant parents, and school leaders who shared their time and insights with us. We sincerely hope we accurately have captured their thoughts and experiences.

We would like to thank Juliana Karras for her important contributions to the initial planning for this study and to Andrena Mason for the logistical coordination she facilitated. We also would like to extend our heartfelt gratitude to the team of research assistants who provided their invaluable time and perspectives during the recruitment and interview phase. Thank you to Safaa Bilal, Bailey Buchanan, Daniel "Dae" Hieu Thuan Bui, Vanessa Cruz, Daisy Gonzales, Shaza Kendo, Emma Lezberg, Luka Meng, Shoghik Mikayelyan, Marie Onaga, Cinzia Pica, Sining Tao, Maria Ximena Valenzuela, Rebecca Westlake, Michelle Xu, and Jessica Yang. We are grateful to Carolyn Sattin-Bajaj and Judy Z. for their thoughtful insights as we analyzed our results.

Without your collective efforts, this study would never have come to fruition.

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JANUARY 2026