



Supporting Families IN A TIME OF FEAR

Tightened immigration policies and uncertainty are creating a “silent crisis” for students from immigrant families. Educators’ response matters.

Eileen Gale Kugler

Stories from around the United States make it clear that a new tension has entered schools.

■ The principal of a California middle school called an assembly to calm students’ fears. Earlier that week, a father of four had been picked up by immigration agents shortly after dropping off his daughter at the school.

■ Teachers in a Maryland elementary school met with their principal to express concerns about the increase in hurtful comments aimed at immigrant students. It didn’t feel like the same school they had taught in just a year ago.

■ A 25-year-old teacher in California

makes sure his students have time to talk about fears that their parents may be forced to leave the country without warning. At the same time, he worries about his own temporary status granted under the 2012 Deferred Action for Childhood Arrival (DACA) program.

In my work as a consultant in diverse schools across the United States, I hear one message today loud and clear: These are challenging times for many families, students, and teachers.

Teachers and counselors report that many students, especially those from immigrant families, are tearful or disengaged, worried whether their parents will be home at the end of the



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day—or whether they themselves will be forced to leave the country they consider home. Other students can't visit relatives outside the United States for fear the family will be stopped at the border trying to return. At the same time, many students are enduring bullying, with chants of “Go home to Mexico!” or “Pack your bags!” hurled on playgrounds (Costello, 2016).

Education leaders are concerned that immigrant parents aren't connecting with schools, even parents who had been engaged previously. In some communities, student attendance has dropped because parents are afraid to bring their children to school (Rein, Hauslohner, & Somashekhar, 2017). Meanwhile, some 750,000 young adults (Krogstad, 2017), including thousands of teachers,¹ worry about their tenuous immigration authorization, granted under DACA. The program is under review by President Donald Trump's administration. Some worry, in addition, that the personal information participants provided in applying for DACA status could make them vulnerable.

The impact of today's climate is far-reaching in our schools. Even if a student was U.S.-born, one or more of his or her parents might not have documentation; over one-fourth of U.S. children under 18 live with at least one immigrant parent (Zong & Batalova, 2017). Even if both parents are legal residents, it's probable that a friend or relative has immigration concerns. And even if an entire family has been here for generations, in our immigrant-rich communities, it's likely they have friends—or teachers—worried about their ability to live and work here.

Children fearful of deportation face both physical and mental health issues that can impact them for years (Satinsky et al., 2013). When a parent is deported, the emotional trauma is compounded by the financial hardship of losing a wage-earner.

After listening to so many stories of fear and confusion, I decided to find out how school leaders around the United States are responding. What are educators doing? What should we be doing?

Every school-based educator I spoke with has witnessed the impact of fear and harassment on immigrant students.

How Leaders Are Responding

I talked with more than 25 education leaders, teachers, and support staff, as well as leaders of nonprofit education and legal organizations. Some educators didn't want their names used because they didn't have clear support from district leaders and didn't want to jeopardize their efforts. The vast majority thanked me for raising attention to what one called “a silent crisis.” I consistently heard the message that educators' intense concern about students from immigrant families isn't political; it's about creating a sense of safety and connection for all students.

Every school-based educator I spoke with has witnessed the impact of fear and harassment on immigrant students. Official state or district responses to the current climate, however, have varied. Some state leaders have been outspoken. The chair of the Oregon State School Board (2016), for example, issued a statement in November noting that “many members of school communities throughout Oregon feel unsafe, unwelcome, and are deeply concerned.... It is not a political act to support each other, to offer kind words, or to listen.” The Oregon Board went further in March, issuing a detailed “Resolution on Safe and Welcoming Schools.”

In December, California state superintendent of public instruction Tom Torlakson (2016) called on all California districts and schools to declare themselves “safe havens.” Some 60 districts did so over the next several months. Sacramento City Unified School District took multiple actions, including delivering information to families about their rights, coordinating with community organizations to provide legal resources, and posting banners at schools saying “Safe Haven: ALL students are welcome.”

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In other communities, district leaders have issued strong statements. In Virginia, the Fairfax County School Board (2017) and superintendent affirmed a resolution by the county board of supervisors that the county “is committed to maintaining a safe, inclusive, and welcoming learning environment for all children.” Many principals sent letters home offering support and a list of resources.

In other districts, however, leaders have offered little guidance. Principals must decide for themselves whether and how to communicate to their students and families. Some have been active. Some have remained silent.²

What Schools Can Do *Build a Trusting Relationship with Each Family*

Welcoming and valuing families has always been important, but it requires a deeper dive right now. For families feeling vulnerable, the school can be a rare place of trust and safety.

Aurelio Montemayor, a senior education specialist with the Intercultural Development Research Association, emphasizes the importance of listening to families with respect, hearing their stories, and seeing their strengths.

“Don’t pity families, but be compassionate,” Montemayor advises. “Most immigrants are here because they were in dire circumstances.”

Some principals hold monthly coffees with families or invite parents to stop by during the day at resource

centers the school has created. Principals have used these opportunities to have honest dialogues with families, reiterating a commitment that the school is a safe, supportive place.

Some schools build trust with immigrant families by providing specialized programs. New Jersey’s Elizabeth School District has an intensive program supporting students who are new to U.S. schools, including stepped-up services for English language learners and a psychologist on staff.

Home visits can also be a powerful tool. Yesenia Gonzalez, training coordinator of Parent Teacher Home Visits, which has developed a structured model of home visits, says, “Once we have built trust through the visits, the family trusts the school and teachers. They feel comfortable talking about the issues they face.” Gonzalez reports that some families are initially fearful and request visits at alternative locations, but they are relieved when they learn that the visits are about partnering with them—not about reporting them.

Roni Silverstein, principal of Fallsmeade Elementary in Montgomery County, Maryland, says that building parent trust has always been a crucial part of the principal’s work. That means continually reaching out to families to make sure the school and family work together to support their child. “Parents trust you when they know you really care about their child—that’s the key,” Silverstein

notes. “When they feel that, there’s an entrée to other things that are important in their lives.”

Building trust is a whole-school job. “Every family has a different situation,” says Silvia Nochez, a parent liaison at Centreville High School in Fairfax County, Virginia. “The entire school has to make the extra effort to know about each student’s situation. I know it’s hard because there are so many children, but we have an obligation to our students.”

“Be a Constant”

Christine Butson, a former teacher and administrator, is an immigration specialist who conducts workshops for educators with Catholic Charities of West Tennessee.

“The biggest question I get from teachers is ‘Where do I get my magic wand?’” Butson notes. “They want to know, ‘How can I help? What can I do?’ I tell them the most important thing they can do is be a constant for the child and family.”

Butson explains:

If a parent is going to be deported, it feels like a place between divorce and death. It impacts the student, the classroom, and the community. Most educators have some experience working with families going through a divorce, and they can call on that knowledge. I tell teachers, “The more consistent you can keep the routine, the more you can be there as a listener, the more stable you can keep that classroom and education in that child’s life, the better for that child and family.”



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Silverstein—who was a principal during the tumultuous days following 9/11 and in 2002 when a sniper was randomly attacking in the Washington, D.C. area, including near her school—agrees that stability is crucial: “My job as the principal is taking care of the children at school no matter what is happening in the outside world. Through all these times, including today, students and families need to know we are here, just like we were before.”

Connect Families to Resources and Legal Advice

A key role for the school is to be a trusted source of information and resources for families feeling vulnerable. The American Federation of Teachers conducts “Know Your

Rights” trainings for teachers around the United States so they can help immigrant families in their schools. “We can’t just look at tests and high academic standards while ignoring what is happening in our communities,” says César Moreno Pérez, associate director for human rights and community relations for AFT. “We have to focus on the safety and security of the families we serve.” AFT has multiple handouts available online that detail what schools can do to support students and families. The union recommends that every school have a designated staff member and a bilingual parent who are knowledgeable about current immigration policies and can be resources as questions arise.

Some principals share information

through local nonprofits like Latino Memphis, which conducts one to two programs a week on immigration rights for families and schools. In other schools, the Parent Teacher Association sponsors workshops for immigrant families. Justin Rosario, PTA President at William Ramsay Elementary School in Alexandria, Virginia, believes that its information session “was really useful for parents. We see kids are more stressed out now. We hoped that the workshop could both serve the community. . . and give our students peace of mind so they could get back to the main job of learning.”

Sometimes workshops like these aren’t as well-attended as planners hoped. Fear of being identified as undocumented is pervasive within

the immigrant community. A superintendent in Oregon held a legal workshop for district families, and to make the information available broadly, a volunteer was livestreaming it on Facebook. School officials saw families sitting in their cars in the parking lot, watching the video on their phones, afraid to come inside.

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The superintendent then asked anyone who wasn't an immigrant to leave the workshop—including herself. Families then began to come inside, feeling more comfortable meeting with the pro-bono attorneys.

Even while providing access to resources, however, educators should stop short of providing families legal advice, immigration attorneys advise. As much as teachers want to reassure their students, “We can't make assurances to a student or family if we don't really know what can happen. That can be detrimental,” says Casey Bryant, the legal director of Latino Memphis's Derechos Immigration Program. “Be open. Listen. But don't offer legal advice. Each family circumstance is different.”

Catholic Charities' Butson, who works closely with Latino Memphis, says schools need to know where to refer families for proper legal services: “The best advice is to have the families speak to a legal representative who can represent them in court, such as a private lawyer or an organization.”

Immigration experts note that too many families rely on someone from their community who doesn't have the right experience or qualifications.

Help Develop Emergency Plans

Educators can help families develop a family emergency plan in case one or both parents is detained or deported,

just as they help students and families develop fire safety plans. Although teachers shouldn't ask a family's immigration status, when there is a trusting relationship, the family may share its concerns. Many schools and districts offer assistance on developing a plan as part of information sessions on immigrant rights.

The development of a plan can turn things around for parents, Bryant finds. “The parents seize control of the situation, saying ‘I know what I'm going to do now.’ Immigrants are used to making plans that involve sacrifice, so being prepared and taking action is one of their strengths.”

This doesn't mean making a plan is easy. The realities of creating a plan are emotionally wrenching, points out AFT's Moreno Pérez. Parents have to decide whether to take their children back to a country they worked so hard to leave. There may be poverty or violence awaiting them. If their children can remain in the United States and the parents want them to stay, the parents must choose who they will ask to be

guardians. That may be even more challenging if most of their relatives or close friends are vulnerable to deportation as well. The empathetic ear of a trusted educator can be just what is needed to help families voice painful concerns and take necessary actions.

Join a Community-Based Effort

In some areas, teachers are part of a community response. United Teachers of Los Angeles (UTLA), a merged chapter of AFT and the National Education Association, is part of a community rapid response team on immigration actions, enabling them to provide follow-up support at schools, such as help for a family if a parent is detained or deported. UTLA sent flyers outlining immigrants' legal rights to all 31,000 of their members to distribute to school families.

Education Austin, another merged AFT and NEA local chapter, is part of the Texas Here to Stay Coalition, which includes immigrant legal services providers and advocacy groups in a state that has given police greater authority to identify undocumented residents. Vice President Montserrat Garibay notes that in addition to family clinics on immigration rights, the group conducts citizenship drives that have helped thousands of eligible permanent residents fill out the paperwork and find grants to pay for the application.

Build a Respectful School Culture

At the most fundamental level, teachers can advocate for a culture of inclusion and respect at school. Butson advises that as soon as they hear or see a troubling interaction among students that causes emotional pain, teachers need to pause to acknowledge the hurt and then begin a conversation with the students about what happened and its potential impact. The conversation

may need to continue with the counselor or an administrator, but it's important to immediately recognize emotional pain just as you would physical pain. Although some students may simply be repeating a negative message they hear at home, they need to learn that what may be acceptable at home isn't always acceptable in school.

Teachers can build empathy in their classrooms in a variety of ways. Welcoming America's *Welcoming Week* (September 15–24 this year) gives educators tools for building community and engaging students in authentic dialogue. An accompanying toolkit includes ways to engage families and the broader community.

Teachers should teach the subject of immigration in a fact-based non-partisan way. AFT's Share My Lesson provides numerous lessons plans that inspire dialogue and critical thinking on immigration history and policy.

Continue to Engage Families in Learning

While supporting immigrant families' critical needs, it's important to continue efforts to keep them engaged in their child's education. Young-Chan Han, a family engagement specialist with the Maryland Department of Education, notes that this isn't the time to abandon what we know about effective family engagement. Families continue to need to know what's happening in the classroom and how they can support their child's learning. Important information about school policies or programs should be provided in the family's home language.

Personal communication from a teacher about a child's strengths and successes can be particularly welcome now. Families tell me that they always pay attention to a personal note from a teacher, even when overwhelmed with other paperwork.

Tools to Learn About Immigration and Extend Support

These resources will help educators in working with immigrant students and their families.

American Federation of Teachers (www.AFT.org/immigration).

Materials and handouts for educators and families on immigration rights and policy updates.

National Education Association (www.neaedjustice.org). Updates and resources on social justice issues, including immigration.

National PTA (www.PTA.org/immigration). Resources for supporting and engaging immigrant families.

Share My Lesson (www.sharemylesson.com/immigration).

This AFT site provides a collection of free lessons on teaching immigration and creating inclusive classrooms.

Teaching Tolerance (www.tolerance.org/features/immigration_support_for_students). Resources on supporting students from immigrant families.


Welcoming America (www.welcomingamerica.org), a nonprofit that helps communities become inclusive, sponsors Welcoming Week. Information and a toolkit available at www.welcomingweek.org.

This is an important time to offer families opportunities to increase their own skills. Although some communities have seen decreased attendance in programs for immigrant families, others find families especially engaged now. For instance, the free programs in literacy, English, and entrepreneurship at the Immigrant Learning Center in Malden, Massachusetts, now have a waiting list.

Focus on What's Important

Teachers in immigrant-rich schools know their work is important. They tell me stories of students with strong work ethics who come from caring communities, who want to succeed to make their families proud. And they tell of families who desperately want what's best for their children, because that's why they left everything familiar and started a new life in a new country. These families and students

continually inspire me.

Educators' work can appear overwhelming, especially in challenging times. But schools can be that essential place of safety, support, and trust for these families. Young-Chan Han, knowing what it's like to be an immigrant child in a struggling family, stays focused on what's important as she supports Maryland families. "Every day," she notes, "I get up and say, 'What can I do to have a positive impact on one family?'" 

¹On the basis of anecdotal evidence from local chapters and the fact that individuals with DACA status can receive teaching licenses and certification in several states, including California, Nevada, and New York, AFT estimates there are thousands of teachers nationwide with this status.

²The situation of immigrant families in this climate is evolving as policies change. Although I've tried to make this article as up-to-date as possible, it's important for

educators to find out their own district's current policy and what new opportunities may exist.

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