

3 Ways to Address the Latest News on Immigration With Your Students

Posted by [Laura Tavares](#) on January 30, 2017

This week, President Donald Trump announced several measures to limit immigration to the United States. His administration shared plans to build a wall on the Mexican border and to more aggressively deport undocumented immigrants. He also announced an order barring Syrians and other refugees from entering the country and suspended immigration from seven primarily Muslim nations.

It's not yet clear exactly when and how these proposals will be enacted, but their effects are already being felt in schools. Immigrant students, both undocumented and legal—or those with undocumented family members—feel afraid and uncertain. Bullying and harassment of immigrant and Muslim students, and students from all different ethnic and religious groups, spiked following the election and still continues. How should teachers and school leaders address the fears felt by so many students? How can educators help all students understand these unfolding events, examine the motivations behind different policy proposals, and reflect on what is at stake in America's stance towards immigrants and refugees?

While there is no one approach that will meet the needs of all schools and students in this complex and evolving moment, we offer the following three ideas to address this week's announcements about immigration and refugee policy with your students. And we invite you to share stories, challenges, and questions from your own classrooms by commenting at the end of this post.

1. Affirm the right to education and respect for all students

In 1982, the Supreme Court ruled in *Plyler v. Doe* that undocumented children have a constitutionally-protected right to public education. [The Court reasoned](#) that all young people must have access to schools for their individual development and because “education has a fundamental role in maintaining the fabric of our society” and imparts “fundamental values necessary to the maintenance of a democratic political system.”

The Plyler decision educates young people about their rights and its reasoning also invites teachers and students to consider what it might look like for schools to “maintain the fabric” of a democratic society. The reading, “[Believing in Britain](#),” drawn from Facing History and Ourselves’ resource, *Stories of Identity*, is another entry point for exploring the relationship between education and belonging. In this excerpt from his memoir, Ed Husain describes his experiences as a child of Pakistani immigrants in England and the ways teachers at his school nurtured his “belief in Britain, an unspoken appreciation of its values of fairness and equality.” Share this text with colleagues or students and discuss:

- How did Ed Husain’s teachers treat him? How did they shape his sense of identity?
- Do all students feel accepted at our school? What else might we do to nurture a sense of belonging in all students?

2. Use the “universe of obligation” to consider how we define our responsibility to others

Sociologist Helen Fein coined the term “universe of obligation” to describe how nations define their responsibility to their citizens and others. The universe of obligation is the circle of individuals and groups “toward whom obligations are owed, to whom rules apply, and whose injuries call for amends.” Nations, societies, communities, and individuals each have their own implicit universe of obligation. Those within the universe of obligation are seen as deserving of respect and protection; those outside may not be treated with the same care.

[This lesson](#) introduces the concept of the “universe of obligation” using a reading and a graphic organizer. After introducing the concept, you can discuss these questions with students:

- What concerns and values might motivate those who want to restrict immigration?
- What concerns and values might motivate those who want to want to maintain or increase immigration? How do you think each side would define the country’s Universe of Obligation?
- What is at stake for Americans in how our immigration and refugee policies are defined and enforced? What is at stake for others around the world?

3. Put debates about immigration and refugees in historical perspective

Many observers of today’s global refugee crisis have drawn parallels to the 1930s, when German territorial aggression and persecution of Jews sparked a refugee crisis in Europe. Two lessons from Facing History and Ourselves help put today’s refugee crisis in historical perspective:

- In “[Text to Text: Comparing Jewish Refugees of the 1930s with Syrian Refugees Today](#),” published in the *New York Times*, we pair a recent news article about the historical resonance of today’s refugee crisis with an excerpt of a Ken Burns documentary, *Defying the Nazis: The Sharps’ War*, about American rescue and relief efforts in the late 1930s. The article, film clip, and other resources invite students to ask if there are “lessons” of history that could guide decision-making today.
- In “[Understanding the Global Refugee Crisis](#),” students use videos and readings featuring former US Ambassador to the United Nations Samantha Power to develop a historical and human understanding of today’s crisis. Ambassador Power defines the term “refugee” and tells the story of the USS *St. Louis*, a ship that carried Jewish refugees fleeing Nazi persecution across the Atlantic in 1939 but was turned back from American shores.

Both lessons invite us to consider how learning about the history of refugees in the 1930s might inform the choices that individuals and governments make about refugees today.



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