

Welcoming Immigrant Students Into the Classroom

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According to the Pew Hispanic Research Center, there are roughly [1.7 million undocumented students under age 30](#), who are enrolled in high school, have graduated or obtained a GED, or are currently enrolled in elementary or middle school. Additionally, this past summer our nation witnessed a spike in unaccompanied minors crossing our southern border with more than [50,000 children fleeing persecution](#) from Central America and Mexico. Most of them await immigration court dates while staying with relatives or sponsors, but in the meantime, our laws require that they attend school. In 1982, the Supreme Court determined in *Plyer v. Doe* that *all* students, regardless of their immigration status, are entitled to access K-12 education.

As the number of immigrant students increases, and sometimes in [areas not historically associated with large immigrant populations](#), teachers and administrators are often seeking assistance with not only how to enroll these students, but also how best to meet their needs in the classroom. We've compiled a few best practices to create a welcoming classroom for immigrant students as well as some helpful Do's and Don'ts for building relationships with them and their families.

Building Relationships

DO put out the welcome mat.

Send a message that all students, regardless of immigration status, have a right to attend your school and are welcomed.

DON'T demand documentation.

It benefits no one when you use a lack of documentation (birth certificate, immigration status, social security number, etc.) to prevent an undocumented student from enrolling at a public school. A [May 2014 letter](#) (PDF, 170KB) issued jointly by the U.S. Departments of Justice and Education offers guidance for how schools can enroll students even if they lack certain documents.

DO seek support from mental health professionals and community groups.

Some recently-immigrated students have experienced trauma from violence witnessed in their home country. Having a school counselor check in with all immigrant students is good idea not only to help students adjust to a different culture, but also to process any trauma, if encountered. Some students may need support for how to deal with difficult situations in non-violent ways.

DO reach out to parents, guardians, and/or sponsors.

As teachers, we hear this often: calling home and saying a few positive words about a student can go a long way toward establishing a good relationship with the student and his or her family. If language is an issue, ask a friend, teacher, or student to translate a letter or email home into the native language. Even if it's not entirely correct, the effort will be appreciated.

DON'T think that lack of response means lack of caring.

A parent, guardian, or sponsor may work long hours, or they may be afraid to talk with you because of a language barrier, their own immigration status, etc. Continue reaching out in a friendly, inviting way.

DO tell students about administrative relief.

Deferred action is a temporary relief from deportation. The DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals) program has been expanded, and a new DAPA (Deferred Action for Parental Accountability) program has been created for parents of a son or daughter who is a U.S. citizen or lawful permanent resident. While neither program is a path to citizenship, it allows families to remain together in the U.S. temporarily and receive employment authorization. Point students and their families to the [Administrative Relief Resource Center](#) to see if they qualify, to learn the steps to apply, to contact an immigration lawyer, etc.

DO hold undocumented students to high expectations.

In some cases, you may have to [scaffold materials](#) depending on a student's language proficiency, but the level of challenge should be equitable. College is quite possible for them as more and more states have [enacted their own versions of the DREAM Act](#), making higher education accessible for thousands of undocumented students.

DO check in with your recently immigrated students.

Ask them how they feel about their school work, what they miss about their home country, what they like and don't like about America, and what questions they have. Give them daily or weekly opportunities to write and/or talk about their immigration experience with you and fellow students.

How to Welcome Immigrant Students Into the Classroom

1. Images and Games

Decorate your classroom or school walls with photos of diverse role models, including those of immigrants. See our interactive lesson plans on [Famous Immigrant Contributions](#), the [Immigrant Experience "Jeopardy-Like" Game](#), and an [Immigrant Timeline Scavenger Hunt](#) for fun, engaging ways to learn about immigration.

2. Friendly Conversation

Create mixed-student small groups. Students may feel more comfortable sharing and building new friendships in smaller groups or with partners, as appropriate to your lesson.

3. Similarities and Differences

Identify shared values and differences in the classroom. Plan for opportunities where students can voice their personal values and beliefs to create a sense of belonging.

4. The Power of Stories

Make room for storytelling, one of the most powerful ways to create empathy. Integrate immigration stories, whether through [literature you read as a class](#) or by creating [a family history and/or digital storytelling project](#) (PDF, 38KB) where students can see that we are a nation of immigrants.

5. Civic Engagement

Create opportunities for positive civic engagement and discussion. [Teach middle and high school students about *Plyer v. Doe*](#), and teach students about [their role as citizens](#). Provide examples of civically-engaged youth today with our [lesson plans](#).

This is certainly not an exhaustive list of ideas to integrate immigrant students into the school community. What are other ways to welcome immigrant students into the classroom and school?



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