

current issues in education

Immigration and Undocumented Families and Students

THE ISSUE

Immigration is a complex and politically charged issue in the U.S. and significantly impacts our schools. [Under federal law](#), all children, regardless of immigration status, have the right to a public K–12 education. Schools cannot ask about or share immigration status without parent/guardian consent or a judicial order.

The scale and complexity of immigration's influence on children and families in the U.S. is substantial and far-reaching:

- Approximately [one in four U.S. children](#) are part of an immigrant family and are born in the U.S., making them U.S. citizens (nearly 18 million).
- At least six million children are living with at least one undocumented family member, according to estimates from both the [Annie E. Casey Foundation](#) and the [American Immigration Council](#), a nonprofit subsidiary of the American Immigration Lawyers Association.
- According to estimates from the nonprofit [Children's Rights](#), 850,000 children under 18 are undocumented.

In 2025, U.S. immigration policy shifted sharply toward enforcement, with new laws expanding detention and expediting removal, limiting asylum access, ending temporary protected status for thousands of people, tightening green card procedures and increasing visa delays. In addition, the ["sensitive locations" policy was revoked](#), which had restricted Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) from conducting enforcement actions in schools, hospitals and places of worship. As a result of the policy change, ICE agents are now permitted to enter the public areas of schools, such as parking

lots and lobbies, but must have a judicial warrant to access private areas, such as classrooms and offices. Specific policies vary from state to state, city to city and school district to district.

These changes in enforcement, as well as politically charged language in our communities and schools, have led to [widespread fear and trauma](#) among immigrant families, including children. As stated in the [ASCA Ethical Standards for School Counselors](#), each and every student has the right to a physically and emotionally safe, inclusive and healthy school environment, free from abuse, bullying, harassment, discrimination and any other forms of violence. School counselors have an ethical responsibility to foster and affirm all students regardless of their immigration status.

DISCUSSION

Children living with undocumented family members are experiencing [higher rates of anxiety, depression and social isolation](#). Inflammatory language and policies about immigrants inflict long-lasting emotional trauma, especially on children, and reinforce exclusionary practices in schools and beyond. These conditions not only harm those directly affected but also undermine the values of justice and opportunity the American education system should uphold.

Absenteeism has surged in districts affected by immigration raids, with studies showing up to a [22% increase in absences](#) following enforcement actions. This loss of instructional time not only affects individual learning but also school funding, which is tied to attendance in some states.

All educators have a responsibility to support each and every student, including immigrant students and citizen students of immigrant parents/guardians. School counselors, in particular, are especially well-equipped to provide support. Through the implementation of a school counseling program, school counselors can foster a school culture that is inclusive, safe and affirming for each and every student, regardless of race, ethnicity or immigration status.

According to the ASCA Ethical Standards for School Counselors, school counselors are called to advocate for the equitable treatment of all students and to promote a safe, inclusive and supportive school environment. This includes:

- **A.1.a.** Supporting student development across academic, career and social/emotional domains.
- **A.3.b.** Recognizing and addressing barriers to student success, including those related to immigration status.
- **A.10.b.** Actively working to establish a safe, equitable, affirming school environment in which all members of the school community demonstrate respect, inclusion and acceptance.
- **A.11.h.** Actively responding to incidents of bias or hate, demonstrating a commitment to equity and promoting a safe, inclusive school community.
- **A.13.a.** Abiding by the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA), which defines who has access to students' educational records and allows parents/guardians the right to review the records and challenge perceived inaccuracies in their child's records.
- **B.2.b.** Advocating for policies and practices that safeguard the rights and well-being of marginalized and vulnerable student populations.
- **B.2.j.** Advocating for the use of vetted, bilingual/multilingual translators to represent languages used by families in the school community and supporting broader cultural communication and engagement.
- **B.2.p.** Using inclusive language in all forms of communication and ensuring students and stakeholders have access to materials in their preferred languages when possible.

To help each and every student succeed, all educators, including administrators, teachers, school counselors and others must recognize the emotional toll of immigration enforcement on students and families, especially when such actions occur near or within school grounds. In collaboration with other school

staff, school counselors play a vital role in supporting children affected by immigration enforcement, particularly in cases where parents/guardians are deported or families live in constant fear of deportation. A [survey of teachers](#) found that "85% of survey respondents reported students expressing concerns and fears they could be deported by ICE agents while on school grounds, with 44% perceiving the impacts as 'extensive.'" When a parent/guardian is removed from the home, children often experience intense emotional distress, confusion and instability.

Children from immigrant families are also at [increased risk of bullying](#) based on race, language or immigration status. Schools must implement policies, protocols and training that center safety, belonging and justice in their response to bullying, harassment and bias incidents. This includes ensuring student safety, providing support for targeted students, facilitating effective communication, connecting students to resources and promoting healing and recovery within the school community.

Additionally, students may not initially view educators as safe or trustworthy. When students are exposed to disturbing messaging and imagery related to enforcement actions, educators must be [intentional in their relationship-building](#) and in fostering a sense of acceptance, respect, support and inclusion. This includes maintaining confidentiality in accordance with laws, policies and ethical guidelines, and consistently supporting students with both direct and indirect services.

POLICY AND ADVOCACY

To uphold the right of a physically and emotionally safe, inclusive and healthy school environment, schools and school districts must implement policies that not only comply with federal, state and local laws, but also actively protect and support vulnerable students. The following recommendations support school districts in creating safe, welcoming environments where each and every student can thrive, regardless of immigration status.

Ensure all staff understand [student rights](#). All children have a right to a public education. Under [FERPA](#), schools are prohibited, without parent/guardian consent, from providing information from a student's file to federal immigration agents if the information would potentially expose a student's immigration status. Schools must be safe havens; welcoming places of learning; and free from racism, discrimination and the threat of deportation.

- Establish clear protocols for staff response. Develop and disseminate step-by-step guidance for school staff on how to respond to inquiries or visits from immigration enforcement. Include legal contacts and appropriate district-level support staff.

- Engage families and communities. Host informational sessions for families to understand their rights and the school's policies. Partner with relevant community organizations to build relationships and ensure families feel supported.
- Encourage families at risk of deportation to create plans in case of sudden detention or deportation.
- Advocate with and on behalf of students to ensure they remain safe at home, in their communities and [at school](#).

Advocate for district policy protecting immigrant students and their families. Many school districts across the country have issued statements reaffirming their commitment to student safety and privacy, including implementing protocols about entry of enforcement agents in schools without required legal documentation and training staff on how to respond to enforcement actions.

- **Include student voice.** Involve students, especially students from immigrant backgrounds, in policy discussions and advocacy efforts. Their lived experiences can guide more effective and empathetic policy development.
- **Evaluate implementation.** Review data that can reveal whether students and families feel safe. Use surveys, feedback sessions and data to inform improvements.
- **Collect and distribute toolkits and resources to students.** Organizations such as the [Immigrant Legal Resource Center](#) and the [National Immigration Law Center](#) have published toolkits and resources to help schools prepare and to protect students. Ensure materials are provided in the main languages spoken by students' families.

Protect students from discrimination and harm.

Advocate for clear policies prohibiting discrimination, harassment and bullying based on real or perceived immigration status. Advocate that all staff are trained to recognize and respond to bias incidents and that students know how to report concerns safely and confidentially.

Support affected students' emotional well-being. Supporting children experiencing extreme emotional distress, confusion and instability is of particular concern to school counselors and other mental health professionals in schools. When a parent/guardian is removed from the home, children often experience intense emotional distress, confusion and instability. Students who fear they or their parents/guardians might be deported are at particular risk of chronic anxiety, withdrawal and school avoidance.

Short-term counseling can provide students with emotional support, help them develop coping strategies, manage transitions and adapt to change. Referrals to mental health services, legal assistance or social services should be offered when appropriate to ensure comprehensive support. School counselors, administrators and others within the school must work to create a welcoming and inclusive environment that helps each and every student feel safe at school.