

# The Civil Rights Project



*Proyecto Derechos Civiles*

U.S. Immigration Enforcement Policy and  
Its Impact on Teaching and Learning in the Nation's Schools  
Patricia Gándara ([pcgandara@gmail.com](mailto:pcgandara@gmail.com)) & Joy Ee ([joyee@ucla.edu](mailto:joyee@ucla.edu))  
Civil Rights Project, UCLA

While we have all heard stories of the impact of immigration enforcement on individuals and even children, there has been no systematic attempt to study the impact of immigration enforcement on teaching and learning in our nation's schools. Because educators all over the country are concerned about this issue, more than 730 schools in 24 districts and 12 states opened their doors to our study. What we found is that those schools that struggle the most to close achievement gaps are hit the hardest by this enforcement regime. The additional burden of trying to educate children, *who are often U.S. citizens*, and are living in terror of losing their families, may simply be too much to ask of educators, who are themselves stressed, sometimes to the breaking point. And it is not just the children of immigrant parents who are affected. The immigration enforcement regime is affecting all students in schools that are disrupted by fear-inducing tactics.

This national survey of teachers, administrators, and other school personnel was conducted between late October 2017 and mid-January 2018. There were a total of more than 5400 responses from the Northeast, South, Midwest, and West. Two thirds (64%) of respondents reported they had observed an impact of immigration enforcement in their schools, and about 3500 educators completed surveys.

**Overall**, we found that: (1) Schools in the South were the hardest hit, with high percentages of respondents noting a very negative impact on their schools; (2) The higher the percentage of immigrant students in the school, the greater respondents reported the impact to be.

Specific findings include:

**Almost 90%** of administrators indicated that they had observed **behavioral or emotional problems** in immigrant students<sup>1</sup> and one in four (25%) indicated that this was a very big problem. Huge majorities of respondents recounted examples of fear and anxiety on the part of their immigrant students. One Maryland teacher writes: "We have one student who had attempted to slit her wrists because her

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<sup>1</sup> "Immigrant students" refers to students from immigrant families, both those born abroad and those born in the US. It is estimated that about 88% of children of immigrants are US born.

family has been separated and she wants to be with her mother. She literally didn't want to live without her mother." A California high school teacher explained, "I had one student who came back the day after prom and would not eat or talk to anyone. I finally found out from one of her friends that she came home from prom to find her mom deported and never had the chance to say good-bye or anything. She was suffering but did not know what to do."

Across all regions, **84%** of educators noted **students expressing concerns about immigration enforcement issues at school**. More than one-third (**36.1%**) indicated that this occurred a lot or **extensively**. Although secondary students are more likely to speak out, a teacher points out that even young children "are worried that their parents will be taken away. They are afraid that they don't know how to care for their younger siblings." A fourth grade teacher in the Northeast, referring to one of her students said: "[she] told me that her mom is teaching her how to make food and feed her baby sister in case the mom is taken away."

**Absenteeism** is a big problem for schools. Not only do children not learn if they don't attend, but schools lose funding, they find it impossible to improve their test scores and narrow achievement gaps, teacher assignments are disrupted and teachers can lose their job when enrollment declines, and the empty seats are a reminder to everyone that some of their classmates are missing. Both teachers and students can experience grief as though a classmate has died, when all of a sudden the student is no longer there and no one knows what has happened to him or her. **68%** of administrators across all regions reported absenteeism to be a problem, with almost **11%** considering it a very big problem. Again, the South was most affected. A Texas teacher wrote, "I've heard students saying they don't want to come to school in case their parents get deported they want to stay together." A New Jersey administrator added, "The kids are scared and sometimes they hide for days when there are immigration raids in the area. Some of the students have no food or place to live because the parents do not have a job and they go day by day."

Across all regions about **70%** of both administrators and certificated staff reported **academic decline among immigrant students**, and **1 in 6** counselors reported this to be **extensive**. A California teacher wrote: "One student's father was deported after 24 years in the country. His children were born here in the U.S., but now their breadwinner is gone. Her grades plummeted after that happened." Many teachers wrote about outstanding high school students simply giving up on school because they no longer saw a future for themselves.

There are also **indirect effects on non-immigrant students**. In Southern schools **70%** of educators reported this impact, with **15%** judging it to be extensive. More than **one of seven** educators in the South, and one in eight nationwide, reported that students' learning was being affected **a lot** due to concerns for classmates whose families are targeted. For many, the ecology of the classroom has been

disrupted. One Northern California counselor commented on how the fears of immigration raids had stressed *her* out: “I don’t know if it is stressing them [the students] out, but I feel stressed out about how the San Francisco Chronicle reported possible raids in California. It is a scare tactic which frightens not only undocumented immigrants, but those who are around them.”

**Parent involvement**, which is critically related to student success, has also declined out of parents’ fear of leaving the home and fear that the schools could be cooperating with immigration officers. The raids have also caused many parents to lose their jobs, increasing homelessness and food insecurity. One Oregon teacher offered: “Students regularly shared stories of ICE raids and fears that it could happen at home or at school despite our reassurance that no one would take them from school.”

**88% of educators say that their schools need to address these issues in community forums**, but relatively few had actually done so. Educators mention that they need to be more informed about the law, and about what they can do for their students. **We conclude, however, that as long as these enforcement policies persist, the nation’s most vulnerable students and schools will continue to suffer, through no fault of their own. This is the unintended consequence of a policy that did not take schools into account.**