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# EXPLORING EQUITY ISSUES: Promoting a Safe and Welcoming Environment for Immigrant Students

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## **Disclaimer**

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# EXPLORING EQUITY ISSUES:

## Promoting a Safe and Welcoming Environment for Immigrant Students

### PART I: THESE CHANGING TIMES



Since the Presidential election last November, rhetoric and hateful incidents against immigrant students in schools have increased and continue to occur at alarming rates across the country. Immigrant students have higher levels of fear and anxiety as a result of the administration's stated goals to deport undocumented immigrants and increased activity by U.S. Immigrations & Customs Enforcement (ICE). According to the Southern Poverty Law Center, 1,094 hate crimes were reported in just one month after Election Day. In a survey of

almost 25,000 teachers, 40 percent reported hearing derogatory language used against students of color, Muslims, immigrants, and other students based on gender or sexual orientation (SPLC, 2016). Schools across the country are reporting incidents against immigrant students, including: comments about deporting the student or their family, chants to "build the wall," an assault to remove a Muslim student's hijab, physical fights with racial epithets, even violent threats.

Unfortunately, the peers of immigrant students are not the only ones making schools an unwelcome environment. There have been multiple reports of schools and districts imposing policies that make it difficult for immigrant and refugee students to enroll in school. Despite federal laws that require schools to enroll students regardless of their immigration status, *Plyler v. Doe*, 457 U.S. 202 (1981), many districts still have policies asking about residency

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and requesting social security numbers. Immigration arrests have increased by 38% since inauguration, with a threefold increase over last year (Gomez, 2017). While ICE has deemed schools as “sensitive zones” in a 2011 policy, recent ICE activity has alarmed schools and students. One young student filmed her father get arrested by ICE agents after he dropped her off at school (Castillo, 2017). Rumors quickly spread about an ICE agent looking for a fourth-grade student at a New York City school who was denied entry by school officials. The agent turned out to be a fraud investigator determining if the student was enrolled for the parent to qualify for an immigrant benefit (Robbins, 2017). These hate incidents along with fear of federal immigration agents showing up at school have led many immigrant students to stop attending school. Immigrant students are particularly vulnerable as they must also manage a language barrier and new culture and new school. They may be reluctant to draw attention to themselves and are embarrassed to talk to their families and teachers about problems.

### PART II: WHAT CAN WE DO?



How do we ensure that our immigrant students feel welcome and safe in our schools? Remember, schools are obligated to provide students with a harassment-free learning environment. Our civil rights laws protect students from harassment when it is based on certain protected classes, which includes their actual or perceived race, color, religion, or national origin and could thus include immigrant students. While schools won't be able to prevent all harassment and hate incidents, they should still work to create a safe and welcoming environment for immigrant students that supports positive behavior and ensures all students know that the school will not tolerate harassment.

**EVALUATE THE CLIMATE AT YOUR SCHOOL.** Observe student group relations at your school. Do students comfortably interact with each other crossing racial, gender, religious, and ethnic lines? Do students self-segregate themselves into groups with little interaction

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with other groups? Schools can also conduct a school climate survey asking staff, students, and families their opinions on the school environment. Carefully review the results when implementing policies and making changes. Use PTA or other parent group meetings to gather family and teacher input.

### **ADOPT STRONG POLICIES.**

In addition to creating an anti-bullying, anti-harassment, or anti-discrimination policy, schools should ensure the policy includes definitions for behavior, methods and mechanisms for reporting, and prevention and intervention strategies. Schools and districts can also implement policies affirming commitment to a welcoming environment for all students and to protect immigrant and undocumented students. School policy should state affirmatively that the school does not collect documents related to students' immigration status. The Los Angeles Unified School District recently passed a resolution specifically forbidding employees from cooperating with federal authorities over immigration inquiries (Blume 2017).

### **TRAIN STAFF.**

Districts can train teachers and administrators on how to help families when dealing with federal immigration agent inquiries and raids. The American

Federation of Teachers (AFT) along with United We Dream, the National Immigration Law Center, and First Focus, has developed several toolkits for educators and families on protecting undocumented students (AFT, 2017). Districts can designate a staff person at each school that students can reach out to if they want to report concerns.

### **ENGAGE FAMILIES.**

Provide trainings and workshops for families so they can identify when a hate incident or harassment occurs and know what they can do about it. Make sure families know about the district's policies and their parental rights. Reassure families the school will not tolerate that type of behavior and will provide resources for families and students to develop family emergency plans. Include families to create a welcoming environment for all students. Request input from families when developing school policies and translate the policies into multiple languages.

### **RECRUIT ESL/ESOL TEACHERS.**

Teachers play a critical role in ensuring a safe environment for immigrant students. Since many immigrant students are also English learners, ESL/ESOL teachers will often be the first to notice the impact of any incidents and can support students in addressing those incidents.

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### **REVIEW CURRICULA.**

Teachers can review class curricula to make sure it is culturally responsive and promote interaction in the classroom for students to get to know students from other backgrounds. By creating a sense of community within the classroom and the school and encouraging students to look out for each other, students will be more likely to speak up when they see hateful incidents occur. Students should know the school's policies and teachers should emphasize that harassment or bullying will not be tolerated in the school or in the classroom.

Immigrant students should feel safe and welcome at school so they can focus on learning and adjusting to a new school and a new culture. Several organizations have developed helpful tools to support immigrant students and those who work with them. The network of equity assistance centers can assist families, schools, and students once the superintendent or his or her designee invites them into the school district.

**Their contact information can be found at:**  
[bit.ly/2s07HIN](http://bit.ly/2s07HIN).

These resources provide more detailed advice to ensuring a welcoming environment for all students:

### **American Federation of Teachers**

<https://www.aft.org/our-community/immigration/background-resources>

### **Teaching Tolerance**

[http://www.tolerance.org/school\\_climate\\_resources](http://www.tolerance.org/school_climate_resources)

### **Colorin Colorado**

<http://www.colorincolorado.org/guides-toolkits>

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