



ILLUSTRATION BY DONALD ELY

What Schools Can Do for Immigrant Students

Kate Stoltzfus

Karen Reyes fell in love with teaching because she wanted to help students communicate. As a teacher in the Austin Independent School District, Reyes teaches prekindergarten students who are deaf or hard of hearing the skills they need to navigate a hearing world. What she didn't realize until she got into the classroom was how deeply the work mirrors her personal experience as an immigrant student.

"You want a child to be able to communicate with their family, their community, and it's the same thing with immigrants," Reyes said. "We just want to be ourselves and to be heard."

As the Trump administration takes a hardline stance on immigration policies, these students and their families, especially those who are undocumented, face a climate of uncertainty. By gaining clarity on immigrants' rights, as well as addressing blind spots within school policies, schools can provide support in more comprehensive ways.

Know the Laws

Although the exact number of immigrant students in any given district is unknown, an estimated 100,000 undocumented students graduate high school every year, according to the Migration Policy Institute. A 2016 analysis by Pew Research Center found that nearly 4 million K-12 students in public and private schools have at least one undocumented parent. This year, the number of families, children, and unaccompanied minors crossing the southern U.S. border hit its highest level in more than a decade, and public schools are adjusting to accommodate these new students.

By U.S. law, all children have the right to a public education, regardless of immigration status. Schools are not allowed to ask about status, and under the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA), they cannot share any information or records unless ordered by a court.

Organizations like the Washington, D.C.-based Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights Under Law, however, have heard increasing reports of school staff who don't fully understand the legal obligations or have

100,000
Estimated number of undocumented students who graduate U.S. high schools every year.

Source: Migration Policy Institute, 2019

3.9 Million
Number of K-12 students who have at least one undocumented parent.

Source: Pew Research Center, 2016

➔ Know the Facts

The network of organizations dedicated to helping educators who work with immigrant students and families is vast. Training experts Karen Reyes, Natasha Quiroga, and Montserrat Garibay offer their recommendations. (Links are available at www.ascd.org/educationupdate.)

- **United We Dream**
Download research and toolkits for mental health, safety, and educator prep from an immigrant youth-led network.
- **First Focus**
Keep up-to-date with current laws and policies.
- **Intercultural Development Research Association**
Print 10-step guides and other strategies for schools.
- **Teaching Tolerance**
Find a list of supports, from classroom lesson plans and posters to ELL best practices to "Know Your Rights" trainings.
- **Colorín Colorado**
Access tools and research for teaching and parenting ELL students.
- **Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights Under Law**
Watch Civil Rights webinars and YouTube videos on legal rights and processes through the "Let Us Learn" initiative.
- **American Federation of Teachers**
Download emergency plan sheets, a deportation defense guide, an educator's guide for school and support staff, and share-my-lesson plans for teachers.

procedures that violate students' or families' rights. Parents are told they need original copies of students' birth certificates, that their children must take an English-proficiency exam before enrollment, or that, if students are of high school age, they might be better off working instead. "Small things have a chilling effect on undocumented students' enrollment," says Natasha Quiroga, senior counsel for the group's Educational Opportunities Project. "It is important that educators know what their obligations are."

Flexible and Transparent Enrollment

Enrollment is one of the biggest gaps the Lawyers' Committee sees when working with schools and immigrant families. The group's "Let Us Learn" initiative educates parents on their rights and schools on best practices for enrollment, providing legal counsel, webinars on its YouTube channel, and in-person trainings and workshops.

Although districts need to know how old children are, schools can't require driver's licenses, original copies of birth certificates (a photocopy in another language or hospital records are acceptable), proof of citizenship, or social security numbers. Schools also need to be transparent and flexible about what they accept. If it's not clear that fields on a form can be left blank, even their presence can be a deterrent, says Quiroga. Updating websites with instructions in all languages that families speak in a district is another step.

Schools also need to confirm students' current, local residency. Rental agreements, leases, or a utility bill work in place of driver's licenses, which undocumented parents may not have. Following reunion after a family separation, Quiroga says it's

common for families to live temporarily with another relative or church member. In those instances, a district can legally work to find an alternative to bills or leases, such as considering a homelessness designation.

"Your Mind Goes Blank"

Reyes, who arrived in Texas from Mexico with her mother at age 2, grew up with many of the same worries her school's undocumented students and mixed-status families have. She understands why many parents don't send their children to school when they hear about ICE raids, why they don't show up to parent-teacher conferences, and how difficult their economic struggles are without government assistance. Her own mother worked multiple jobs to get by and wasn't often able to attend her school events.

Her catalyst for deeper activism came in 2017, after a series of ICE raids in the Austin area. Reyes wanted to tell a student's undocumented mother that she understood her predicament and had resources, but she was too afraid to say anything.

"I thought, 'If I'm scared and I have some sort of privilege with DACA, these parents must be terrified,'" Reyes said. "Your mind goes blank when you're in that situation."

Trainings and Toolkits

In recent years, organizations across the country have mobilized resources (see box) to mitigate feelings of fear. Local teachers' unions, educators, or leaders, in tandem with advocacy groups, can facilitate trainings to make sure all parties have what they need. Hosting these workshops at school or offering connections to local immigrant rights organizations support families without them having to disclose immigration status.

In districts like Austin ISD, where Reyes teaches, local teachers' union Education Austin works with the district and other national organizations like United We Dream and the American Federation of Teachers to provide "Know Your Rights" trainings, DACA clinics, and citizenship drives. Reyes helps with these events for parents and educators and hopes to pass a measure to require professional development for all educators and staff.

Depending on the audience, Reyes says, they might discuss basics like the status differences between DACA holders, unaccompanied minors, and Temporary Protected Status holders; pass out materials in multiple languages on what to do during an ICE raid or if someone is detained; or give out United We Dream's educators' toolkits (which can be downloaded in seven languages).

"You Have the Power"

"You have the power to do at least one thing to make students safe," says Montserrat Garibay, the secretary-treasurer of the state labor federation Texas AFL-CIO. When she was a bilingual preK teacher, she had one student who was absent because the student's father had been arrested and detained while driving. It wasn't safe for the student's mother, who was also undocumented, to retrieve the car

of keys and a credit card, a folder listing account numbers, children's food allergies, and a designated neighbor or friend who can pick up the kids from school, or a list of immigration lawyers.

Separately, schools should come up with a designated space for students to wait if a parent or sibling doesn't show up. All teachers should be briefed on the plan and reminded about students' protected anonymity in any situation, while figuring out whom they should notify, what resources are available, and with which community organizations to partner.

Worthy and Welcome

Beyond enrollment and procedural education, educators have a lot to think about to ensure that students, many of whom escape from severe trauma, have the academic and emotional support they need, says Quiroga. It's a comprehensive system, spanning culturally sensitive curricula to bullying prevention techniques to high-quality English language instruction.

Garibay tells educators that it's all about deciding where you feel most comfortable, whether it's doing a training, writing a letter to a state representative, or putting up a poster in the classroom that says, "Welcome, Dreamers." Reyes suggests creating a DREAM support group on campus and being

"Everyone is worthy of dignity and respect, no matter what their immigration status is."

from jail. Garibay stepped in and worked with lawyers to pick up the keys so that her student would have a ride to school.

For Garibay, the issue is a personal one: She became a U.S. citizen 20 years after arriving from Mexico City.

"A lot of teachers would say, 'I don't want to get into immigration, I'm not a political person,'" Garibay says. "You have a child that comes to school who hasn't eaten or has a toothache or doesn't have glasses, you advocate for the child to have what he or she needs. If providing these resources can help them have a better situation, it's not much of a difference."

After years of facilitating trainings—in collaboration with school counselors, principals, and immigration lawyers—Garibay recommends having parents gather practical items and information that they or others might need if anyone gets detained: an extra set

conscious of language (avoid the use of "illegal") or inviting any student or parent who feels comfortable to talk about their home culture with classmates. She reads books like *Pancho Rabbit and the Coyote* by Duncan Tonatiuh or *Llama Llama Misses Mama* by Anna Dewdney, which indirectly discuss topics immigrant students might be dealing with. She's also careful not to perpetuate the narrative of the "perfect immigrant"—the idea that only those students who have flawless records or go to college deserve to be in the country.

"We have all types of students coming through our halls," Reyes says. "Everyone is worthy of dignity and respect, no matter what their immigration status is." ●

Kate Stoltzfus is the associate writer at ASCD.