

Immigration Enforcement— What Can Educators Do?



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As the Trump administration ramps up its rhetoric promising severe immigration enforcement and deportation tactics, California schools are feeling outsized effects. Among all U.S. states, California has the highest share of foreign-born people (27 percent, compared to 12 percent nationwide) as well as the highest number of undocumented residents—an estimated [1.8 to 2.6 million](#) people, or 4 to 6.7 percent of all Californians. The Trump administration’s recent actions target this community and threaten immigrants who have had long-standing temporary protections.

These actions also directly affect K–12 schools. An estimated 133,000 California public school students are undocumented. Almost one in eight students—about 750,000 young people—have at least one parent who is undocumented; the ratio is higher if we include grandparents, aunts and uncles, cousins, neighbors, and friends. California also has the second largest population of [unaccompanied minors](#) in the United States—nearly 100,000 in 2024. These children are required to enroll in school while navigating deportation proceedings. The Trump administration’s plans therefore affect students and families in almost all California communities. Now that the Biden-era restriction on conducting [ICE enforcement](#) in U.S. schools has [been removed](#), public education institutions play a critical role in upholding California laws that protect all students.

Under California law, all students ages 6 to 18 are mandated to attend school, irrespective of immigration status. To ensure a safe learning environment, school district personnel are prohibited from assisting ICE in immigration enforcement on their campuses without a valid court order ([SB 54](#) & [AB 699](#)). In their best incarnations, schools are trusted community institutions to which families turn for resources and counsel. With this role in mind, partners of the newly formed [California Newcomer Network](#)—which includes lawyers, youth workers, immigration experts, and district leaders—have been working on a [tip sheet](#) that draws on the protections and limitations within California law to provide guidelines for educators in schools serving undocumented students and families. As educators, regardless of personal politics and local situations, we need to understand at least the broad contours of the ever-changing landscape our immigrant students navigate. Most importantly, we must ensure that our actions, however well intentioned, do not inadvertently perpetuate harm.

For districts, schools, and educators keen to know what they should and should not do at school to help students affected by Trump administration immigration reform, we offer three sets of recommendations: potentially harmful actions educators should avoid; proactive actions districts should take; and supportive actions educators and school staff can employ to assist students and families in active immigration proceedings. These recommendations are grounded in research, shaped by the authors’ many years

of experience, and informed by legal expertise.

1

AVOIDING HARM: WHAT NOT TO DO IN THIS MOMENT

We begin with four areas of caution to steer clear of during this turbulent time of uncertainty and fear for many students and families:

1. **Do not react with panic.** Many California students are [anxious and afraid](#) for themselves, their families, and their communities. We encourage educators to stay calm, whether talking to students or families, hearing about ICE raids, or encountering ICE directly. For educators managing their own immigration-related fears or who find themselves close to panic for any reason, find a colleague to tap in and step away from the situation.
2. **Do not give legal advice beyond informing students of their most [basic rights](#).** Immigration law is complex and in flux; providing misinformation can have serious ramifications. For educators encountering situations where legal help is required, refer students for case management, so they can be connected with an immigration lawyer.
3. **Do not spread unverified information.** Recently, [news spread fast](#) around San Francisco that ICE was arresting SFUSD students on a bus. Well-meaning educators helped spread the word, but in the end, the story turned out to have been a misunderstanding. This fast-spreading rumor caused communities to panic—some students declined to go to school for days. For educators wanting to keep their communities informed, confirm or fact-check all news first.
4. **Do not share any student or family information with ICE or other government officials.** “Does this student attend this school? Have you seen them? Do you know where I can find this person?” For educators who are asked these or similar questions, say nothing and refer the official to an administrator or designated point of contact (see below, “Clarify District Policies and Protocols”).

This initial set of recommendations highlights key actions for educators to avoid, to prevent harm and ensure a safer, more informed, and supportive environment for all students, especially those facing immigration-related fears and challenges.

2

PROACTIVE STEPS DISTRICTS CAN TAKE TO SUPPORT IMMIGRANT STUDENTS

It is equally critical to know how and when to act to support immigrant students. This second set of recommendations includes five actions school districts should take now that ICE enforcement is permitted in schools.

1. **Clarify District Policies and Protocols.** Many school districts throughout California have created protocols related to ICE enforcement on or near campus. Oakland Unified School District has made its January 2025 [ICE protocol](#) available in [multiple languages](#) as a reference for all. If they haven’t already, districts should establish clear ICE protocols and widely communicate them so that all educators and school staff are well informed of what to do and what will happen in the event of ICE activity in or near school. Generally, such protocols encourage teachers and staff who encounter ICE on campus to reach out to their administrator or designated point of contact.
2. **Partner with Legal Organizations.** There are excellent legal organizations specializing in immigration throughout the state that are conducting “Know Your Rights” trainings in person and online. Coordinated efforts to partner with such organizations to offer training, consultation, and representation can have marked effects on communities’ ability to protect their members. Districts and schools can also partner with legal organizations to support students in families with an ongoing immigration case. Legal services organizations can educate and empower district and school staff by providing educator-specific training about the immigration system. We encourage districts to choose and train one or more school or district members to liaise with the legal partner and help link them with students who have the most urgent immigration needs.
3. **Share Resources & Rights.** There are many immigration-related resources and selecting the most useful and best informed ones can be hard. Resources we recommend for wide dissemination based on their clarity and legal grounding include:

- [Red cards from the Immigrant Legal Resource Center \(ILRC\)](#)
 - [ILRC's Know Your Rights Toolkit](#)
 - [California Attorney General guidance on promoting a safe learning environment](#)
4. **Provide Support for Family Preparedness.** Families often reach out to educators worrying about what might happen should a family member be deported or detained. Districts should provide the supports necessary (including, if possible, trained personnel) to help concerned families create an emergency plan, for example as described in English and Spanish by [ILRC](#). When possible, remind all families to update their emergency contact information to include a person with stable immigration status; as ILRC states, immigrant families should also come up with specific plans for child care.
 5. **Create Welcoming Spaces.** We encourage districts, schools, and educators to telegraph that they are supportive of immigrants and their rights as protected by California law. Districts and schools can hold Know Your Rights trainings, bring immigrant families together with staff who speak their language, and host inclusive multicultural community events. Individual educators keen to create safe spaces in their classrooms for immigrant students can hang immigrant rights posters as well as materials in multiple languages on their walls, and can make themselves visible to and available for concerned students and families. Be alert to instances of hateful language or bullying that targets immigrant students.

With proactive steps such as these, districts can ensure that schools remain reliable and stable sources of information and support in uncertain times.

3

HOW EDUCATORS AND SCHOOL STAFF CAN HELP STUDENTS AND FAMILIES IN DEPORTATION PROCEEDINGS

Much of the focus in the education community right now is on what to do if ICE comes to a school. While this anticipatory perspective is critical, many California students and families are already in active [deportation proceedings](#). Affected students are often [unaccompanied minors](#) or members of asylum-seeking families who were apprehended by immigration when they first arrived in the United States. These individuals must attend court to defend themselves against their deportation. While school staff cannot ask directly about anyone's [immigration status](#), educators can offer support to students and their families who have chosen to opt in to any immigration-related assistance being offered.

While everyone in deportation proceedings has a right to an immigration lawyer, the [government does not provide a lawyer](#) in the vast majority of cases, so noncitizens have to find and pay for one on their own. The best way for educators and school staff to support students and families without representation is to connect them with a reputable [provider of immigration legal services](#). Unaccompanied minors with legal representation were 4 times less likely to have their case [end in deportation](#).

Without working outside their scope of practice, educators and school staff can support students in immigration proceedings who do not have representation in several ways. Educators and school staff may:

1. **Help the student check to see whether a court date has been assigned.** Students can call [1-800-898-7180](tel:1-800-898-7180) or go to <https://acis.eoir.justice.gov/en/> (English) or acis.eoir.justice.gov/es (Spanish) and follow the instructions. For either a phone call or online check, students will require their "A number," the immigration identification number located on all official paperwork received from immigration. By following the prompts on the phone or online portal, students can determine if they have a court date and when and where.
2. **Assist the student to call immigration lawyers and document the calls.** Gather information about immigration lawyers in your area. Document the names of lawyers the student chooses to call, when the call was made, and whether the provider is accepting new cases. (Here is a sample [form](#) you can use.) The student can bring this list to court to show the judge the efforts they are making and ask for more time to find representation until it is secured.
3. **Remind the student to fill out a change of address form when necessary.** Anyone in deportation proceedings who moves

must change their address with the immigration court using form [EOIR-33](#). If a student requests help filling out the form, non-lawyers (including teachers and school staff) can complete it. Assist the student to mail it both to the immigration court and to the Department of Homeland Security.

4. **Assist the student with figuring out how to get to court.** If a student has an upcoming immigration court date, do they know where the court is and how to get there? Provide practical help, for example with acquiring a public transit pass, printing out directions, and finding out how much time it will take to get there and back. If necessary, try to find someone from the school or district to attend with the student.
5. **Educate students that they have the [right to an interpreter](#) in their preferred language during deportation proceedings.** Indigenous language speakers from Guatemala, for example, should not be forced to go forward with their court case in Spanish. Informing students of this right—and giving them opportunities to practice asking for what they need—can help build their confidence as well as their self-advocacy skills.
6. **Connect students to social-emotional supports.** Students in deportation proceedings are often adjusting to a new country, language, school, and sometimes caretakers. They may also be fleeing harm or instability in their home country. Substantially adding to these stressors is the prospect of having to go to court—often, at least initially, without a lawyer. Being mindful of the challenges these circumstances require immigrant students to face is vital; connecting them to existing supports in the school and community—mental health resources, recreational activities, food security services, medical care, etc.—can help.

Many Californians—documented and undocumented immigrant students as well as their families and friends—are deeply fearful of what the future holds. As schools have been legally upheld as safe spaces for immigrant children and youth in the past, districts, schools, and educators may seek opportunities to actively support immigrant students and their families. This commentary provides a framework for how educators and school communities can prepare for potential increases in immigration enforcement, ensuring that schools remain safe and stable spaces where immigrant students and families can access the resources and support they need amid a broader context of fear and instability.

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