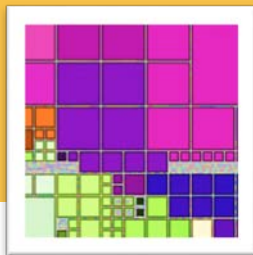


# Strategies for Supporting Immigrant Students and Families: Guidelines for School Personnel

A National Dropout Prevention  
Center/Network White Paper

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NATIONAL  
DROPOUT  
PREVENTION  
CENTER/NETWORK  
AT CLEMSON® UNIVERSITY



# **Strategies for Supporting Immigrant Students and Families: Guidelines for School Personnel**

A National Dropout Prevention Center/Network White Paper

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The mission of the National Dropout Prevention Center/Network (NDPC/N) is to increase high school graduation rates and reduce school dropout rates through research, research dissemination, and the provision of evidence-based solutions. It accomplishes these goals by serving as a clearinghouse and network for evidence-based information that supports dropout prevention. The NDPC/N provides technical assistance and other professional assistance to school districts in the United States, all in support of dropout prevention. Fifteen effective strategies (National Dropout Prevention Center/Network, n.d.) guide the work of the NDPC/N. This paper targets two of these strategies or subareas of strategies: Parent and Family Engagement and Strategies for Specific Populations. This publication is designed to inform and facilitate best practices in school districts serving immigrant students and their families within the current context of increasing diversity and complex federal and state political environments.

## IMMIGRANT STUDENTS AND FAMILIES: AN OVERVIEW

Historically, schools in the United States have welcomed new immigrant children to their classrooms, and according to recent data, at the beginning of this decade there were nearly 900,000 immigrant students in the United

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*“All children in the United States are entitled to equal access to a public elementary and secondary education, regardless of their or their parents’ actual or perceived national origin, citizenship, or immigration status.”*  
(U.S. Department of Education, n.d.)

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States, and more than 4.6 million English learners (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.). The growing rate of immigration began decades ago, and during the 1970s and 1980s, 17 million immigrants entered the United States, more than double the number that had arrived during the four preceding decades (Board on Children and Families, 1995). As the immigrant population in the United States steadily has increased and diversified, so has the need for schools to support these students and their families. Over the past 40 years, the total foreign-born population in the United States has quadrupled, reaching 40 million people (12.9% of the total population) as of 2010 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2014). About one in four children under the age of 18 in families have at least one foreign-born parent (Kids Count Data Center, 2017). And “while immigrant families remain highly concentrated in ‘traditional gateway’ states such as California, there has been a growing dispersion of immigrants to new areas, leading to significant increases in immigrant populations in many small communities” (Dinan, 2006, p. 5).

The U.S. Department of Education states that,

*All children in the United States are entitled to equal access to a public elementary and secondary education, regardless of their or their parents’ actual or perceived national origin, citizenship, or immigration status.* This includes recently arrived and unaccompanied children who are in immigration proceedings while residing in local communities with a parent, family member, or other appropriate adult sponsor.  
(U.S. Department of Education, n.d.)

Providing school support for these immigrant students serves several purposes, including academic and socio-emotional support for the child, assisting the immigrant families, and fostering a collaborative home-school relationship that benefits everyone. Principals, teachers, and other school professionals can work to understand the issues and identify the resources, systems, and professional development necessary to meet the needs of immigrant students and their families (Elizalde-Utnick, 2010). Recent efforts to identify undocumented parents and children in the U.S. challenge the public schools in their efforts to meet the needs of all children residing within their school districts. Public schools often find themselves in politically and legally sensitive situations in which they must balance their responsibilities to serve immigrant and undocumented children and the expectation and need of local authorities to identify undocumented individuals.

This publication is provided to assist school district personnel in meeting the needs of all students—including undocumented children or children of undocumented parents—within the parameters of current legal guidelines in the United States.

## FEDERAL AND LEGAL GUIDELINES FOR SCHOOL DISTRICTS

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*States and school districts have an obligation to educate children who have arrived in the United States. Public elementary and secondary schools have a constitutional duty to provide undocumented children with a free education—It's the law.*

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Even with a long history of serving immigrant children in the public schools of the U.S., there are limited examples of relevant litigation and court cases to provide context and information for public school administrators. Below are two key questions and responses related to current federal laws.

**1. Do States and school districts have an obligation to educate children who have arrived to the United States? Yes.** Under federal law, states and local educational agencies are obligated to provide all children—*regardless of immigration status*—with equal access to public education at the elementary and secondary level. This includes children such as unaccompanied children who may be involved in immigration proceedings.

**2. Do public elementary and secondary schools have a constitutional duty to provide undocumented children with a free education? Yes.** The U.S. Supreme Court's landmark decision in *Plyler v. Doe* established the principle that undocumented children have the constitutional right under the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment to receive a free public education from kindergarten to the 12th grade (Olivas, 2010).

- Under the law, the U. S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) is required to care for unaccompanied children apprehended while crossing the border. While in care at an HHS shelter, such children are not enrolled in local schools but do receive educational services and other care from providers who run HHS shelters.

- Recently arrived unaccompanied children are later released from federal custody to an appropriate sponsor—usually a parent, relative, or family friend—who can safely and appropriately care for them while their immigration cases proceed. *While residing with a sponsor, these children have a right under federal law to enroll in public elementary and secondary schools in their local communities and to benefit from educational services, as do all children in the U.S.* (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.)

## MAJOR ISSUES FOR IMMIGRANT STUDENTS, PARENTS, AND FAMILIES

As the immigrant population in the United States increases, so does the need for schools to support immigrant students and their families. Principals and other administrators can work with their student support personnel—school psychologists, counselors, social workers, nurses, and teachers—to understand the issues

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*As the immigrant population in the U.S. increases, so does the need for schools to support immigrant students and their families.*

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and identify the resources, systems, and professional development necessary to meet the needs of immigrant students and their families (Olivas, 2010). Following are key issues for immigrant students, parents, families, and for the school-based personnel who serve them.

## KEY ISSUES FOR ELEMENTARY AND SECONDARY STUDENTS

The majority of immigrant and undocumented children attend public elementary and secondary schools in the U.S. With the expansion of 4K programs in public schools, very young children are also found in large numbers in elementary school settings, bringing with them unique emotional, social, and cognitive needs (Morrison, 2013). Each child brings to the school a unique profile of strengths and needs that deserves to be supported. Circumstances for these children range widely, from economic, language, educational, health, cultural, and religious perspectives.

The following is a list of common issues for immigrant elementary and secondary students:

- acculturation challenges and exposure to racism and discrimination contributing to identity confusion, especially for adolescents
- accessibility and transportation to the public schools and school resources
- social pressures to fit in and assimilate into the school culture
- stress related to undocumented parents and the fear of deportation
- part-time employment to provide income to the family due to family economic distress or a parent being deported
- serving multiple roles related to parents, siblings, and as a student in the schools
- restricted social interaction within the school environment due to family responsibilities or parents' restrictions
- increased absenteeism due to family responsibilities or stress-related illnesses
- drops in grades and ability to keep up with homework and school expectations

- symptoms of depression, anxiety, and other psychological and stress-related health issues
- varying levels of English language proficiency for the student and parents
- diverse economic backgrounds and resources
- identifying with negative stereotypes that can cause the student to withdraw from school socially and emotionally, perform poorly, and adopt negative behaviors

## KEY ISSUES FOR PARENTS AND FAMILIES

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*Supporting immigrant families includes support to meet immigrant students' learning needs.*

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Supporting immigrant families includes home-school collaboration, linking families with school-based and community services, and providing specific instructional support to meet immigrant students' learning needs.

Key issues experienced by immigrant parents and families include the following:

- lack of access to, or skills for, consistent employment, often resulting in inadequate income to support families
- limited access to health care and prenatal care services, federally or locally funded health and prenatal care insurance, and government programs for their families (Dinan 2006)
- fear of deportation or being the remaining parent to care for a family due to deportation of the other parent
- limited English proficiency and/or confidence to communicate with school officials
- lack of high school education or equivalency to compete for jobs
- acculturation and fitting into American schools and neighborhoods (Olivas, 2010; Hwang, 2006)
- living in hostile communities that may not support federal and local government programs for immigrants
- anxiety, depression, and other psychologically related health issues (Dinan, 2006; Hwang, 2006)
- relational stress within the family and/or with the children's schools
- anticipatory distress as undocumented parents make plans for the caring of their children by other relatives and loved ones, in case the parents are deported (Hwang, 2006)

## KEY ISSUES FOR PRINCIPALS, TEACHERS, AND OTHER PROFESSIONALS

Public school personnel serving immigrant children and families face daily challenges in meeting the academic, social-emotional, and familial needs of this population.

Key issues for principals, teachers, and other professionals include the following:

- staying vigilant and identifying immigrant students and families who are experiencing extreme stress in their lives (Hwang, 2006)
- scheduling time to spend with immigrant students to listen and to take a personal interest in their individual issues
- providing appropriate resources for immigrant students and families in a culturally responsive and sensitive manner, including basic information about community-based agencies and health, food, shelter, economic, educational, and employment needs (Dinan, 2006; Elizalde-Utnick, 2010)
- becoming fluent in the languages spoken by immigrant children in the school and building rapport and relationships with individual students and their parents
- providing culturally responsive assessment of individual immigrant student's English language proficiency, academic readiness, strengths, and areas of concern
- meeting immigrant students and their parents at their points of readiness, including meeting with them off campus and in community sites where the family may feel safe and comfortable
- identifying students who are in crisis and reaching out to them and their parents in a confidential and trustworthy manner, and providing appropriate school-based services through school psychologists, counselors, social workers, nurses, and other personnel (Morrison 2013; Hwang 2006)
- building school personnel teams that work together to meet the needs of individual immigrant students and their families (These teams should reflect the unique needs of each student and can include a teacher, psychologist, special education coordinator, parent, social worker, and other individuals as needed.)

## SCHOOL-BASED STRATEGIES FOR TEACHERS, ADMINISTRATORS, AND PROFESSIONAL STAFF

Public schools are complex environments in which all aspects of children's developmental needs are addressed. Elementary and secondary schools frequently become the most secure places for young immigrant children, and they often provide basic food, shelter, and relationship needs, especially when home environments are stressed and unpredictable. School personnel frequently are the immigrant child's most reliable and consistent source of adult relationships and comfort (Morrison, 2013; Hwang, 2006).

Meeting the needs of such diverse immigrant child and family situations requires knowledge, commitment, and emotional energy on the parts of school administrators, teachers,



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*Preparation for public school administrators, teachers and other professional personnel involves self-awareness, knowledge of other cultures, and skills.*

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and other school personnel. School professionals should be poised to provide assistance to immigrant families in a culturally competent manner. “Cultural competence entails a three-pronged approach: self-awareness, knowledge of other cultures, and skill” (Elizalde-Utnick, 2010, p. 14). While some states have become the home base for the majority of immigrant children and families, the fact is that public elementary and secondary schools in most states in the U.S. are now home to immigrant students and families. Thus there is a need to help prepare public school administrators, teachers, and other professional personnel to embrace and support this very important part of the school community: immigrant children and families. Being prepared to meet these needs takes time, commitment, and a shared vision of the school. Being ready to meet the needs of immigrant students also takes place over time and is a dynamic process with multiple opportunities for input, output, and improvement.

The following are strategies for school personnel to follow in meeting the needs of immigrant students and families:

- Find ways to enhance and achieve your own self-awareness of your cultural heritage and the values that are embedded. One must understand one’s own heritage in order to be culturally responsive to others’ heritages and values.
- Promote, facilitate, and participate in activities that increase knowledge of the cultures represented within the school through focused study of the values, living habits, food, family traditions, and other aspects of those cultures and the lives of students within the school.
- Request and assist school administrators in providing professional development for teachers and other school personnel related to the cultures reflected in the student population.
- Become skilled in conversational languages spoken in the school setting, with an emphasis on learning to speak Spanish fluently.
- Establish collaborative relationships. Reaching out and attempting to collaborate with students and families is the first step.
- Remember that immigrant families might not share a philosophy of active participation in and partnership with schools (Elizalde-Utnick, 2010). Some may view the teacher and the school as the main authority for the child.
- Provide support services for immigrant families. School personnel—particularly school psychologists, social workers, counselors, and family liaisons—should work together. These school personnel are greatly instrumental in helping meet the needs of immigrant children and parents.
- Establish a menu of parent and family support services that can include
  - orientation programs for new immigrants,
  - free and reduced-price breakfast and lunch programs,

- after-school childcare programs that provide homework support,
  - family involvement programs that support the development of reading and mathematical reasoning,
  - family literacy programs that support ELL learners—parents and children—and encourage shared reading at home,
  - parenting workshops and parent support groups,
  - increased access to health services regardless of immigration status (Dinan 2006),
  - ESL classes for parents,
  - school interpreters,
  - community-based and culturally-based social service agencies (Elizalde-Utnick, 2010; Dinan, 2006),
  - steps to facilitate immigrants’ access to banks and other financial institutions, and
  - addressing the barriers that prevent low-income immigrant families from receiving public benefits (Dinan, 2006).
- Instructional planning for ELLs should make use of differentiated instruction strategies that take into account students’ readiness levels, learning style preferences, language dominance, and interests. Strategies include
    - previewing key academic vocabulary before each lesson,
    - scaffolding important concepts,
    - contextualizing vocabulary,
    - providing photo illustrations and manipulatives,
    - providing support or scaffolding materials in the students’ first language, and
    - teaching concepts and vocabulary in the students’ first language through a community volunteer or a proficient bilingual peer (Elizalde-Utnick, 2010).

In addition, immigrant students can benefit from classroom activities and schedules that encourage self-regulation. Many immigrant students have been immersed in chaotic and uncertain circumstances in the transition into the United States, and they benefit from routines and structure that build a sense of rhythm and security. The social-emotional needs of these children is equally as important as their academic needs. Indeed, Maslow’s theory informs of the important need to address children’s basic needs before we can expect academic engagement and performance (Morrison, 2013). In order to be effective, public school personnel must have a shared and common vision for the immigrant child and family population.

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*Maslow’s theory stresses the importance of addressing children’s basic needs before we can expect academic engagement and performance.*



## SUMMARY

Immigrant families are a very diverse group and face a number of challenges depending on how and under what circumstances they arrive in the United States. School professionals are in a position to offer assistance and services to immigrant students and families in need, including home-school collaboration, school- and community-based services, and instructional support. Immigrant students can also benefit from social-emotional support services and multicultural vocational interventions. By providing support to immigrant families and students in need, schools ensure that immigrant students not only develop a sense of belonging but also learn in an environment that fosters respect, success, and achievement for all.

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***For help with additional questions regarding resources for unaccompanied children, please call the U.S. Department of Education at 800-USA-LEARN or visit <https://answers.ed.gov>***



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