

From the national Center for MH in Schools & Student/Learning Supports at UCLA

Supporting Students Distressed by ICE Actions: What Schools Can Do

In times of heightened immigration enforcement activity, schools often become the emotional anchor for students who feel afraid, confused, or unsafe. For many children – whether undocumented themselves, part of mixed-status families, or simply empathetic peers – news of ICE actions can trigger significant distress.

Schools cannot control federal policy, but they can shape how students experience safety, belonging, and stability during uncertain moments. The role school staff play is to ensure that campuses function as protective, supportive environments where every student has the opportunity to learn without fear. *The message to students must be unwavering: You are safe here, and we will support you.*

What's Can Schools Do?

- Schools can reaffirm their commitment to being safe and welcoming spaces. Students need to hear – in age-appropriate, non-political language – that their school will protect every student's right to learn. Districts can clearly communicate that immigration enforcement officers are restricted from entering school campuses without proper legal documentation, consistent with long-standing federal guidance. When communicated calmly and consistently by trusted adults, these assurances help reduce anxiety and counter the spiraling fear that often travels rapidly through student communities.
- Access to student/learning supports can be made highly visible and signal to students that it's normal, acceptable, and easy to seek help. Students distressed by ICE activity can be expected to exhibit symptoms such as difficulty concentrating, irritability, absenteeism, or sudden withdrawal.
- Teachers can work with counselors, psychologists, and other support staff to learn more about how to address student concerns without political debate, shifting instead toward reassurance, empathy, and problem-solving. Brief classroom conversations that normalize feelings – while maintaining focus on learning – can help students breathe, settle, and re-engage academically.
- Schools can strengthen communication with families. Fear related to enforcement actions can lead to confusion about attendance, transportation, or school events. Clear, multilingual communication – shared through trusted channels such as community liaisons, parent centers, or local organizations – helps families understand both their rights and the school's role. Schools will avoid giving legal advice, but they can direct families to reputable, community-based immigration support organizations for accurate information and services.
- Educators can preserve stability by protecting routines. Consistency is a powerful antidote to fear. Keeping classrooms predictable, maintaining regular schedules, and reinforcing positive relationships with adults help students regain feelings of personal control.
- Finally, schools can enhance connections with community resources. Local nonprofits, cultural organizations, legal aid groups, and mental health providers often

have deep ties to immigrant communities and can offer both expertise and continuity of care. Coordinated support ensures that students and families do not navigate fear or trauma alone and that resources remain available beyond the school day.

In moments of community distress, schools have an opportunity to embody their core mission: supporting the whole child. By offering safety, support, clear communication, and stable routines, schools can help students and their families weather fear with resilience and dignity.

Best wishes and be well,
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