

# Colorín Colorado Survey: Ideas for Supporting Immigrant Students and Families

## Overview

During the spring of 2017, Colorín Colorado surveyed its national audience to learn more about how schools are supporting immigrant students. We are enormously grateful to everyone who participated and have compiled a summary of their responses in this report. 117 people filled out the survey from 30 states. While not all responses are printed, all have been reviewed. Some responses have been edited and organized for clarity. As you will see from the responses, our participants are actively engaged in these issues. Some are looking for more information while others are taking a leadership role in their school and districts based on their background knowledge and relationships with families.

Two Colorín Colorado articles resulted from responses to this survey:

- [All Hands on Deck: Creating Immigrant Support Teams for Students in Topeka](#)
- [Keep Asking Until Someone Responds: How a Small Question Had a Big Impact](#)

The responses also informed our [in-depth guide](#) on how schools and early childhood programs can support immigrant families, which features recommendations, strategies, and helpful resources.

For additional educator feedback, we recommend the [detailed surveys](#) conducted by researchers at the University of California, Los Angeles during the Fall of 2017 on the impact of immigration enforcement on teaching and learning in U.S. public schools.

**Note:** A number of respondents to the survey mention schools as “safe” spaces. In some cases that refers to a supportive environment where students can speak openly about concerns; in others the teachers are referring to “safety” from immigration enforcement. As of this writing, schools are still considered “[sensitive locations](#)” where immigration enforcement should not take place.

However, those guidelines are not codified into law, and there have been examples of detentions happening near sensitive locations. We encourage educators and administrators



to stay informed on these policies, to engage in [honest conversations with families](#), and to build a foundation of trust from which educators can [answer families' questions](#) and [encourage student attendance](#) and participation in school events.

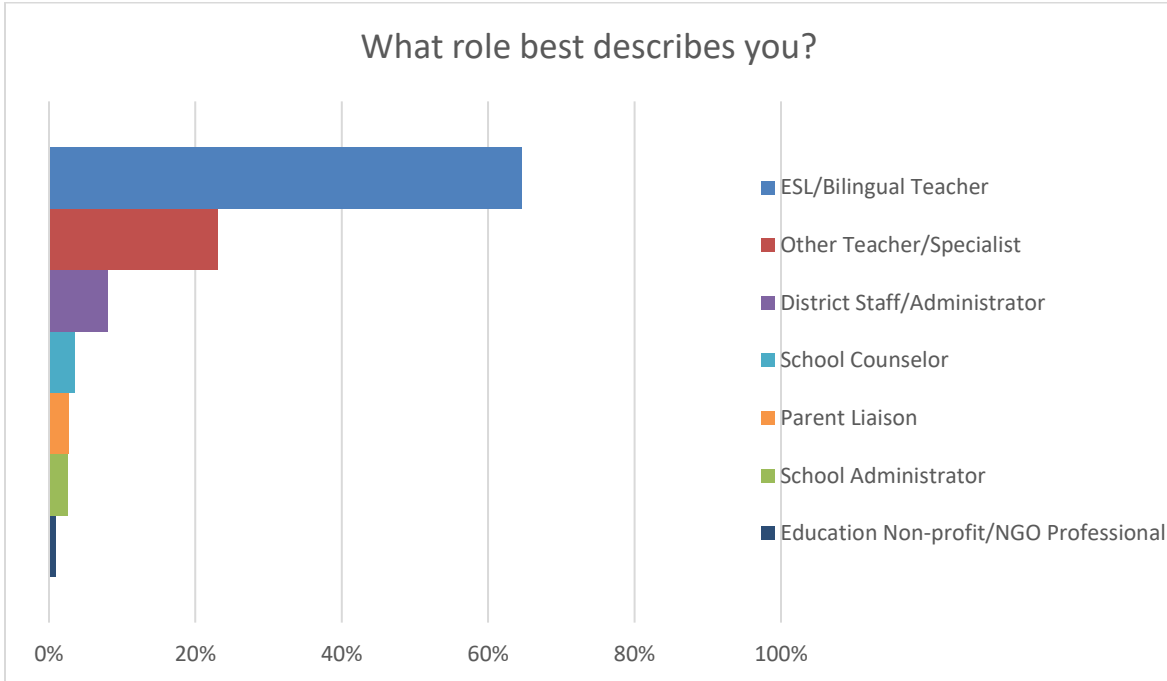
See more strategies in our complete guide, [How to Support Immigrant Students & Families: Strategies for Schools and Early Childhood Centers](#).



## About Colorín Colorado

Colorín Colorado is a free, bilingual (English/Spanish) website that provides research-based information, activities, and advice for the families and educators of English language learners (ELLs). Colorín Colorado is based at Washington DC's flagship public broadcasting station, WETA. Major funding is provided by our founding partner, the American Federation of Teachers, as well as the National Education Association. This report was compiled by Lydia Breiseth, Director of Colorín Colorado.

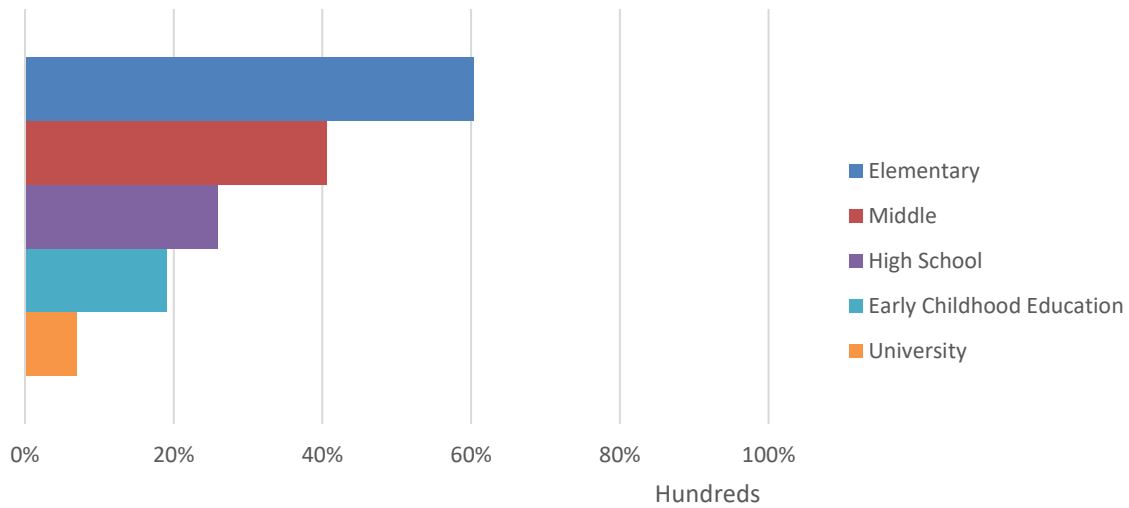
## Question 1. Professional roles of respondents



ESL/Bilingual Teacher	64.60%
Other Teacher/Specialist	23.01%
District Staff/Administrator	7.96%
School Counselor	3.54%
Parent Liaison	2.65%
School Administrator	2.60%
Education Non-profit/NGO Professional	0.88%

## Question 2. Age of Students

What age are the students that you work with? Check all that apply.

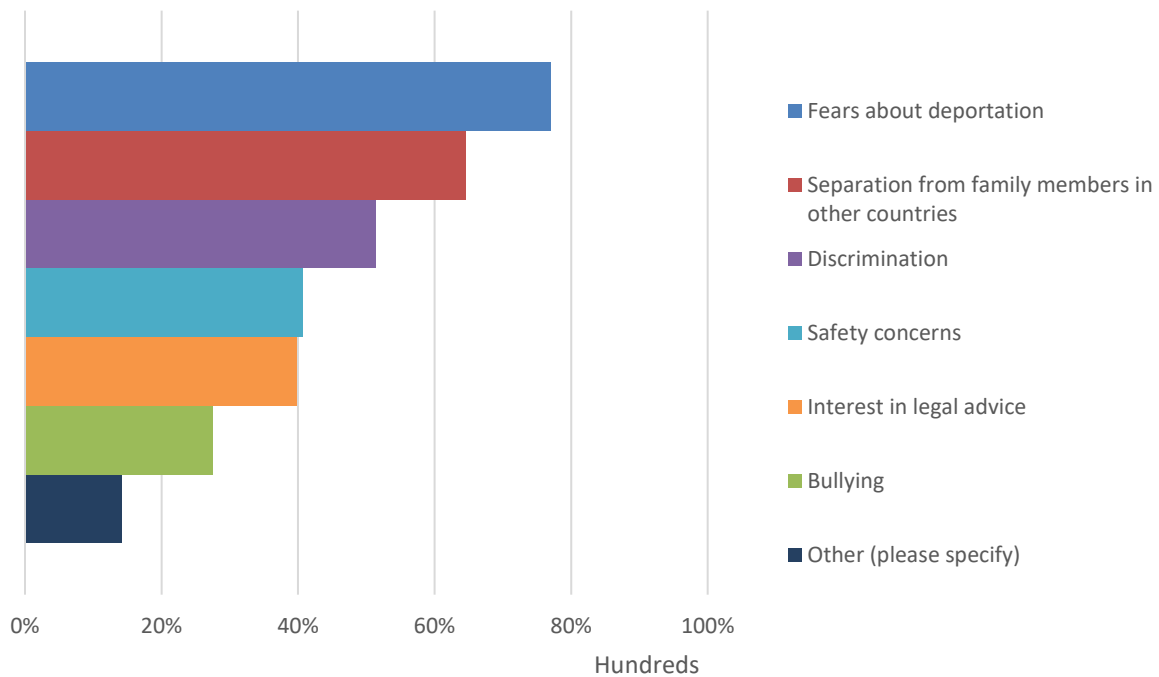


Elementary	60.34%
Middle	40.52%
High School	25.86%
Early Childhood Education	18.97%
University	6.90%



## Question 3. Families' Questions and Concerns

What kinds of questions and concerns are your immigrant students and families sharing? Check all that apply.



Fears about deportation	76.99%
Separation from family members in other countries	64.60%
Discrimination	51.30%
Safety concerns	40.71%
Interest in legal advice	39.82%
Bullying	27.43%

### Other responses included:

- Where to get help for trauma
- Proving residency for attendance in the school district

## Question 4. Steps to Express Support for Immigrant Families

This question asked, “Has your school taken any steps to express support for immigrant families in recent weeks? If so, what are they?” Nearly half of respondents of the survey (49%) indicated that their district had taken some measures to express support for families. Examples are included in the summary below.

### Communication from the school and/or district to families

19% of respondents said that some kind of communication had been shared publicly and/or gone home to parents. This included:

- School board resolutions of support
- Statements of support for international students and immigrant families affirming that students and families are welcome at school (these were distributed both in K-12 districts and higher education systems, like SUNY)
- Letters explaining that schools will not release any personal information or information on immigration status without parent consent or an official warrant
- Translated fliers with phone numbers and websites of community organizations and legal services
- Translated information about civil rights
- Information about the policies going into effect, such as travel restrictions

Some respondents explained an even more robust approach to communication:

“The Superintendent posted a letter stating that all children are welcome in our district. Several community partners reached out to schools to support families.”

“A Safe Zone resolution was adopted by school board; multilingual messages have been shared on our website and through robo-calls to families to assure them of safety and support in our schools. We are meeting with a lawyer to set up advisory meetings for families, developing guidance documents and sharing resources with principals and key staff to respond to stress and possible crisis.”

“Our district has hosted town hall meetings and we continually celebrate and open our school up to the cultures of the students and families we serve.”



We had a number of respondents from New York City, who specifically mentioned the letter published by (then) Chancellor Carmen Farina, which was translated into numerous languages.

It is interesting to note that communication coming from one level of the school district didn't guarantee that it came from other levels. For example, these respondents wrote:

"I haven't seen any organized, school-level, overt expression of support, but my school district has recently published a commitment to safeguarding immigrant students/families."

"Not at all. Not on school level. District sent out memo."

#### Limited or no communication

About 15% of the respondents said their school and/or district had done nothing so far.

"There has been no school-wide or district-wide messages of support or safety at school."

Some indicated that some kind of action was under way but not yet realized:

"They are discussing options, but nothing has been done, yet. I believe (administrators) may be concerned about repercussions from higher level state officials. Some systems have taken a stand to support students and others are still talking about it."

"There is some effort at the school board level, but it is slow-moving."

Others expressed a desire to see more action and clarity, describing their own personal actions and underscoring the different kinds of advocacy that educators of ELLs often do on their students' behalf:

"No, but word of mouth lets our parents know who they can call for help."

"None, despite many teachers asking for both the school and the district to make a statement."

"None, even though the ESL teachers have asked."



“Not that I am aware of. I have told my students they can talk to me.”

“Yes, but not enough. Our district partnered with Catholic Family Charities to provide a ‘Know Your Rights’ presentation. This was very well attended and received. However, our school district has not made an official statement of support for immigrant families.”

“I wish we could give out information without having to wait for families to ask. We are trying to find ways to communicate and involve families while being sensitive to safe transportation issues.”

“Would like to hear more reassuring statements from local police, immigration enforcement and elected officials at all levels.”

“We reach out on a personal level, and that seems to help. But I think it would be better if there was an official district statement of support and clarification about how things will be handled if immigration officers arrive at the school or seek information on students or families.”

In one case, a university professor engaged other professors following a troubling incident:

“Talking with the professors where the discrimination from fellow classmates took place.”

### Communication to staff

Some respondents noted that they received regular updates and information about how to help families and where to get the most current information available. A few respondents mentioned that the district sent information detailing district “policies and philosophies,” which in some cases referred to relevant district policies and in other cases referred to federal immigration policies.

“Teachers are encouraged to be empathetic and to stay away from providing any opinions about the new policies.”

“Multiple all-staff and county-wide memos have gone out reminding staff of county policies and philosophies, as well as the consequences for using professional resources to





express personal or political views. To my knowledge, nothing has gone out to students or families.”

### Changes in district forms

One respondent noted that the wording on the Home Language Survey had been changed:

“Changed wording on the Home Language Survey to note that information was for educational purposes only and would not be given to any agency.”

We have seen other references to these kinds of administrative changes, particularly regarding questions about immigration status and the use of Social Security numbers, which are not required for public school enrollment.

### Uncertainty about what was permitted

Some respondents expressed frustration that the district was not providing clearer guidance on what they were allowed to do, as well as concern about violating district policy:

“I believe it begins by school systems being clear about their rights and protections in school and on school property. Teachers wish to reach out, but some are being intimidated by unclear policies on what teachers can and cannot say or do.”

“I haven't been able to find resources for teachers like me, who are in districts where they're not getting the directive or support from administration. I need to understand what the parameters are for what I can and should say to support students without putting myself at risk of being reprimanded or fired.”

In the case of the second respondent, we followed up with her after reading her response. As it turned out, she had continued asking for more information and eventually was scheduled for a meeting with her superintendent, who was surprised to learn how serious the impact was of these policies on the district's families.

That meeting led to a district-level communication effort and clarification of policy – and to an article on Colorín Colorado: [Keep Asking Until Someone Responds: How a Small Question Had a Big Impact](#).



## Legal services and advice

As mentioned above, respondents described a variety of ways in which schools shared information about legal services and decisions that families may wish to consider. Some of these efforts were geared toward parents and included:

- Translated fliers with phone numbers and websites of community organizations and legal services
- Information about civil and legal rights, regardless of immigration status (often referred to as “Know your rights” information)
- Information about immigration law and policies relating to immigrant children
- Information on creating a family plan in the event of detention
- Workshops and Q&A panels for families in their home languages

Others were geared towards students, often shared by individual teachers:

- Role-playing and practicing what to say if rights are violated
- Encouraging engagement with the media

In addition, a few respondents mentioned that they were trying to help families by reminding them that their actions could have significant consequences:

“We encouraged families to make sure that they are above the law by: sharing rides with a person that is documented when possible, making sure brake lights are working, not drinking and driving.”

“We would like to give common-sense advice to families such as not driving without a license, but we are still waiting for directives from the school district.”

Collaboration with community partners was a key aspect of this outreach, as seen in this response:

“We have had three workshops in the last two months about immigrant rights for families, including one with a lawyer, another with representatives from the Mexican Consulate, and the other helping parents to create a family plan in case of detention.”

## Counseling and conversation

Many participants highlighted the importance of listening to students’ concerns and communicating messages of reassurance, whether through signage on doors and walls, special “welcome events”, informal conversations, or larger assemblies and gatherings:



“Our principal spoke with all ENL students assuring them that they were safe in school.”

Other respondents highlighted the importance of mental health, mentioning counseling, referrals to professional counseling and health clinics as crucial resources. (See more below under the strategies for addressing student and family concerns.)

### School-wide efforts

Efforts that involved the whole community ranged from small steps (wearing ribbons) to big ones (holding a rally and incorporating related topics into lesson plans). Here are some related responses:

“We held a rally with parents, students, teachers and community members to show support for immigrants and refugees. Students have made posters. Many classes are working on ‘identity projects’ to share school wide.”

“We had a day in which staff wore safety pins with ribbons of our school colors to affirm our commitment to keeping our school a safe space for all. Teachers led classroom discussions about what it means to feel safe in school.”

### Community partnerships

As mentioned in some other responses, community partnerships have been crucial in providing support and information, particularly around immigration law, legal rights, and having a plan in place in the event of detention. Organizations mentioned by respondents include:

- ACLU
- American Civic Association
- American Federation of Teachers (and the AFT Immigration and Refugee Students Guide)
- Local teachers’ unions, such as the Office of Communities through New York’s UFT local affiliate
- Catholic Charities
- Faith-based organizations & houses of worship
- Immigration advocacy groups, such as Tennessee
- Mexican Consulate



- Teaching Tolerance

Some educators noted that organizations were able to provide support on a variety of issues:

“We also invited the ACLU-MN to address student rights re: police interactions, immigration, and social media.”

In addition, respondents mentioned that they looked at other districts to see what was happening further afield:

“We like Denver Public Schools communication – ‘Immigration Fact Sheet’ – and are encouraging our district to release a version.”

A few participants also mentioned resources from Colorín Colorado as important in their efforts to stay informed.

### Staff training

A few respondents mentioned the importance of “keeping staff well-informed” about new developments and updates as well as keeping themselves informed. Others mentioned various topics they were seeing delivered through staff training and professional development, such as:

“District-wide PD regarding immigration and what schools can do to support their students and families”

“Integrating various cultural activities into mainstream events”

“Information about Islamophobia”

Others noted a shift in terms of how immigrant students were seen by colleagues, as well as what they were learning about their own students:

“We have social workers, guidance counselors and nursing staff that students feel comfortable with. Teachers and administrators reach out to students. I have also noticed much more effort to bring in bilingual staff to facilitate communication. It also seems that student stress is being addressed in faculty meetings.”



“I have seen the teachers and leaders I support be extra compassionate, extra supportive and extra available.”

“Eye-opening for me was when I took a survey of the number of students who work after school at full time jobs; often second shift late into the night. Helping to pay rent becomes a priority. Often, school falls by the wayside, especially as pressure mounts to pass state tests. I found that a short survey asking about home responsibilities and expectations, their prior schooling and working situations in the U.S. and their home countries helped me to better understand and work with students. It was surprising for me to find that 10 out of 10 ELLs in one particular class all worked in their home countries in agriculture as child laborers. Younger children went to school in the mornings and worked in the fields in the afternoons. Older children worked in the mornings and went to school in the afternoons.”

### General support for ELL and immigrant students

Finally, a few respondents mentioned some more general ways that their school was supportive to immigrants and ELLs, particularly around meals and academics. It’s worth noting that in our conversations with educators during recent months, the most cohesive and coherent responses to current challenges have come from schools that already had strong support systems for ELLs in place. Some of these efforts and programs include:

“All of our immigrant families are given access to the meals program, community help, and free and reduced lunch when they enroll at our schools.”

“They have provided after-school tutoring and homework assistance. In the upcoming months, they are looking at transportation for the after-school program.”

“We held a Hispanic Parent Resource Fair in January, and we offer adult ESL classes every Thursday night.”

“Our school is offering after school tutorials in addition to other initiatives including Adopt-a-Grad and the Bilingual Honor Society.”



## Question 5. Addressing Student & Family Concerns

This question asked, “What strategies have you found to be effective in addressing student/family questions and concerns?” While many of the answers overlap with those in the questions above, they speak more to the steps that individual teachers are taking on a daily basis.

### Listening to students

The most common response to this question focused on the importance of listening to students and giving them a chance to share their thoughts, feelings, and concerns, whether in one-on-one conversation, group discussion, writing, or the arts.

“Allowing students to talk and share their feelings about what they are experiencing.”

“When students brought concerns...I offered class time as a space for expressing concerns and sharing thoughts and attempt to have questions answered. They responded well to that opportunity. I haven't heard much since. ”

“Providing students with opportunities to share their concerns and feelings. For example, having students keep journals can be effective. The journals are used for processing their learning, but at times, utilizing the journal to share their concerns and feelings. The journal can be kept between the student and the teacher or students may elect to share their journals with classmates. Teacher comments and feedback are a very important aspect of the journals. This is a safe way for students to express their thoughts and for teachers to identify student needs. ”

“For kids as young as the ones I teach, keeping the routine going is vital, as well as reassuring them that we love them and want them here in school with us. When the kids go home feeling happy and safe, that seems to reassure parents some too, but I wish I could do more. ”

A number of respondents also shared specific steps they had taken to reach out students by:

- letting students know that they could be trusted and would listen to their concerns
- trying to be as honest as possible with students and families, and acknowledge the uncertainty of the moment
- reassuring students that they were safe in school



- having lunch with students

It's worth noting that this is an approach that can be encouraged at the school level, as seen in this comment:

“Our teachers are encouraged to allow students to express themselves, their fears. Our student group set up table at lunch with sticky notes for students to write their thoughts about current events and post to wall for all to see, be ‘heard.’”

### Building relationships with families

In terms of relationships with families, respondents also underscored the importance of building strong relationships and effective communication with families. Here are some responses of the steps educators did to achieve that goal:

“Establishing a climate and culture of respect and addressing concerns openly and honestly”

“Speaking directly with parents and asking if we can help them in anything. Sometimes they are only seeking someone that will listen to them.”

“Being kind and honest”

“Just showing my genuine caring and offering to find additional support or solutions”

“Making them feel welcome and conducting home visits”

“Face-to-face contact”

“Being well informed myself at all times”

“Going into their communities often, and let them see me participating in their neighborhood”

“Talking to parents and being available any time. Letting them know that we are listening and are available for support. Wish we could do more. ”



“Communicating exactly what we CAN and WILL do to maintain the school environment as a safe space, using families as a guide for needs (listening to understand and support).”

In addition, respondents referred to the importance of affirming that families were welcome at school, as seen in this comment:

“I know of one teacher who called all families of her students just to say ‘I wanted to thank you for entrusting your child to our school. We're happy you're here. I love working with your student.’ I heard about the phone call from an older sibling, and it was the first time I'd seen this girl smile in two weeks. Small gestures (in the absence of a larger district affirmation) make a difference.”

### Communicating in families' languages

Many respondents underscored the importance of communicating in families' home languages, whether through translated documents, district translation phone lines, or multilingual outreach events.

Another key strategy was effective collaboration with parent liaisons who are trusted by their community:

“Cultural liaisons!! Absolutely necessary to have bilingual people from the community to be the trusted source.”

“Interpreters who work with the families closely and have gained their respect and trust”

“Working as a team to address individual problems”

Nevertheless, respondents referenced challenges in relationships with families, such as the following:

“We have found that reaching out on a personal level helps somewhat. But even though families know they can trust the ELL staff, they don't have the same level of trust with other school personnel. We are able to connect them with community supports, but the fear of raids in the area is real, given that deportations and raids have been widely covered.”





## Encouraging classroom discussion and engagement

A number of teachers described the activities they are using in the classroom to address these topics and reiterated the importance of sharing facts and accurate information:

“News articles to keep them informed about the facts of what is happening.”

“I am talking to students and offering resources and information (and articles, resources, and learning activities that engage in these topics) within my classroom, and networking with other teachers as best as we can, but it's all happening in individual classrooms.”

“I explained terms (refugee, immigrant, illegal, undocumented, etc...) in child-friendly terms. Then had my refugee students think back to when they arrived in the US. Many remember a person in uniform looking at their official papers, some remember getting papers stamped, then the person in uniform smiling and letting them move on. Only then did they make the connection to their entry being official and legal. ”

“Teaching students about how laws are made, and how the government works.”

“I have had conversations with the students and made them aware that there is a lot of help out there and reading/researching is a very useful and powerful tool!”

“Giving students a voice in the school and community is important. I created a project for my students, centered around legacy. There were 2 components: individual and class (or group, depending on the size of the class). For the class portion, students worked together to develop and implement a project. They had the freedom to choose the message and type of project they wanted to implement. They decided to create and sell t-shirts and donate the money to our school’s family fund. The t-shirts celebrated diversity and included a quote that the students chose. The individual portion required students to create questions and interview adults in the school (regarding legacy).”



## Question 6. Addressing Anxiety About Coming to School

This question asked, “Do you have specific suggestions on how to help students and parents who are anxious or afraid to come to school?”

One respondent shared the following list of strategies:

1. Centralizing information (policies, procedures, letters, etc.) in one location (school/district website) so that students and families have ready access.
2. Designate a "point person" who is knowledgeable about policies and issues and trained on how to mediate and facilitate conversations with those who are anxious, in fear or unsure.
3. Ensure that staff (not just teachers) are aware of the most salient points or messages from the district and who to contact for more information. Do not assume staff know or expect that they should now.
4. Have office hours/times for administrators to deal with specific questions that arise on the fly. Have all the key numbers, letters, policies at their fingertips or readily accessible.
5. Lead and work with compassion when interacting with students and families. This is a difficult time for all. We have families, students and communities in potential crisis. We should do all that we can to not add fuel to the fire or ignore their concerns.

Additional responses included:

- Empowerment training for families
- Counseling



## Question 7. Resources for the Future

This question asked, “What kind of resources would you like to see in the future?” These responses covered a wide range of ideas, but many address questions around legal information:

“‘What to do when...’ types of handouts/documents”

“A lawyer helpline that's free and always available”

“Anything that takes fear away from educators who want to be advocates”

“Faculty workshops with diversity training”

“Help with childhood trauma from the previous country”

“How to guide parents in the correct direction for legal questions”

“How to inform them of their rights”

“I would like to see resources put out that help parents and children understand what the law says, and what is within the government's power to do or not do. I would like one-page bulletins explaining to parents and children their rights as it pertains to any type of potential ICE encounter or deportation proceeding. I would also like a guide to teaching students about immigration, and their rights as citizens, without being overtly political. While I have done this in the past without sharing my own thoughts, it is becoming harder to hide my views when discussing these topics due to the nature of my students' concerns. ”

“Information on stress, trauma, relocation”

“It would be great to share ways that leaders and teachers communicate the laws (specifically Plyler v Doe) to their colleagues/teams and to families. ”

“Know-Your-Rights information for teachers and secretaries at the school. What are we allowed to do, what can we refuse to do, etc. ”



“Legal advice agencies that can be given to parents in case of housing or immigration difficulties that may arise.”

“More clarity for teachers to understand the immigration resources that are available (locally and nationally), as well as statutory changes around our professional boundary and liability.”

“National guidelines in regards to the dos and don'ts pertaining to information shared with immigration...references to give to parents, resources”

“Specific classroom instruction ideas to pass on to classroom teachers who do not always have strong background knowledge of immigration issues.”

“Steps to complete on the road to becoming a legal citizen.”

“I hear that it is best to have a legal guardian for the children. What else should parents doing?”

Others spoke to the importance of additional support for staff:

“Our teachers and staff, as all teachers, see a lot of heartache, witness effects of deportation. It would be good to have resources on how to debrief, seek respite, reenergize, etc.”

“Teachers are having difficulty coping with the responsibility of helping children, many of whom are traumatized. More attention needs to be paid to counseling teachers so that they may better cope and keeping them informed of best practices for helping the kids.”

### Additional comments

We also allowed space for any additional thoughts:

“Thank you for all you do! I'm so glad ColorinColorado is there for us – I can access trusted resources.”

“Thank you for this survey – I'm looking for every outlet possible to engage in this conversation.”