

Addressing Immigrant Families' Questions and Concerns

We would advise school staff to educate themselves about concerns that families of English Learners in their community are facing, and to be aware of and sensitive to those concerns without making any assumptions about a family's specific situation.

– [Muhidin Warfa](#), Director of the Multilingual Department, Minneapolis Public Schools, Minnesota

Key Takeaways

- Immigrant families may have a range of questions and concerns. Understanding those concerns (and not making assumptions about families' situations) will help schools partner with families more effectively.
- Schools can learn more by providing families with plenty of channels for communication and opportunities to share input.



See this information online

Addressing Immigrant Families' Questions and Concerns

- View online: <http://www.colorincolorado.org/immigration/guide/questions>
- Download PDF: <http://www.colorincolorado.org/immigration/guide/questions-pdf>

Complete guide: <http://www.colorincolorado.org/immigration/guide>

Excerpted from *How to Support Immigrant Students and Families*.

Listen to immigrant families' questions and concerns

Why this matters

Immigrant families' situations can be very complex, varying from community to community and family to family. In order to best address parents' concerns, it is critical to ask for their input and give them a variety of avenues for sharing that input. You may be surprised at what parents would find helpful or unhelpful – which is why it is important to ask! For example, educators who completed our survey indicated that families had concerns about the following issues:

- Fears about deportation
- Separation from family members in other countries
- Discrimination
- Safety concerns
- Interest in legal advice
- Bullying
- Where to get help for trauma
- Proving residency in the school district

Educators have also received requests from families who wanted information about how to manage stress and help their children manage stress and anxiety, including from parents of young children (Cervantes, Ullrich, & Matthews, 2018).

Some school districts have also put extra channels of communication in place for immigrant families to share questions and concerns. For example, officials in Los Angeles set up a [hotline and a website](#) for questions related to immigration, while officials in Santa Fe, New Mexico created a hotline to report bullying or harassment and a parent group for immigrant families to “collect information and share news.”

Respondents to our 2017 survey on how schools were supporting immigrant students said they were making a point to:

Speak directly with parents and ask if we can help them in anything. Sometimes they are only seeking someone that will listen to them.

Establish a climate and culture of respect and addressing concerns openly and honestly.



Tips for getting started

You can gather input from families in both private and group settings by collaborating with a cultural liaison and asking families what kinds of information they want and how they would like to receive it. You may also wish to:

- provide families with a space for meeting and opportunities for discussion
- determine what roles your staff and community partners can play
- find ways to make outreach as [culturally responsive](#) as possible
- find ways to share information with multiple families who may have similar questions
- encourage immigrant families [to take leadership roles](#).

Recommended resources

- [Drawing Upon Strong Community Support: Meeting Immigrant Families' Needs During Uncertain Times](#) (Muhidin Warfa, Director of the Multilingual Department. – Minneapolis Public Schools, MN)

Recommended videos

- [Question from a Muslim parent](#) (Nathaniel Provencio – Principal, Minnieville Elementary School, VA)



Expanding parent outreach

Wolfe Street Academy in Baltimore is a [community school](#) that has a great relationship with its families; a school-wide morning meeting draws dozens of parents to the school each day. Immigrant parents wanted more information about changing immigration policies, however, so school leaders have:

- hosted parent workshops to answer questions about immigration policy, crisis management, and supporting kids struggling with anxiety
- organized an informal support group for parents
- offered space in the school for parents to meet
- distributed updated information through the school's parent action committee
- partnered with local groups that have offered family workshops on crisis, anxiety, and stress management.



Be honest with families and share the kinds of support you can provide

Why this matters

Educators and school leaders spoke about the need to be honest and realistic with families while reassuring them that they were doing everything in their power to keep students safe. They did not want to offer false hope but were still striving to address parents' concerns.

Tips for getting started

Administrators can have address families' concerns by:

- answering questions honestly
- sharing policies proactively
- asking parents what they would find helpful (such as video-streaming events for parents without requiring attendance)
- reminding families that all children have a constitutional right to a free public K-12 education and they have rights about sharing their and their child's personal information under FERPA
- keeping lines of communication open.

In addition:

- Talk with colleagues in your school, district, or professional learning communities about how they are addressing these challenging conversations.
- Do your best to understand your own local context and families' concerns. Current approaches to communicating about these issues vary widely, even within the same district.
- Ask families for their input. While some things are beyond your control, there may be other things you can do that would help families feel more comfortable in sending their kids to school and coming to the school themselves.
- Work with community partners such as an immigration advocacy organization to provide accurate, up-to-date information.





Speaking sincerely with families

[Scott Kizner](#), Superintendent of Stafford County Schools (and former Superintendent in Harrisonburg, VA) writes,

At a Hispanic Parent Teacher Organization meeting on immigration, one parent was emotionally upset on the possibility that she could be separated from her child and I went over to her to show support. It was at that time that I also told parents that they must have a plan just in case they are separated...My main role is to provide moral leadership and also make school resources available to the students, families and community. It is also important I share what our legal role is and not to over-promise, but also take steps to alleviate fear. Being forthright and keeping the communication channels open with the school community is critical.

Dallas, TX school psychologist [Dr. Lisa Peterson](#) writes,

Instead of talking about the future, which is so uncertain and may just exacerbate negative emotions, focus on the factors that will help them get through challenges in the present. Compliment them on their effort in school and other activities. Point out their own personal strengths that will help them when times are challenging. And always let them know that you will be there for them.



Share information through outreach and events

Why this matters

Families may not know where to turn for help and may be afraid to reach out with questions. Schools and early childhood programs can offer workshops, family nights, or other events about:

- “know your rights” sessions: This information helps families understand what rights they do have, even if they are undocumented, and what to expect if detained. (Learn more about how educators in [North Carolina](#), [Virginia](#), and [Los Angeles](#) are sharing this kind of information with families.)
- information about the school/program policies regarding enrollment and immigration
- resources in the community
- tips for managing stress.

Note: The information in this guide should not be interpreted as legal advice. Any individual or organization seeking legal advice related to immigration issues should consult with the appropriate attorneys, local government officials, or non-profit organizations specializing in immigration law that can offer guidance. **We also remind educators not to provide legal advice.**

Reminders to families

Some educators are reminding families to avoid run-ins with the law that can lead to immigration proceedings, such as getting pulled over for a broken taillight, driving without a license, driving under the influence, or even riding in a car with someone else who is undocumented. (See more about driving while undocumented in this [New York Times article](#).)

Are we allowed to hold these kinds of events at school?

Schools and districts across the country are answering that question differently with regards to using school facilities and teacher involvement. See more [guidelines for educators in our section on educator advocacy and outreach](#). For schools that have policies prohibiting events explicitly about immigration issues, community partners or teachers’ unions may be able to host events on their property in collaboration (directly or indirectly) with the school.



Tips for getting started

- Talk with families and staff who work closely with families about what kinds of information they would find most useful.
- Connect with a legal or immigration advocacy group to share this information with families.
- Look for ways to share this kind of information on a regular basis, such as at parent teacher conferences with all families, and include a way for them to follow up with you. This places the decision to talk more about these issues in families' hands.
- Look for ways that can make these events more accessible for families, such as:
 - providing transportation, meals, child care, and interpretation (if needed)
 - holding events at times convenient to the families
 - holding events in families' neighborhoods (this may address restrictions on the kinds of events that can be held at the school and make families feel more comfortable)
 - offering information in different formats for families who may not wish to visit the school, such as phone calls, email, text, fliers, or livestreamed video events.

Recommended resources

- [Hosting Know Your Rights and family preparedness workshops at your school](#) (Informed Immigrants)
- [Know Your Rights: A Guide to Your Rights When Interacting with Law Enforcement in Multiple Languages](#) (Catholic Legal Immigration Network)
- Know Your Rights: Guide in [English](#) and [Spanish](#) (American Federation of Teachers)

Recommended videos

- [Supporting Immigrant Parents:](#) This Spanish-language video addresses tough topics such as bullying and potential family separation. The video is also available with English subtitles.

