



**Written Testimony from Alejandra Vázquez Baur  
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Regarding the June 4, 2024 Hearing by the House Education and the Workforce Subcommittee on Early Childhood, Elementary and Secondary Education, entitled “The Consequences of Biden’s Border Chaos for K-12 Schools”

Chairman Bean, Ranking Member Bonamici, and members of the subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to submit this written testimony. My name is Alejandra Vázquez Baur. I am a fellow at The Century Foundation, an independent think tank that conducts research and develops policy solutions to advance economic, racial, gender, and disability equity in education, health care, and the workplace. My particular areas of focus and expertise are in school integration and immigrant education, and my testimony addresses the rights of undocumented immigrant students and their families and the need to secure those rights during this critical moment in American history.

I would like to convey three main points for the subcommittee to keep in mind as it considers federal policy that affects K–12 schools with significant immigrant student populations.

**First, the *Plyler v. Doe* decision of 1982 firmly establishes the right of *all* children to a free and appropriate education regardless of citizenship status.** Any effort to single out immigrants as a burden on schools is discriminatory and goes against the precedent established by that important civil rights decision, and against the foundational values we hold as a country of equal access to education and opportunity for all.

**Second, if our K–12 schools are ill-equipped to support newly arrived students, this is not the fault of new families themselves.** Rather, it is the consequence of years of underinvestment in public education and misalignment of resources in response to changes in student and community needs.

**Third, immigrants and their children make our communities, our schools, and our country better, richer, safer, and more vibrant.** While it is certainly time to update our immigration policies to reflect the modern needs of immigrants and their new communities in the United States, there should be no debate about the right of all children, including undocumented immigrant children, to receive an education in our schools, and no debate, when the facts are examined carefully, of the benefits to all students in the United States that immigrant children bring to our schools.

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As a high school teacher in Miami-Dade County Public Schools, I taught over 600 students, including several new students from Haiti, Honduras, Venezuela, and other countries. Contrary to politically motivated mischaracterizations, my immigrant students aimed to make friends, learn English, graduate from school, and develop financial self-sufficiency and agency by working hard and contributing to their new community in Miami—much like their other 15-year-old peers. As a researcher and advocate, these are the very characteristics I see in our newcomer students when I visit schools across the country. Those familiar with education case law know that the justices in [Plyler v. Doe](#) (1982) named *this* as a primary purpose of education—to provide the basic tools for people to “lead economically productive lives to the benefit of us all.”

When the Court decided in favor of protecting the educational rights of undocumented students in *Plyler*, their reasoning was straightforward: 1) the Constitution’s [Fourteenth Amendment](#) prohibits states from denying “any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws,” including protection of those without legal status; and 2) citing [Brown v. Board of Education](#) (1954), the Court recognized that denying undocumented students within a U.S. state’s jurisdiction a basic education would “deny them the ability to live within the structure of our civic institutions, and foreclose any realistic possibility that they will contribute in even the smallest way to the progress of our Nation.” This principle—laws apply equally to all—is a foundational American value and a cornerstone of a healthy democracy.

The Court’s decision was clearly intended to protect access to education—and the opportunity to contribute to American society—for *all* children, including undocumented children. Disregarding these students’ equal access to schools not only ignores legal precedent: it also yields yet another form of discrimination that hurts all students, our economy, and our democracy. Further, it represents an assault on foundational American legal traditions and the core of our democracy as established by the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment. It is un-American, and it is inexcusable.

In the midst of a contentious debate over immigration policy, it has become too easy for many to demonize these migrant youth. But when it comes to how they behave in school, how much they value their education, and how they hope to use their education to achieve their dreams later in life, there are more similarities than there are differences between migrant teenagers and teenage children born and raised all their lives in the United States. Why would we treat their dreams and opportunities any differently?

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Some of the witnesses for this hearing, and others who have spoken on this issue, would have us believe that students like those I taught in Miami are stressing the resources in public schools. Texas Governor Greg Abbott has [specifically argued](#) that it is too expensive to give these young children the education our country's courts have determined they are entitled to. It is worth noting that Texas falls in the bottom ten of all states in per-pupil spending, trailing [\\$4,000 behind the national per-pupil spending average](#). The state of Texas is making a choice about where to invest its resources, and if there are shortfalls in public education that prevent the state from meeting its education obligations, this is a consequence of choices the state is making.

And of course, this isn't just a Texas problem. According to a [2020 report](#) by my Century Foundation colleagues, the United States underfunds its K–12 public schools by nearly \$150 billion annually, denying more than 30 million schoolchildren the resources they need to succeed in the classroom and beyond. The report found that this is especially true for school districts with high concentrations of Latino and Black students, who experience an average education spending deficit of more than \$5,000 per student. While Congress has [held funding steady](#) over the past two fiscal years for key education programs, such as Title I and Title III, failure to increase funding in real terms for the services these programs provide to all students, including immigrant students, will make it even more difficult for school districts to meet their obligations to educate newly arrived immigrant students.

As I mentioned in the beginning of my testimony, research is clear that immigrants make our communities and our country better, richer, safer, and more vibrant. They bring numerous assets to our classrooms, and when immigrant students do well in U.S. public schools, they make our schools better for everyone.

Studies have repeatedly found that the presence of immigrant students in K–12 classrooms improved the academic outcomes of U.S.-born peers. In a [2023 article from the \*Review of Economic Studies\*](#), researchers found that, in most cases, greater exposure to immigrant peers correlated with better math and reading scores among U.S.-born students. A [2021 study from experts at Northwestern, UCLA, and the American Institutes for Research](#) found similar results, affirming that increasing a U.S.-born student's immigrant exposure was correlated with bumps in reading and math scores. It also revealed that, on average, immigrant students have fewer serious disciplinary incidents than their U.S.-born peers. This might have a beneficial effect on their U.S.-born classmates' behavior. Furthermore, data from [Chicago](#), [Texas](#), [California](#), [Hawaii](#), [Oregon](#), and [New York](#) show that—over time—large majorities of U.S. K–12 students who are

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non-native speakers of English will become fully proficient in English *and* have academic outcomes that are as good or better than their native English-speaking peers.

It must be added that the benefits that immigrants bring to our country extend far beyond the classroom. As part of its examination of the impact of immigration on K–12 public schools, I strongly encourage the subcommittee to closely review the positive—and well-established—impacts immigrants bring to their communities and the nation at large, especially as immigrant students graduate and age out of the school system. Fortunately, we need not rely solely on anecdotes in this area either.

For instance, in 2013, [researchers from Saint Louis University, the University of Texas-Austin and Iowa State University analyzed data](#) on tens of thousands of people in the United States to compare native-born Americans’ behavior with immigrants’ behavior. Their findings were unambiguous, so I am going to quote them directly: “[n]o matter the region of the world, immigrants to the US are less likely to engage in violent or nonviolent antisocial behaviors than native-born Americans.” Specifically, and contrary to politically motivated mischaracterizations of immigrants as disproportionately violent, they are less likely than native-born Americans to destroy property, abuse animals, commit domestic violence, start fights, use a weapon, or commit many other antisocial behaviors. [In 2020, an updated study from experts at East Tennessee State University and Yale University](#) found precisely the same thing. Findings from these studies directly challenge assumptions about criminality that are often used when discussing immigrant communities in the United States.

Further, the United States gains immense economic benefits from welcoming immigrant families. For example, [slightly more than 21 percent of Florida residents are immigrants](#), and those 4.6 million people pay annual taxes of nearly \$40 billion. Indeed, [in the Jacksonville, Florida, Metropolitan Area alone](#), immigrant families paid nearly \$330 million in state and local taxes—and \$1 billion in federal taxes. That \$1 billion—federal taxes paid by immigrant residents of a single U.S. metro area—is enough to fund the federal government's entire investment, insufficient as it may be, in K–12 English language acquisition ([ESEA's Title III](#)).

The truth is that the United States is both fortunate to be able to attract so many immigrants and it is dependent on a regular influx of immigrants to support our economy. Immigrant families enhance our economy and our communities. Further, immigrant children are high-potential students bringing valuable linguistic and cultural assets to our public K–12 schools. As a result of

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decades of immigration, our national future will be richer, safer, and smarter—but only if we do our part to protect the dignity of our new neighbors and support their integration, growth, and development.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit this written testimony.

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