

# ‘They’re going to deport us’: Trump’s immigration policies prompt some children to skip school

Every missed day matters, educators say

By [Giulia McDonnell Nieto del Rio](#), [Christopher Huffaker](#) and [John Hilliard](#) Globe Staff, Updated February 25, 2025, 7:02 a.m.



Esperanza, a Guatemalan mother who is in the United States without legal authorization, walked with her 3-year-old and 9-year-old daughters on the way to school. On at least one occasion, she has kept her daughter home for fear of immigration enforcement. PAT GREENHOUSE/GLOBE STAFF

LYNN — Esperanza and her two daughters fled the violence and hunger the family endured in the western highlands of [Guatemala](#) in the hopes that one day the girls could



freely study and grow up out of harm's way.

But on Monday morning, Esperanza's fourth-grade daughter clutched the fence outside of her [Lynn elementary school](#) in a moment of anxiousness that had become common for her since President Trump's inauguration.

"I think that they're going to deport us," the 9-year-old said in Spanish. "It scares me."

Esperanza, an asylum-seeker who asked the Globe to withhold her last name and the names of her children because of deportation concerns, said she kept her daughter home at least once in the past month over fears that immigration officials would arrest the family. Her family is living in the country without legal authorization. The 9-year-old frequently worries that while she's in class, immigration agents will separate the family. It's a fear they all share. On Monday, her 3-year-old sister began sobbing as she watched her sibling slip through the doors of the school building.

[Amid the Trump administration's](#) promises of mass deportations, some schools in Massachusetts and nationwide in recent weeks saw an uptick in absences among migrant students. Both the families and some Massachusetts superintendents say the federal government's immigration policies — which now allow Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents to enter schools to make arrests — are pushing immigrant children away from protected learning environments. As families grapple with the prospect of immigration enforcement around schools, some have opted to pull their children from classes.

Absences appeared to spike in late January and early February, district data show, with multiple school leaders pointing to the fear of ICE raids, though some of the absences likely were the result of seasonal illness and bad weather. And while attendance has largely returned to normal in some districts, superintendents said the damage could be lasting: Children aren't focused on learning, but on whether their families will be broken apart. Some families, unwilling to take the chance, have opted to return to their home countries.



“This is the best country to educate kids, and so being an educator and knowing that some of these students are going back to a place that doesn’t have the same opportunities is heartbreaking,” said Stoughton Superintendent Joseph Baeta, himself an immigrant from Portugal.

And every day missed matters, educators said, particularly for the many immigrant students who previously had little to no formal education. Research is clear that to learn, students need to be in the classroom.

“We know when our students show up, they learn,” said Chelsea Superintendent Almudena Abeyta. “Our goal is to set our kids on a path that will set them up to be successful.”

In many Massachusetts communities with significant foreign-born populations, fear has washed over families. School administrators reported thousands of children — in districts such as Worcester, Chelsea, Lowell, and Salem — have stayed home as rumors swirled on social media about ICE agents.

Chatter that ICE was active wasn’t unfounded, though agents conducting arrests in the Boston area appear to largely be targeting people with criminal histories, and in the Trump’s administration’s first month, deportation rates have been lower than those of Joe Biden [during his last year in office](#). The week of the inauguration, several people were taken into custody, including a man outside the Chelsea Market Basket. In late January, a Lynn [teenager was swiftly detained by ICE](#) after she was arrested for [allegedly pushing her brother](#).





A Guatemalan 9-year-old and her 3-year-old sister paused outside the older's school before going inside. On at least one occasion, their mother kept her daughter home from school for fear of immigration enforcement. PAT GREENHOUSE/GLOBE STAFF

And in late January when ICE was spotted near a Lynn elementary school, rapidly setting off agitated messages, Mayor Jared Nicholson had to [publicly reassure parents](#) that ICE did not “enter or attempt to enter” any Lynn Public Schools facility.

Esperanza's oldest daughter remembers the panic children felt. “All the kids started to cry that their parents were going to be taken away,” she said.

Salem Superintendent Stephen Zrike said families may be more worried about what could happen to them on the way to school.

“There are these reports, that ICE is coming or is in the city, and that causes people to keep their kids at home,” said Zrike.

Not all local officials believe the issue is dire.



During a meeting of the Quincy School Committee this month, Mayor Thomas Koch appeared to downplay the prospect of ICE activity at schools.

“I haven’t seen any schooling issue where someone’s gone in to drag a kid out of a school anywhere. So I haven’t seen that. So I hope everyone can just calm down a little bit,” Koch said.

The mayor, who also touted the city’s strong relationship with ICE, indicated the enforcement effort was the result of the presidential election.

“Elections have consequences,” he said at the meeting.

**Attendance in multiple districts with high migrant populations fell slightly since President Trump's inauguration**

Some districts, including Worcester, reported dramatic declines on Jan. 21 and 22. Some of the declines may be attributed to weather, illness, and other typical causes of seasonal fluctuation.

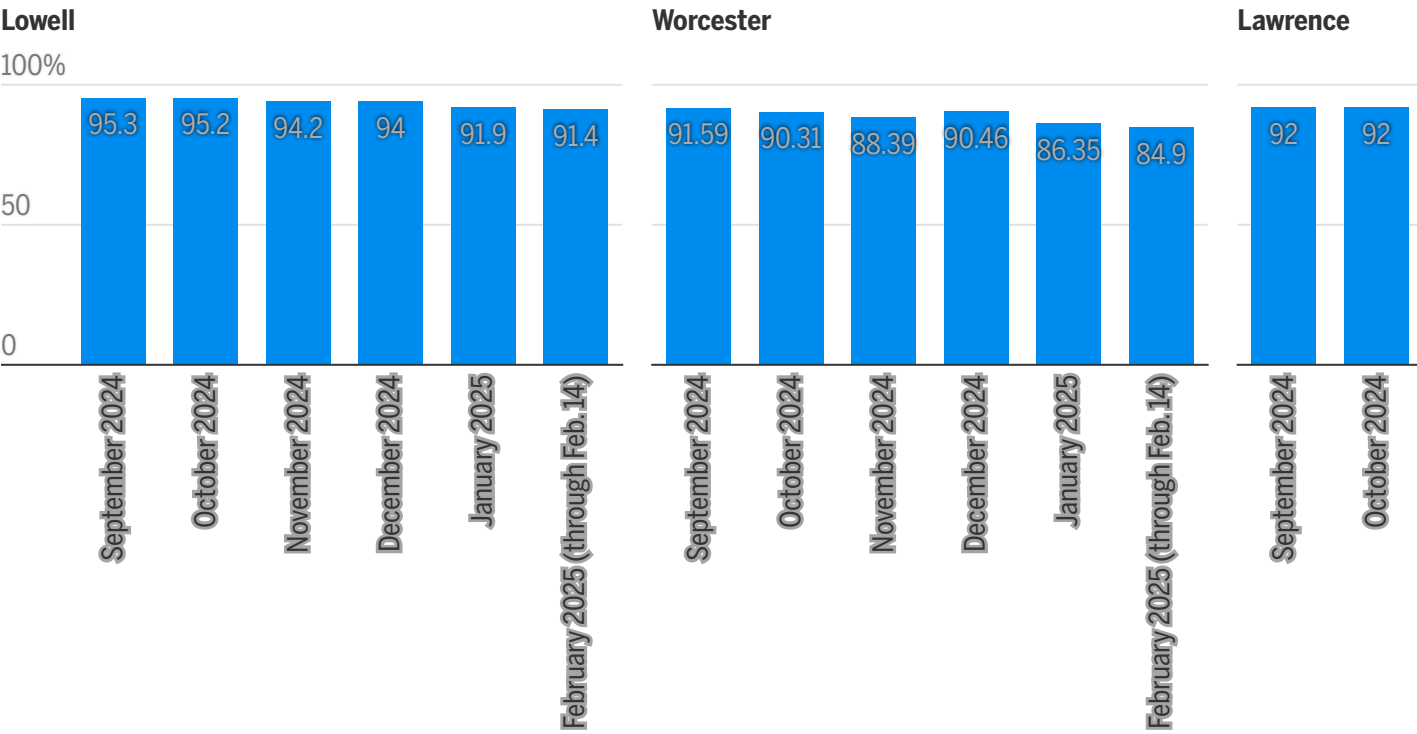


Chart: CHRISTOPHER HUFFAKER/GLOBE STAFF • Source: School districts

As a candidate, Trump repeatedly pledged to deport millions of immigrants living in the United States without authorization. The day after he was inaugurated for a second term,



his administration announced it would allow federal immigration enforcement in “sensitive” places, such as schools, churches, and hospitals.

The furor over the crackdown prompted an 11-year-old girl in Texas to kill herself after she was tormented by classmates who threatened to call ICE to have her family deported, [according to media reports](#).

Federal law prohibits schools from asking students or their families about their immigration status, but that has not assuaged fears.

School district leaders said they have labored to repeatedly reassure families.

“It’s really important for families to understand that the safest place for their child is in school,” said Framingham Superintendent Robert Tremblay. About a quarter of students stayed home for a day shortly after Trump’s inauguration, as ICE was rumored to be working in the area, he said.

Even those who have legal status remain afraid.

“No one feels safe,” said Monsy, a mother from El Salvador who lives in Lynn with her husband and two children, and who came into the United States legally with a visa about five years ago.

She said her daughters — one 8, the other 14 — decided not to go to school over fears of being arrested by ICE on a recent morning; the family had been so worried that they weren’t sure if even their legal status would protect them. She requested the Globe use only her first name.

Monsy, 40, who is a school cafeteria worker, and whose husband is a US citizen, said at work she recognizes the toll the rhetoric around deportations has taken on children.

“I see the sadness, the fear in the children. Sometimes they’re crying,” Monsy said.



Multiple superintendents said a scene of armed ICE agents marching up to a school building with a warrant signed by the judge is unlikely. But they can't dismiss chance encounters, or enforcement in public places, including bus stops.

In Chelsea, rumors of [ICE operating in the vicinity last month](#) caused many families to keep their children at home from school, Abeyta said. She rushed to get messages out: Their children were safe in the schools. Their information was secure. And the schools' focus was on education.

"I wasn't worried about families losing trust in the schools, I was more concerned that they wouldn't know what was in place, that they wouldn't send their children to school," Abeyta said.

Students mostly returned, although more were absent two weeks later for the Day Without Immigrants, [a nationwide protest against Trump's immigration policies](#).

**Absences appeared to surge in Chelsea due to immigration fears, but other days saw even more kids out of school**

The district has about 6,100 students, with about 800 absent on a typical day. Absences were elevated on four days in the month after President Trump's inauguration.



Chart: CHRISTOPHER HUFFAKER/GLOBE STAFF • Source: Chelsea Public Schools



Some families are preparing in case they are split up, and completing state caregiver documentation to ensure children have a place to stay in case parents are taken into custody.

In New Bedford, Corinn Williams, who leads the Community Economic Development Center of Southeastern Massachusetts, said people worry their lives could be uprooted. The community [has wrestled with the long-term consequences](#) of the largest ICE workplace raid in modern Massachusetts history, where 361 workers were arrested in March 2007, and 150 are estimated to have been deported.

About 20 families have sought help from the organization to [complete state paperwork](#) that declares who would serve as a caregiver if a parent is deported, Williams said. Another 50 to 60 families have sought help completing passports for children born in the United States, in case they have to leave the country, she said.

Back in Lynn, life has changed drastically in the past few weeks for Esperanza, her husband, and their two daughters. They don't frequent their local Stop & Shop anymore because they heard ICE agents gathered there one day. They've stopped their carefree outings to the park. The kids don't have play dates. Often, the 10-minute walk to and from school is the most stressful part of their day.

"There's a fear there, as if someone were chasing us," Esperanza said.

*The Great Divide team explores educational inequality in Boston and statewide. [Sign up](#) to receive our newsletter, and send ideas and tips to [thegreatdivide@globe.com](mailto:thegreatdivide@globe.com).*

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