

In increasingly Hispanic Memphis schools, immigration enforcement surge brings fear, absences

By

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Memphis educators say Hispanic students are showing up to class distressed and distracted, or not showing up at all, in the wake of a controversial federal law and immigration enforcement surge in the city.

The full impact on Memphis-Shelby County Schools is not yet clear. The district has not released complete attendance data for October, though leaders indicated there hasn't been a sharp decline in attendance in the last few weeks. But educators say effects are being felt in classrooms at an increasingly diverse Memphis school system.

Board member Amber Huett-Garcia said multiple high school teachers told her that students "have just stopped showing up."

"And they've stopped going to extracurricular activities, because they don't want to be out of the house," she added.

Nationwide, the increase in immigration enforcement has disproportionately affected Latino communities. Nearly one in five MSCS students is Hispanic, compared to just over 11% in 2014, according to data from the Tennessee Department of Education. And in local charter schools, the number of Hispanic students has more than doubled in the past decade.

One MSCS teacher in a predominantly Hispanic charter school said a parent pulled her child out of school entirely because of concerns about immigration enforcement.

“She sent me a message and just said that she was scared, that they were in a difficult situation and they would have to leave the city,” said the teacher, whom Chalkbeat is not naming due to her concerns about protecting her students. “They withdrew the next day.”

Now, some state and local immigration advocates are pushing district leaders to create “safe buffer zones” and increase busing to ease concerns about students and families encountering immigration officials on the way to and from school.

Last week, Huett-Garcia pressed MSCS leaders for attendance numbers and asked about resources available for concerned families. Superintendent Roderick Richmond said the district hasn’t put any new support measures in place because he hasn’t heard reports of ICE activity on school campuses.

But Memphis educators and local officials, including Shelby County Mayor Lee Harris, say ICE agents are targeting Hispanic residents and focusing on neighborhoods where they live.

“Every single day this week, I have seen pickup trucks with the label ‘Border Patrol’ on Summer Avenue,” Huett-Garcia said. “When there are outside factors that affect our attendance, we should know and be aware of that. Our kids feel safe in our buildings, it’s just getting to and from those buildings.”

Memphis educators: Classes are emptier, students more fearful

In the past month, hundreds of federal and state agents, including from the Tennessee National Guard and Immigration and Customs

Enforcement, have arrived in Memphis in a push President Donald Trump has said is meant to reduce violent street crime.

Tennessee and Memphis Republicans have backed Trump's law enforcement surge, arguing increased law enforcement is needed to address longstanding crime issues within the city.

"For too long, citizens of Memphis, Shelby Co, and West TN have dealt with the ravages of out-of-control crime," Rep. Mark White, a GOP state lawmaker from Memphis, said in September. "We must fix this problem now and get routine offenders off the streets to save our city."

State Democrats and local leaders have sharply criticized the National Guard deployment and the increase of federal agents in the city, saying the moves trample local authority and lack transparency concerning who's arrested. Preliminary data suggested a majority of the task force's arrests have been for non-violent offenses and immigration-related charges, the Commercial-Appeal reported this month.

In other cities subject to the Trump administration's federal deployment, ICE has detained students. Chalkbeat reported the detainment of at least one public school student, a U.S. citizen, in Chicago, and the arrest of a 16-year-old student in New York last week.

There have been no reports that Memphis students have been detained, and no reports of ICE activity in Memphis schools. But Huett-Garcia said she talked to one MSCS teacher last week who cried with a student for hours because two of their family members had been detained that day.

“Memphis is in this state of reality now where people are disappearing,” she said. “As a community, as a country, we have to answer, ‘Are we OK with that?’”

The MSCS teacher at the predominantly Hispanic charter said she’s had “all time low” attendance this month. For three days in a row, 25% of her students were not in class, she said. When her young students do show up, she said, they’re “extremely scared” and distracted.

“My students are telling me that they miss their mom, that they want to go home even early in the day,” she said. “It’s been constant.”

During an October school board meeting, Stacey Davis, director of enrollment and attendance, said there has not been a “significant difference” in student attendance since the National Guard arrived on Oct. 10. Chalkbeat Tennessee requested individual school attendance data last week, but the district said it couldn’t provide that information until late November.

One principal of a predominantly Hispanic school in Memphis said attendance is “hit or miss,” with families deciding to send their children based on what they see on the news or hear through their network.

“Parents are fearful about being out, dropping off their kids, picking them up, so they’re keeping them home more frequently,” the principal said, who spoke on the condition of anonymity in order to protect their students’ privacy.

Meanwhile, the MSCS charter teacher said the threat to students and their families “can be paralyzing when you don’t have access to the right training.”

Could MSCS do more in response to ICE?

Although she said immigration enforcement is “outside of our control or jurisdiction,” Huett-Garcia said she’s open to working with county and city government officials to brainstorm creative solutions, especially when it comes to transportation barriers.

And she said she wants to hear from teachers about support they need, including grief training.

In Chicago, some board members and educators are calling for Illinois Gov. JB Pritzker to permit an emergency switch to virtual learning, although Pritzker has expressed skepticism about the idea. Chicago Public Schools has also sent out messages assuring parents that school buildings are safe from ICE interference and reminding them of their rights.

But in other communities, many support efforts are happening on a school-by-school basis.

MSCS does have a list of parent rights and resources on the district website when it comes to immigration issues. But the elementary teacher said district leadership should offer teacher training on how to interact with federal agencies, even outside of school grounds.

“Realistically, I’m not expecting ICE to show up at my door and try to take away one of my students,” she said. “What I am expecting is for them to wait down the street and arrest a parent at a traffic stop, because that’s what we’re seeing happening.”

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