

# Chicago teachers say immigration enforcement near schools is scaring kids and disrupting class

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The Chicago Public Schools district has been vocal about the fact that it does not collaborate with federal immigration enforcement agencies. Justine Goode / NBC News; Getty Images

CHICAGO — A teacher said tear gas drifted toward a school playground, forcing students and recess indoors. A viral video recorded near another school showed law enforcement dragging a woman out of her van and onto the ground. And students say they have seen ICE vehicles in their neighborhoods, leading them to feel frightened, according to one instructor.

Educators say those incidents and others that have taken place as federal immigration agents increase arrests in Chicago are disrupting their jobs, upending their communities and traumatizing their students.

“Everyone’s very anxious,” said Sheena Shukla, a school social worker for Chicago Public Schools. “Can you imagine telling a 12-year-old that people are out there who might want to take their family? We can’t shield our children from these realities, so we provide them with a level of support that they can understand.”

In response, school staff members have organized teams to report and respond to Immigration and Customs Enforcement activity around their schools, including patrolling the area, keeping concerned parents informed and helping escort some families to and from school, according to members of the Chicago Teachers Union.

That work includes talking to their students in age-appropriate ways about what's going on in their communities in a city that is nearly 30% Latino and more than 22% foreign-born, Shukla said.

The Chicago Public Schools district is holding daily calls with city leaders and its labor partners. It said in a statement to NBC News that while there has been law enforcement activity near some schools, there have been no incidents inside its schools and facilities. Nonetheless, the district and the Chicago Teachers Union have been issuing guidance and [taking steps in preparation for federal immigration enforcement](#) since President Donald Trump returned to office in January.

"School remains the safest and best place for students. CPS staff have safety protocols, including how to respond if federal representatives seek access to school property or interaction with students or staff," the district said.

The district has also been vocal about the fact that it does not collaborate with federal immigration enforcement agencies, including ICE. Agents will not be granted access to its schools unless they present a "valid criminal judicial warrant signed by a federal judge," the district said in its statement.

The Department of Homeland Security referred NBC News to a statement saying ICE does not target schools or children.

"ICE is not going to schools to make arrests of children. Criminals are no longer able to hide in America's schools to avoid arrest. The Trump Administration will not tie the hands of our brave law enforcement and instead trusts them to use common sense," DHS spokeswoman Tricia McLaughlin said in the statement. "If a dangerous illegal alien felon were to flee into a school, or a child sex offender is working as an employee, there may be a situation where an arrest is made to protect public safety. But this has not happened."

On Tuesday, [DHS said on social media](#) that its enforcement surge in the area, known as Operation Midway Blitz, "is making Illinois SAFE again" and had arrested over 1,500 people across Illinois, including criminals and gang members.

Last week, Chicago Teachers Union officials met with about a dozen teachers at Funston Elementary School to talk about a recent incident involving immigration officials and tear gas being deployed near the school.

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Maria Heavener, a first grade teacher at the school, described how she was teaching on Oct. 3 when she heard what sounded like helicopters, horns blowing on the street and a whistle educators used to announce ICE activity. She then saw a message from a fifth grade teacher at the school who spotted ICE “less than 100 feet from our building” while walking to a store called Rico Fresh Market for lunch.

“Tear gas filled the streets, blowing into the parking lot of Rico Fresh and towards the direction of our playground across the street,” Heavener said at [a news conference with Chicago Mayor Brandon Johnson](#).

A class that had been outside was quickly pulled inside so it was not affected by the tear gas, Heavener said. The school said in a letter to families that it held recess indoors for the rest of the day out of an abundance of caution and that staff members were well-versed in the protocols for keeping students safe.

By dismissal time, about 100 community members were lined up and down the streets near the school, “creating safe passage for our children and families and sending a clear message that ICE is not welcome in our community,” Heavener said.

DHS did not respond to a request for comment about enforcement activity and deploying tear gas near the school or concerns about using chemical agents near schools.

“There is no institution available right now that is constructed to deal with the trauma, the impact that our young people and their families and our communities are experiencing,” CTU President Stacy Davis Gates said.

Heavener and other school staff members told NBC News they have seen a drop in attendance as the immigration enforcement operations have increased. “Some families and students, they’re not leaving the home,” said Shukla, the social worker.

Videos of apparent immigration enforcement activity around the city have kept teachers on high alert, including [a recent viral post](#) showing federal agents taking a woman out of her car and putting her on the ground while they were detaining her. The person who recorded and

posted the video said that she is a teacher and that the incident took place near the school they work at during dismissal as parents were picking up their children. The teacher claimed she heard students shouting "It's ICE!" and running away.

NBC News could not independently verify the details described in the post, and the poster of the video did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

DHS said in a statement about the incident that while it was conducting targeted immigration enforcement operations, Border Patrol was "harassed and recklessly followed by agitators with megaphones and whistles who began to yell inflammatory remarks and alerted the public of the officers' presence."

"They were driving recklessly, including weaving between lanes and putting other motorists at risk. Following the driver abruptly stopping in the middle of traffic near a school, law enforcement approached the vehicle," McLaughlin said. "The occupants refused to exit the vehicle and follow law enforcement commands."

She said the people in the car were two immigrants in the country illegally from Mexico but did not identify them or specify whether they were detained.

A teacher at a school in Englewood, a neighborhood in Chicago's South Side, told NBC News that students have reported witnessing ICE vans near their homes or driving by during recess. The teacher said that during a check-in with a seventh-grade class, a student said "she was feeling sad because she witnessed somebody getting abducted by ICE. Immediately, the entire class just became a discussion of ICE activity."

The teacher, who asked to remain anonymous because of fears that federal immigration agents could target his school community, said some of his students' family members have been arrested by immigration agents.

"It ripples out. Now there are other students who are missing their friends," he said.

Heavener said her young students have a hard time comprehending what is going on.

When school returned the Monday after the incident near Funston Elementary, Heavener said, she asked her first grade class how they were feeling and whether they had questions about what happened.

Some were confused, and others "knew exactly what Immigrations and Customs Enforcement was, they knew what a tear gas canister was."

"They were telling me that they feel sad and they feel scared. It doesn't make sense to them," she said. "In social studies, we're also doing a unit on community, about getting along with others, about rules and laws, about citizenship and respect, and they're seeing all of

these things be violated in real time. The things that they're learning and the things that they're seeing outside of the window don't line up."

Heavener asked students to share a word that described how they felt. Most said "scared" or "worried."

Then one student said they felt brave, she said.

The student said, "I feel brave, because at the end of the day, did you see how many neighbors were outside? They were there to keep us safe," she recounted.

"Then another kid, encouraged by that, said: 'I feel confident, because I know school is the safest place to be. My mom was telling me that school, they can't come into our school,'" Heavener said. "I think that is also what gave me hope in the moment."

*Natasha Korecki reported from Chicago and Daniella Silva reported from New York.*