

In cities targeted by ICE, empty desks and school disruptions follow

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The effects of the Trump administration’s immigration crackdown in Charlotte tore through schools last week, disrupting learning as more than 20 percent of students stayed home from class.

At many schools, children were either missing or rattled. One wore a tag that read “I’m a U.S. citizen”; another carried an American passport to elementary school. Two kindergartners showed up to class with whistles around their necks to blow if they saw immigration agents.

“You can’t get ready for this type of disruption,” said Amanda Thompson, president of the Charlotte-Mecklenburg teachers union. “All of our students are being affected.”

Charlotte became the latest example of how the Trump administration’s sweeping campaign to deport undocumented immigrants — including activity by immigration agents near schools in some places — has traumatized kids, put new burdens on teachers and administrators, and dramatically altered the school year in the communities it has touched.

The federal government does not release comprehensive data showing where arrests or detentions are taking place, but a Washington Post review of news reports found instances of parents arrested near campuses in at least 10 states so far this year.

In other instances, immigration agents' actions near campuses — which include shooting a man, releasing tear gas and engaging in a car chase — have prompted lockdowns and alarm. And attendance often drops temporarily following Immigration and Customs Enforcement activity, or rumors of it, school officials say.

The Department of Homeland Security is not conducting enforcement operations at schools, spokeswoman Tricia McLaughlin said in a statement to The Washington Post. The agency has repeatedly said it is not raiding schools, and no reports have surfaced of such.

But in interviews with 22 teachers, administrators and school staff members in affected areas from California to Maine, The Post found that federal officers are operating close enough to school campuses to upset students and families, regardless of whether they are citizens.

Teachers tell stories of students who are anxious, depressed and scared that their parents might not come home each day. Administrators have created protocols for what to do if federal officers knock on school doors and poured resources into promoting attendance. Parent volunteers keep watch around schools for ICE officers patrolling nearby.

“This is not something that I ever thought I would see in my lifetime,” said Leticia Manzanares, who runs the newcomer student program for the public school system in Oakland, California, and has been in counseling for 27 years. “It just feels terrible.”

Schools were off-limits for immigration enforcement for years, but Trump rescinded that policy in January. Federal agents will enter campuses if a suspected criminal flees into a school, McLaughlin said — as happened in two recent incidents — but they are “not going to schools to arrest children.”

In some cases of parents arrested near schools, DHS alleged criminal activity or said those detained had undocumented status. In at least two cases, the individuals did not and were later released.

McLaughlin did not address questions about the impact on students of operations close to schools or about whether the agency would limit its activity near schools.

DHS touts its efforts as removing “the worst of the worst criminals,” even as the administration has increasingly targeted unauthorized immigrants who do not have criminal records, along with some who have legal protections and some U.S. citizens.

Seventy-five House members, all Democrats, on Friday called for Education Secretary Linda McMahon to provide guidance to schools affected by DHS activity; last month, a group of Democratic senators asked her to urge DHS to stop making arrests near school property.

Teachers and administrators said it’s not just undocumented families on edge but also children who are citizens but have immigrant parents and families here legally who are concerned about racial or ethnic profiling. Some students from nonimmigrant families are unnerved by the presence of officers in their neighborhoods or worried for their friends at school, Thompson said.

In the United States, 1 in 4 children — 15.9 million kids, most of them citizens — have an immigrant parent, according to a May analysis of 2022-2023 census data by the Urban Institute. About 2.5 million children are immigrants themselves, said the report, which did not include data on immigration status.

In Charlotte, federal agents arrested more than 250 undocumented immigrants from Nov. 15 to Nov. 19 in a highly publicized operation. A day after the initial weekend of arrests, 30,000 students were absent in the Charlotte-Mecklenburg school district — an attendance rate of 79 percent, compared with an average rate of 93 percent, according to the district.

“People know that schools are not safe just because they’re schools,” said Justin Parmenter, a seventh-grade English teacher. Last Monday, he and his colleagues held up handmade welcome signs as students got off the bus at South Academy of International Languages, a public magnet school, hoping to make them feel more comfortable.

“You belong here!” Parmenter’s read in English and Spanish, with “here” double-underlined.

Some Charlotte students returned to school Tuesday, but more than 25,600 of the district’s 141,700 students remained absent. That number went up to about 27,200 on Wednesday, the district said Friday, citing the latest available data.

By Friday, 20 of Parmenter’s 22 homeroom students were in attendance, up from nine earlier in the week. Across school, children seemed happy to be back, but Parmenter worried about the potential lasting effects.

“Trauma doesn’t just go away on its own,” he said. “Even though in some ways we will ‘get back to normal,’ I think a lot of the uncertainty and fear will persist.”

The Trump administration described the absences in Charlotte as evidence that the public education system was “supporting illegals.” It is required, however, for public schools in the United States to serve all children regardless of immigration status, under a 1982 Supreme Court decision.

For that reason, and citing the duty to care for children, some local school districts have mounted significant efforts to support immigrant families — and in some cases work against ICE.

In Oakland, the district runs a hotline for reporting suspected sightings of federal agents. In D.C., neighbors created a caravan to walk children of immigrants to school. In southern New Mexico, staff make home visits to families whose children have been absent.

Broadly, efforts by district leaders around the country to keep up attendance appear to be working, said most educators who spoke to The Post. In Los Angeles, where ICE activity dissuaded some families from attending graduations this past spring, the district implemented a 24-hour family help hotline, distributed preparedness packets and created a “safe passage” effort with new bus routes. So far, it has seen a 94 percent average attendance rate this fall.

But each brush with ICE presents a challenge for schools.

In Chicago, agents deployed tear gas across the street from an elementary school in October to disperse ICE protesters, sending the chemicals wafting toward the school while children were on the playground. A few weeks later, a high school in Los Angeles went on lockdown after immigration agents a block away shot a man who allegedly hit a DHS car while trying to flee arrest.

“The fact that it happened in front of the school is beyond concerning,” said Maria Miranda, elementary vice president of United Teachers Los Angeles, the city’s main teachers union. “What if a student ... had been walking nearby? What if a bullet had ricocheted into the school?”

Increasingly, nearby ICE activity is pushing some schools to preemptively lock their doors and keep children inside, as schools in Portland, Oregon; Oakland; and suburbs of Chicago and Detroit have done this month.

At a high school in Gurnee, Illinois, a Border Patrol chase of two undocumented immigrants spilled onto a high school campus on Oct. 30 when the men fled into the school parking lot. One ran into a special education classroom, where officers handcuffed him in front of students and staff, superintendent Daniel Woestman said. As officers put the man in a car, a handful of staff members and passersby gathered. “This is a school!” someone shouted repeatedly. An agent pointed pepper spray at the crowd, according to the superintendent.

Parents had divided opinions about the agents’ actions. The two men, who had extensive criminal allegations against them, allegedly evaded a traffic stop and hit other cars as they led DHS on a chase, McLaughlin said. Still, many families in the suburban district saw what happened as another “hurdle” to feeling safe at school, Woestman said.

Even law enforcement activity off campus, if nearby, can cause profound impacts to children's mental health, particularly for students worried about their families' immigration status, said pediatrician Sural Shah, chair of the American Academy of Pediatrics Council on Immigrant Child and Family Health.

“Not only does it cause stress in the short term — nightmares, headaches, crying — but it also over the long run can have long-term effects on children's health,” she said. “It can affect their cardiovascular health, their behavioral and mental health as well.”

Regardless of a suspect's legal status, some educators say law enforcement should not carry out arrests near schools, where children are more likely to witness or hear about them. After a parent whom DHS accused of Social Security fraud was detained while waiting to pick up his child from a San Diego elementary school in August, district officials called on DHS to stop operating near campuses.

“There may be a lot of debates about immigration reform, but there should be no debate that this kind of tactic is inhumane,” Fabiola Bagula, superintendent of the San Diego school system, told reporters.

In another apparent example of the impact of Trump's policies, which have largely halted arrivals from south of the border, enrollment of new immigrant students has plummeted in cities such as Miami and Oakland. In Texas, a middle school for newcomers closed because it no longer had enough students.

The White House celebrated the enrollment drop as “good news” in a Wednesday roundup of “proof the Trump agenda is delivering.”

In Houston, high school teacher Agustin Loreda normally teaches three sections of a course for newcomer students. This year, he said there are only enough children enrolled for one section.

Loreda said he worries that his school is “one bad ICE bust” away from getting emptier. When his soccer team travels to matches, some players ask: “Coach, what if Immigration is there?”

He said he tries to reassure them, but he is sometimes troubled by how much security he can give.

“How do I tell the kids not to worry?” Loreda said. “I don’t know if it’s going to be okay.”

What readers are saying

The comments reflect a strong concern about the impact of immigration enforcement near schools on students' mental health and learning environment. Many commenters describe ICE agents as intimidating and liken their presence to authoritarian regimes, suggesting that their tactics... [Show more](#)

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