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Granting Undocumented Students Access to Public Education Delivers \$633 Billion Return on Investment



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[Leslie Villegas](#)

In 1982 the U.S. Supreme Court decided in *Plyler v. Doe* that all children—regardless of immigration status—are entitled to equal access to free, public K-12 education. Despite this long-standing precedent, 2025 was mired with legislative efforts to deny undocumented students’ access to public schools. Those behind the proposed rollbacks often inflated the financial “burden” associated with educating undocumented students and ignored the financial contributions of undocumented students and their families. And although none of the measures succeeded, these efforts represent a growing trend to shrink access to public education for currently undocumented students.

To be sure, sensationalized estimates of the financial resources dedicated to undocumented students are made possible by the dearth of data on this topic. A new report by [FWD.us](#) fills this void by quantifying, for the first time, the societal and economic gains that *Plyler* has provided. Scott D. Levy and Phillip Connor, the researchers behind the report, estimate that 4.8 million people have benefited from, or are currently benefiting from *Plyler*. The researchers found that investing in the education of undocumented students has “served as an engine of economic growth, skilled labor in our workforce, and improved health outcomes for over 40 years.”

According to the report, ensuring undocumented children have access to education has generated a \$633 billion return on investment. This figure represents the state and local income taxes paid by *Plyler* beneficiaries and exceeds the state and local costs of educating these students. *Plyler* is estimated to have increased beneficiaries’ income by \$171 billion between 1982 and 2022. This monetary gain has prevented 730,000 U.S. citizen children born to *Plyler* beneficiaries from living in poverty. *Plyler* has also helped reduce healthcare costs by \$28.9 billion since 1982 by improving public health outcomes for beneficiaries across a number of key health metrics. And lastly, this law has allowed over 1.6 million people to enter occupations that often require a high school education.

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The analysis focuses on not only the retrospective gains, but also the prospective losses to be expected if efforts to roll back *Plyler* are successful. If universal access to K-12 education is taken away, the report found that the U.S. economy would shrink as *Plyler* beneficiaries would lose more than \$1 trillion in income over their lifetimes. Additionally, the workforce would shrink by 450,000 workers—341,000 in jobs typically requiring some college education and 110,000 in jobs typically requiring a high school education—with Texas and Florida being hit the hardest. Furthermore, as the report notes, “access to education is an important factor in determining numerous health outcomes over the course of a person’s life, and exclusion from schools during a

person’s youth can have devastating consequences.” As a result, healthcare costs for preventable conditions—such as obesity, infant mortality, preterm births, and physical disability in old age— would increase by \$24.2 billion if *Plyler* were reversed. These costs would be incurred by governments, individuals, nonprofits, and medical institutions.

Quantifying the social and economic benefit of a policy that ensures all children have access to education is not an easy feat. Undocumented student counts are merely estimates as there is no formal way of identifying them and immigration statuses are not static. However, the methodology deployed for the report draws from various data and experts in their respective fields including demographic estimates and poverty estimates from Princeton University’s Center for Migration and Development, lifelong economic and state fiscal estimates from City University of New York, labor force estimates from the Cornell Population Center, and health outcome estimates from Emory University . And, as the authors conclude, *Plyler*’s positive impact extends beyond the individual students who benefitted from it, fostering security and stability in our country as a whole. Reversing this policy would “wreak havoc on America’s economy, workforce, and public health.”

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Leslie Villegas
Senior Policy Analyst, Education Policy

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