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The price of denial: State lawmakers' efforts to undermine *Plyler v. Doe* and the fiscal fallacy of exclusion

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For the first time in over four decades, the constitutional protections guaranteeing undocumented immigrant children the right to attend public school are facing a coordinated and credible threat. Since early 2025, lawmakers in six states have introduced legislation aimed at restricting or denying public education to undocumented immigrant children—measures that, if enacted, would almost certainly trigger legal challenges with the potential to reach the U.S. Supreme Court. These efforts are not happening in isolation: They are part of a broader strategy explicitly [outlined by the Heritage Foundation](#) to provoke a judicial reconsideration of *Plyler v. Doe*, the landmark Supreme Court case that found undocumented children have a Fourteenth Amendment right to be educated.

Overturing *Plyler* would mark a profound shift in American constitutional interpretation and public policy. The U.S. would join a troubling list of countries that actively deny or restrict educational access for undocumented, migrant, or refugee children—policies that have consistently led to the emergence of permanent underclasses, heightened risks of exploitation, and generational cycles of exclusion. Proponents of this path claim that undocumented students impose unsustainable costs on public education systems, but the fiscal evidence tells a different story: Undocumented immigrants contribute significantly to federal, state, and local tax bases, often at rates comparable to or higher than their U.S.-born counterparts, more than offsetting the costs of educating their children.

This paper offers a comprehensive analysis of the current legal and political landscape surrounding *Plyler v. Doe*. It begins by reviewing recent legislative activity in six states—Tennessee, Texas, Oklahoma, Idaho, Indiana, and New Jersey—that have introduced bills designed to test the limits of *Plyler*. It then examines how public education is funded in the U.S. and presents state-specific data showing that undocumented immigrants consistently contribute more in taxes than the cost of educating undocumented children.

To contextualize what is at stake, the paper also explores international case studies—focusing on Malaysia, the Dominican Republic, and Lebanon—where restrictions on educational access have led to systemic exclusion, child labor, and long-term social and economic marginalization. These global examples underscore the tangible human costs of policies that deny children a basic education based on legal status. Taken together, the legal analysis, fiscal data, and comparative case studies demonstrate that *Plyler v. Doe* remains not only constitutionally sound but also socially and economically indispensable. Efforts to overturn it are grounded not in sound legal judgment or fiscal necessity, but in political opportunism. The consequences of such a reversal would reverberate far beyond the affected children, undermining America’s commitment to equal protection, weakening its social fabric, and diminishing its long-term economic competitiveness.

Plyler v. Doe

[*Plyler v. Doe*](#) is a landmark 1982 Supreme Court decision ruling that states cannot constitutionally deny students a free public education based on their immigration status. The ruling was based on the [Fourteenth Amendment’s](#) guarantee that no state shall “deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws.” This language applies to all people within the U.S., regardless of their immigration status. The Court decided, in a 5-4 ruling, that any financial savings garnered by excluding undocumented children from public education were far exceeded by the harms to society that would come from denying them an education.

Central to the decision was the idea that denying undocumented children a public education “[imposes a lifetime hardship on a discrete class of children not accountable for their disabling status.](#)” Undocumented children are not able to affect their parents’ actions, nor their immigration status. Preventing them from accessing education, the Court declared, “threatens the creation of an underclass of future citizens and residents (that) cannot be reconciled with ... the Fourteenth Amendment” and “presents most difficult problems for a Nation that prides itself on adherence to principles of equality under law.” While there have been [some efforts to overturn the ruling in the decades since 1982,](#) all have been unsuccessful.

Following the January 2025 inauguration of President Trump, a new wave of efforts has emerged to overturn this precedent. The Heritage Foundation has called for states to require school districts

to collect immigration status in their enrollment data to calculate the costs of educating undocumented students. But the absence of such data did not deter the authors from also urging states to pass legislation that requires public schools to charge tuition to undocumented students, writing:

Such legislation would draw a lawsuit from the Left, which would likely lead the Supreme Court to reconsider its ill-considered *Plyler v. Doe* decision that had no basis in the law.

Arguably, the Heritage Foundation's brief provided a blueprint for states to attempt these actions. Since the beginning of 2025, lawmakers in [six states](#) have aimed to challenge *Plyler v. Doe* since January: Idaho, Indiana, New Jersey, Oklahoma, Texas, and Tennessee. Actions have failed in Idaho and Indiana, paused in Tennessee, but are pending in New Jersey, Oklahoma, and Texas.

The economics of educating undocumented children

In the U.S., public schools educate approximately [49.6 million students](#) from pre-kindergarten through 12th grade. Funding for public schools mainly comes from state and local governments, with the federal government providing about [7.6% of total financing](#).

Federal school funding primarily goes to three programs: [Title I grants](#), the [Individuals with Disabilities Education Act](#), and the [Child Nutrition Act](#). To a lesser degree, federal funding also supports [Head Start](#) Programs, magnet schools, gifted and talented programs, [Impact Aid](#), vocational programs, and [Indian Education](#) programs.

The amount of state funding for schools varies across the nation. Each state uses a unique [funding formula](#) to determine how money for K-12 education should be allocated and how much each school district should receive annually.

In five states, [two-thirds or more](#) of K-12 funding comes from the state itself, and 35 states set a [base level](#) of funding per student. Data from the 2019-2020 school year reveals that about [47.5%](#) of K-12 funding nationwide comes from states. Nowhere in the U.S. does public K-12 spending exceed [5.5%](#) as a share of state taxpayer income, with the average being

around [3.67%](#). At the federal level, public education funding accounts for only [0.51%](#) of total taxpayer income.

In the 2019-2020 school year, local funding accounted for [44.9%](#) of K-12 funding. Local funding comes from cities, counties, and school districts themselves. About [81% of local funding comes directly from property taxes](#), and in 29 states, property taxes account for [30% or more of total public school funding](#). [Other revenue](#) is generated from parents through parent-teacher associations, tuition, transportation fees, food services, district activities, textbook sales, and summer school programs.

In the United States, public education spending falls below international benchmarks and has not kept pace with economic growth. Organizations such as UNESCO—the United Nations agency promoting education, science, culture, and communication to advance global peace and equity—recommend that countries allocate at least 15% of total public expenditure to education, a standard the U.S., despite being a member, consistently fails to meet.

The [latest report from 2022](#) shows that the U.S. has fallen short of this standard since 2020, contributing 14% in 2022. The U.S. is also [one of seven countries](#) without a universal publicly funded early education system; the US government spends less than [0.5%](#) of its GDP on early childhood education and learning. K-12 schools spend approximately [\\$857.2 billion annually](#), which amounts to around \$17,277 per student. At the same time, federal, state, and local funding provides \$878.2 billion (\$17,700 per student), leaving a \$21 billion surplus (\$423 per student). States rarely expend all of the funds allocated to public schools in a given year.

How undocumented immigrants contribute to the tax base and education funding

Despite lacking legal status, undocumented immigrants make substantial contributions to the U.S. tax system, supporting essential public services, including the very education systems from which some lawmakers now seek to exclude their children. In 2022 alone, undocumented immigrants paid an estimated [\\$96.7 billion](#) in federal, state, and local taxes. Of this total, \$59.4 billion went to

the federal government. At the time, undocumented immigrants comprised roughly [5% of the U.S. workforce and 3% of the overall population](#).

With approximately [8.3 million undocumented](#) individuals of working age, the per capita tax contribution amounted to nearly \$8,889—comparable to, and in many cases higher than, contributions from U.S. citizens with similar incomes. In other words, for every 1 million undocumented immigrants, public services received an additional [\\$8.9 billion in tax revenue](#). There are approximately [620,000 undocumented K-12 students in the U.S.](#) The tax revenue from undocumented workers alone covers the annual cost of educating these children (approximately \$10.7 billion dollars) more than nine times over.

Undocumented immigrants paid an effective tax rate of [26.1% of their income](#) in 2022, nearly identical to the [26.4% tax burden](#) faced by the median U.S. taxpayer. In fact, undocumented immigrants often pay more in taxes relative to their income than U.S. citizens with comparable earnings. This is due in part to their exclusion from refundable tax credits and social safety net programs, as well as to structural inequities in how taxes are assessed and administered. A significant portion of undocumented immigrants' tax payments—over one-third—is allocated to programs from which they are [legally excluded](#): In 2022, \$25.7 billion went to Social Security, \$6.4 billion to Medicare, and \$1.8 billion to unemployment insurance.

At the state and local levels, undocumented immigrants continue to shoulder a meaningful share of the tax burden. In 2022, they paid an estimated [\\$15.1 billion](#) in sales and excise taxes, [\\$10.4 billion](#) in property taxes (either directly or through rent), and [\\$7 billion](#) in personal and business income taxes. Six states—California, Texas, New York, Florida, Illinois, and New Jersey—each collected over [\\$1 billion in taxes](#) from undocumented immigrants in 2022 alone. And while it's common to hear complaints that undocumented immigrants pay little or nothing in taxes, they labor under similar inequities as ordinary American citizens and legal permanent residents: [In 40 states](#), undocumented immigrants face higher effective state and local tax rates than the wealthiest 1% of households.

Their tax contributions, therefore, play a direct and often underappreciated role in funding public education. Like citizens and other legal residents, undocumented immigrants help finance local

school systems through property taxes and sales taxes, while receiving fewer benefits and support services in return. As policymakers debate the cost of educating undocumented children, these fiscal realities underscore a central point: Undocumented families are not simply recipients of public services; they are among the millions of taxpayers helping to sustain them.

Efforts to overturn *Plyler* in six states

Notably, except for New Jersey, the six states in which lawmakers have introduced legislation to challenge *Plyler v. Doe* are among those that invest the *least* in public education nationwide.

Five of the six allocate significantly less per student than the national average, and four consistently run surpluses in their education budgets, some exceeding \$1 billion annually. Despite this fiscal capacity, lawmakers in these states frequently cite cost as a primary justification for denying undocumented children access to public education.

This argument is both economically and empirically flawed. [Immigration has a net positive impact](#) on the U.S. economy overall, and, as the analysis below demonstrates, the tax contributions of undocumented immigrants alone are more than sufficient to offset the costs of educating their children, whether measured nationwide or on a state-by-state basis.

Below is an analysis of the state-level efforts seeking to deny public education to undocumented children. Tennessee advanced the farthest, but its bill was paused after a fiscal analysis warned it could run afoul of federal civil rights law and jeopardize \$1 billion in federal education funding. Texas and Oklahoma proposed documentation and tuition requirements, though their efforts have stalled. Idaho and Indiana introduced bills that failed in committee. In New Jersey, which ranks near the top in education spending, lawmakers introduced the “PLYLER Act” to charge tuition to undocumented students.

Tennessee

In Tennessee, legislators have introduced three bills to strip undocumented children of their right to public education. [HB0145](#) and [SB0268](#) would have required parents, guardians, or legal

custodians of undocumented children enrolled in public schools to pay tuition and fees; however, these bills failed in a Tennessee House committee.

[SB1044 and HB0746](#) would have required citizenship documentation for students and allowed for tuition payments if parents were unable to provide proof of citizenship. This effort failed in the Tennessee Senate Education Committee.

Finally, [SB0836 and HB0793](#) would have required proof of citizenship or legal status upon a child's enrollment in public school. They would also allow school districts and charter schools to charge tuition for undocumented students. SB0836 passed the Tennessee Senate, but voting on HB0793 was paused for the 2025-2026 legislative session.

To date, HB0793 has come the closest of all the 2025 *Plyler v. Doe* precedent-challenging bills to becoming law. While it could be [reintroduced in Tennessee's next legislative session](#), the pause this year was due to a [state review of the financial impacts](#). The review found the law's passage could cost the state more than \$1 billion in federal public education funding for potentially violating the [Civil Rights Act of 1964](#)'s ban on discrimination on the basis of national origin in programs financed by federal dollars. The sponsor of the bill, William Lamberth, then withdrew it from consideration, and Tennessee sent a letter to the U.S. Secretary of Education to determine the actual financial impact; however, a response has not been received at the time of the publication of this paper.

Tennessee ranks [43rd in overall spending and funding of public education](#), spending significantly less per pupil (\$12,431) than the national average, at a total annual cost of \$12.5 billion. Public education expenditures in Tennessee are equivalent to 2.82% of total taxpayer income. State and local funding is equivalent to 2.45% (\$10.86 billion) and federal education funding is equivalent to 0.58% (\$2.55 billion) of state taxpayer income. As previously mentioned, states rarely spend 100% of their dedicated funding in a given school year, and the latest data show that Tennessee has an [annual education budget surplus of \\$898.6 million](#), or approximately \$893 per pupil.

[Data from the Migration Policy Institute](#) (MPI) from 2019 provides the most comprehensive estimate of Tennessee's undocumented population to date. They estimate the state is home to approximately 128,000 undocumented migrants, of whom 12,000 are between the ages of 3 and

17. MPI also estimates that 84% of children aged 3 to 17 were enrolled in school at the time of data collection, with enrollment rates reaching 93% for children between the ages of 13 and 17. Estimates from the American Immigration Council for 2018 reveal that undocumented migrants in Tennessee contributed [\\$143.4 million in federal taxes and \\$85.9 million in state and local taxes](#), totaling \$229.3 million.

Based on available data, a reasonable estimate can be made to assess whether tax contributions from undocumented immigrants in Tennessee offset the cost of educating their children. The per-student cost of public education in Tennessee is approximately \$12,431. With an estimated 12,000 undocumented school-aged children in the state, the total annual cost amounts to roughly \$149.2 million. According to the American Immigration Council's estimate, undocumented immigrants in Tennessee contributed [\\$229.3 million](#) in taxes in 2018 alone. This means their tax payments exceed the cost of educating their children by approximately 54%, or more than \$80 million. In short, tax contributions from undocumented Tennesseans greatly exceed the cost of educating the state's undocumented K-12 students.

Tennessee legislators argue that undocumented children place a financial burden on the state's public education system. Yet, the state spends much less per student annually compared to the rest of the country, consistently runs a public education budget surplus amounting to nearly \$900 million, and has an undocumented migrant population whose tax contributions cover the cost of their children's public education and then some.

Texas

In Texas, two separate bills have been introduced in the House of Representatives. [HB371](#) would permit public schools to charge tuition for the enrollment of undocumented children, and [HB5371](#) would require documentation of citizenship to enroll. At the time of writing, no further action has been taken on either bill.

[Texas ranks 37th](#) in spending and funding for public education and has the second-largest K-12 student population in the U.S. Texas spends approximately \$14,257 per pupil and \$78.7 billion annually. This is equivalent to 3.89% of Texans' total taxpayer income, while state and local funding is equivalent to 3.01% and federal education funding is equivalent to 0.66% of the state's

taxpayer income. Texas receives \$13.4 billion (\$2,425 per student) from the federal government, \$23.0 billion (\$4,175 per student) from the state, and \$37.8 billion (\$6,853 per student) from localities. Texas schools spent \$4.43 billion (\$803 per student) according to the latest numbers..

As of 2019, MPI estimates that there are approximately [1.7 million undocumented migrants living in Texas](#), of whom 133,000 are school-aged children (between 3 and 17). School enrollment for individuals aged 3 to 17 is about 87% (116,000). Undocumented migrants in Texas pay approximately [\\$13.8 billion in taxes](#), [\\$4.9 billion](#) of which are state and local taxes, which is among the highest contributions in the nation. The total cost of educating all 133,000 undocumented children in Texas is \$1.9 billion annually. Given the estimated tax contributions from undocumented migrants in the state, these individuals cover the cost of educating all undocumented children in public schools more than seven times over.

Oklahoma

In Oklahoma, the state board of education approved an [administrative rule](#) that requires proof of citizenship or legal immigration status upon enrollment in public schools. The rule will now be [reviewed by the Oklahoma state legislature](#), which can approve or deny it via a joint resolution. However, Oklahoma Governor Kevin Stitt has stated that he would [veto](#) this measure should it pass. At the time of writing, no further action has taken place in the state legislature to review the rule.

[Oklahoma ranks 48th](#) in spending and funding of public education. K-12 schools in Oklahoma spend \$11,349 per student, totaling \$7.96 billion annually. Public education expenditures are equivalent to 3.24% of total taxpayer income. State and local education funding is equivalent to 2.74% of Oklahoma taxpayer income, and federal education funding is equivalent to 0.67% of the state's taxpayer income. Oklahoma receives \$1.63 billion (\$2,328 per student) from the federal government, while state funding totals \$3.48 billion (\$4,966 per student), and local funding is \$3.24 billion (\$4,622 per student). School funding in Oklahoma exceeded spending by \$397.5 million (\$567 per student) according to the last available budget data.

[2019 estimates from MPI](#) show that Oklahoma has an undocumented population of 90,000, of whom 6,000 are children between the ages of 3 and 17. Approximately 89% of school-aged

children are enrolled, totaling around 6,000 students. The [American Immigration Council estimated](#) that in 2018, undocumented migrants in Oklahoma paid \$91.3 million in federal taxes and \$77.6 million in state and local taxes. However, a newer study showed that undocumented migrants in Oklahoma paid [\\$227.5 million in state and local taxes alone](#) in 2022. It costs some \$68.1 million annually to educate undocumented students in Oklahoma. Using the tax contribution estimates from 2018, the revenue from undocumented migrants covers this cost about 2.5 times, enough to fund the education of all 6,000 undocumented students and have \$100 million left over.

Idaho

During this year's legislative session in Idaho, lawmakers introduced [HB302](#), which would require schools to maintain records of the immigration status and nationality of all enrolled students. This bill died in committee.

[Idaho spends the least on public education of all states](#) in the nation. The state also ranks 50th for public education funding. Expenditures are \$9,387 per student and \$2.98 billion annually. This is equivalent to 2.55% of Idaho total taxpayer income, with state and local funding amounting to 2.32% of state taxpayer income and federal education funding to 0.51% of state taxpayer income. K-12 schools in Idaho receive \$600.6 million (\$1,891 per student) from the federal government, \$1.94 billion (\$6,101 per student) from state funding, and \$768.5 million (\$2,420 per student) from local funding. The state spent \$325.7 million less than was allocated for public education according to the latest data, or \$1,026 per student.

Estimates of Idaho's undocumented population are more limited than in other states. According to MPI estimates from 2019, Idaho has an undocumented population of approximately [29,000](#). FWD.us estimates that there are about [1,000](#) school-aged undocumented children in the state. According to data from the American Immigration Council, Idaho's undocumented population paid approximately \$31.1 million in federal taxes and \$22.5 million in state and local taxes in 2018, totaling [\\$53.6 million](#). It costs \$9,387 per student annually to educate a child in an Idaho public school. Using this information, Idaho's undocumented population could educate 5,710 students in the state annually with their tax revenue alone, more than five times the estimated number of undocumented children in the state.

Indiana

Legislators introduced [HB1394](#) in Indiana during the 2025 legislative session. The bill would deny enrollment to students who were in the U.S. “in violation of the law.” This bill never received a committee hearing and can be considered to have failed.

[Indiana ranks 38th](#) in school spending and funding. Indiana’s K-12 expenditures amount to \$14.7 billion annually (\$14,162 per student). \$1.88 billion (\$1,815 per student) of this amount comes from the federal government, while state funding totals \$8.73 billion (\$8,422 per student), and local funding amounts to \$4.56 billion (\$4,398 per student). Total public education expenditures are equivalent to 3.49% of taxpayer income. State and local education funding is equivalent to 3.16% of Indiana taxpayer income and federal education funding is equivalent to 0.45% of the state’s taxpayer income. The difference between spending and funding was \$490.6 million (\$473 per student) according to the latest year for which data is available.

Indiana is home to approximately [102,000 undocumented migrants](#), according to 2019 estimates from MPI. Approximately 6,000 members of this group are students, and 85% of them are currently enrolled in school. In 2018, Indiana’s undocumented population paid approximately [\\$262.7 million](#) in taxes, with \$151.7 million going to federal taxes and \$111 million to state and local taxes. It costs \$14,162 per student annually to educate a child in public school in Indiana. Therefore, it costs \$84.97 million to educate all of the undocumented children in Indiana, and tax contributions from the state’s undocumented children could pay for this more than three times over.

New Jersey

In New Jersey, [A5233](#), the “PLYLER Act,” was introduced this legislative session. It proposes that undocumented students be required to pay tuition to attend public schools. To date, this bill has not progressed.

New Jersey is an outlier amongst the states in this group. The state receives relatively little K-12 funding from the federal government and [ranks third in the nation spending and second in funding](#) in the U.S. New Jersey spends approximately \$26,558 per student on K-12 education

annually, totaling \$36.8 billion. This is equivalent to 4.82% of overall taxpayer income. State and local funding is equivalent to 4.61% of New Jersey's state taxpayer income, and federal funding is equivalent to 0.37% of the state's taxpayer income. K-12 schools in the state receive \$2.81 billion (\$2,030 per student) from the federal government, \$17.0 billion (\$12,278 per student) from the state, and \$18.1 billion (\$13,110 per student) from localities. In the 2019-2020 school year's difference between spending and funding was \$1.19 billion (\$859 per student).

New Jersey has approximately [440,000 undocumented migrants](#), according to MPI. Approximately 31,000 are school-aged (between 3 and 17), and 90% of that group are actively enrolled in school. Undocumented migrants in New Jersey pay a total of [\\$4.7 billion in taxes annually](#), \$2.9 billion of which was federal and \$1.8 billion of which was state and local. It costs \$26,558 to educate a child in a New Jersey K-12 public school. Even with the comparatively high cost to educate a child in New Jersey, undocumented immigrants pay over 5.7 times the cost of educating all 31,000 undocumented children (\$823.3 million) in the state. That's \$3.88 billion in tax contributions remaining **after** the cost of education.

International case studies

The notion that denying undocumented children access to education would create a permanent “underclass,” as the Supreme Court put it, is not speculative—real-world examples across the globe bear it out. Numerous countries have enacted policies that either explicitly bar noncitizen children from schooling or erect de facto barriers that make enrollment nearly impossible.

In Malaysia, for instance, noncitizen children are legally excluded from public education. At the same time, in countries such as the Dominican Republic, Lebanon, [Saudi Arabia](#), [South Africa](#), [Libya](#), [Hungary](#), [Russia](#), and [Thailand](#), legal access exists in theory but is undermined by bureaucratic, financial, or social obstacles. Even within countries, certain jurisdictions—such as Kerman Province in [Iran](#)—have implemented localized bans on education for undocumented children, echoing the pre-*Plyler v. Doe* practices once seen in parts of the United States.

Across these contexts, the result is strikingly consistent: The creation of a socially and economically marginalized population, with children denied the opportunity to learn, forced into exploitative labor, and ultimately locked out of meaningful participation in the workforce as adults.

Malaysia

In 2002, [Malaysia amended its Education Act of 1996 \(Act 550\)](#) to limit free education to Malaysian citizens. The law prevents children of foreigners, even those born in Malaysia, from attending government schools.

Malaysia is home to more than [3.2 million noncitizens](#), accounting for approximately [10% of its population as of 2019](#). It is difficult to calculate the total number of children impacted by this law in Malaysia because it is exceedingly difficult to calculate the number of stateless and/or undocumented individuals living in the country. Estimates for registered refugees and asylum seekers are easier, but the counts are imperfect. As of February 2025, approximately [192,800](#) refugees and asylum seekers are registered with the UNHCR in Malaysia. Estimates from UNHCR indicate that the group above comprises at least 54,870 children under the age of 18.

However, the majority of individuals affected by this policy are stateless. Statelessness is challenging to quantify in Malaysia, particularly in the state of Sabah, located on the island of Borneo. There, migration across the borders with the Philippines and Indonesia is widespread, and communities of undocumented indigenous peoples, stateless semi-nomadic Bajau Laut, and migrant workers from Indonesia and the Philippines make up a large portion of the population. It is estimated that [one in three people in Sabah alone lack citizenship](#). However, the most recent reporting (from 2016) estimates that there are approximately children under the age of 18 throughout Malaysia. Therefore, in Malaysia, nearly 350,000 children are prevented from attending government schools at any level.

Informal community-based learning centers have emerged across peninsular Malaysia to fill gaps, but only about 34% of non-citizen children can access this alternative education. These learning centers lack standardized curricula, resources, and accreditation for education beyond the primary level. Stateless children without access to education in Malaysia often [fall victim to forced labor](#),

particularly in the palm oil and service industries, as well as forced street begging, commercial sexual exploitation, and cyber scamming.

Dominican Republic

The Dominican Republic's laws explicitly prohibit excluding children from its education system due to a lack of identity documents. However, in practice, stateless children are routinely prevented from accessing or completing education based on a lack of identity documents or birth certificates. This especially impacts [Haitian children](#), though there is also a small but growing number of [Venezuelans](#) who are also affected.

[Between 650,000 and 1 million Haitians](#) live in the Dominican Republic. The Dominican Republic has denied birth certificates, identity cards, and other documentation to those of Haitian descent born in the country. Dominican officials withhold documentation on the presumption that the parents or even ancestors of these children entered the country illegally, creating widespread, [multi-generational statelessness](#). In 2013, the Constitutional Court of the Dominican Republic issued a ruling that retroactively revoked the citizenship of the descendants of undocumented immigrants. As a result, Haitian children are structurally excluded from the educational system.

Haitian children who are unable to access schooling in the Dominican Republic are often thrust into child labor, including in agriculture (sugarcane harvesting and coffee production), mining, street vending, and construction. Further, these children have been known to have been victims of [forced labor and human trafficking](#), including commercial sexual exploitation, use in illicit trades, and forced domestic, agricultural, and street labor.

Lebanon

Lebanon is currently facing a multifaceted political and economic [crisis](#) that has impacted education for all children living within its borders. However, in the past decade, refugee children in particular have been faced with disproportionate barriers to education. Lebanon is home to about [1.5 million](#) refugees, of whom about 1.1 million are from Syria. Data from 2023 indicate that nearly 44% of refugee children between the ages of 6 and 17 did not attend school, and 35%

of those between 15 and 24 had never attended school. [Refugees from Palestine in Lebanon](#) are also largely considered to be stateless.

Essentially, the only option this population has for education is through segregated schools run by the [UNRWA](#). There are about [500,000 total registered Palestinian refugees in Lebanon](#), of which approximately [40,000](#) children are being educated in UNRWA schools. In addition to the refugee population, Lebanon also has a significant [migrant worker population](#) within its borders. There are more than [15,000](#) children in Lebanon born to migrant workers, and the vast majority of them have been declared stateless.

[Documentation](#) is the biggest hurdle for refugee and stateless children attempting to access education. Oftentimes, schools require official birth certificates or other legal residency documents for enrollment, which those fleeing their home countries or who were born to migrant workers simply do not have. In addition to legal barriers, many refugee children in Lebanon live in poverty and have been forced to become breadwinners for their families rather than attend school.

The U.S. Department of Labor's Bureau of International Labor Affairs highlights the prevalence of child labor amongst Lebanon's refugee community in their report, [Findings on the Worst Forms of Child Labor – Lebanon](#). The report details that children are subject to forced agricultural labor, especially in potato and tobacco production, as well as work in slaughterhouses and butcheries. In addition, the report indicates that children are working and/or begging on the street, as well as in domestic labor, construction, and in food service.

Lastly, the report highlights that children in Lebanon are being forced into the worst forms of child labor, such as use in the production and trafficking of drugs and arms, and commercial sexual exploitation. One of the key [recommendations](#) that the DOL report offered to the government of Lebanon was “ensure access to public education for all children, including refugees.”

Conclusion

The renewed challenges to *Plyler v. Doe* unfolding across several U.S. states could set up a profound reckoning with the values and direction of the nation. At the heart of the Supreme Court's 1982 ruling was the recognition that denying undocumented children access to public education would not only harm those children but also erode the foundational promise of equal protection under the law. That insight remains as urgent and relevant today as it was then.

The fiscal rationale often cited by proponents of these challenges fails to hold up to scrutiny. As this report has shown, undocumented immigrants contribute tens of billions of dollars annually in taxes at the federal, state, and local levels. In every state examined, those tax contributions exceed the cost of educating undocumented children, frequently by a significant margin. Even in high-cost states like New Jersey and high-population states like Texas, these contributions fund the education of undocumented students several times over.

Reversing *Plyler* would also place the United States among a handful of nations that systematically exclude undocumented or stateless children from education, countries where such exclusion has entrenched poverty, fostered labor exploitation, and created intergenerational marginalization. The experiences of Malaysia, Lebanon, and the Dominican Republic offer stark warnings of the human and societal consequences of tying access to education to immigration status.

Undermining *Plyler v. Doe* would represent not only a constitutional regression but a denial of empirical fact: Undocumented immigrants are not a fiscal burden; they are net contributors to public systems, including education. Denying children their right to learn—based solely on the circumstances of their birth—would not only violate the principle of equal protection, it would undermine America's long-term social and economic health. The law remains sound, the data unequivocal, and the moral stakes incalculable. Preserving *Plyler* is not simply about protecting vulnerable children—it is about upholding who we are and who we aspire to be as a nation.