INTRODUCTION

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NEXT TO FAMILY, school is the most important institution in the lives of children in the United States. It is where their friends are; it is a source of structure and stability in their lives; for most, it is the place outside the home where they find caring adults; and for many, especially children of immigrants, it may be the only reliable source of daily nutrition.¹ So, when family members are threatened by immigration enforcement activities such as raids, followed by detentions and deportations, children, too, are threatened and so are their schools. Some children, out of fear, don’t come to school; others come but are so affected by depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, and anxiety, that they are not able to function in school.² Throughout recent history, but especially during both the Obama and Trump administrations, children of immigrants—even though most are American citizens—have been traumatized by the threats of immigration enforcement and also by a pervasive message that they and their families are not wanted. Under the Trump administration, the bullying of immigrant children reached a high point.³ These children were often taunted with remarks like “build the wall,” “go home,” or worse.⁴ Of course, most are already home. Born in the United States, this is the only home they have ever known.

Although a considerable amount has been written about the plight of immigrant and refugee families under the Trump administration’s aggressive immigration enforcement policies, including the separation of families, caging of children, and denial of basic services, little has been written about
the impact that these policies have had on the nation’s schools, particularly those that serve poor children. This volume seeks to remedy that void in the literature and to bring to wide attention new research pointing to the degree to which the futures of millions of children have been put at risk, the overwhelming majority who are US citizens, but all who are guaranteed the right to an equal education by the US Constitution.

Based on original data, new analyses, and descriptive studies, the chapters in this book describe the ways that random raids and aggressive immigration enforcement have made it nearly impossible for teachers to teach and for students to learn in communities affected by these enforcement activities. Immigration enforcement has also been carried out by partnerships between local law enforcement and Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents, a phenomenon that puts low-income communities and their schools, especially, at particular risk, given their high proportion of immigrant students. Importantly, the research also shows that students in these schools whose families are not targets of immigration enforcement have also been deeply affected by the disruption to their schools and classrooms and the concerns they have for their peers who are the children of immigrants. The research findings imply that the substantive impact and nature of immigration enforcement activities have been far more comprehensive than what has been reported in the media to date.

As researchers concerned with the intersection of immigration and education, we believe this is one of the most compelling and least understood problems facing the nation today. The data show that these students—our future workforce—have experienced declining academic performance and even increasing absenteeism and school dropout in the wake of aggressive immigration enforcement. The educators charged with teaching these students and attempting to close achievement gaps need help in addressing their own needs, but little emphasis has been placed on the educators’ plight in the media or in school districts. They are largely left on their own to cope.

There are bright spots, however, and these include the Biden administration’s renewed focus on immigration reform. On the first day of his presidency, President Biden sent to Congress a package of immigration reform proposals that include immediate amnesty for those undocumented
immigrants who are farmworkers, and a pathway to citizenship for most of the 11 million undocumented immigrants in the country. In executive orders effective immediately, he called a pause to deportations for a hundred days (which was quickly enjoined by a Texas district court), a return to the Obama-era focus on “felons not families,” and pledged to extend and fortify DACA. These, of course, were stopgap measures that will give way to debate in the Congress, where immigration reform has been a political football for decades. President Biden has committed to undo some of the damage wrought by Donald Trump, but a protracted struggle is likely. A burgeoning pro-immigrant movement, which includes many educators and their supporters, will have a voice in the debates. While the country waits to see what survives of the executive orders and the reform package, we include a series of policy suggestions relevant to the local, state, and federal levels to chart the course ahead into a future that makes good on the promise of an equitable education for all students, including immigrants and the children of immigrants.

**ORIGINS OF THIS BOOK**

Under President Obama (2008–2016), deportations rose to all-time highs. This, even though one of his campaign promises was to enact comprehensive immigration reform that would include the right to remain in the United States for many who had made their lives in the country and were actively contributing to the society and the economy. At least one rationale offered for the ramped-up enforcement during the Obama administration was that if Republicans in Congress saw that the administration was serious about controlling borders, bipartisan support for immigration reform legislation would be forthcoming. This, however, did not materialize. Ultimately, President Obama shifted to a more benign immigration policy of targeting undocumented individuals with criminal records rather than law-abiding parents who had lived in the country for decades (“felons not families”). In fact, the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) policy and the ill-fated Deferred Action for Parents of Americans (DAPA) were both conceived during Obama’s second term in response to Congress’s inability to pass immigration reform legislation.
Estimates indicate that in 2017, 365,000 high school students were eligible for DACA. The program allowed young people who had arrived as young children and been in the United States consistently for at least five years, who were working or in school, and who had no record of having broken the law, to remain in the country without threat of being deported—in exchange for completing a detailed set of applications and a payment initially of $465 ($495 as of October 2020). Of course, this also divulged their immigration status and family information to the federal government, something that kept many who qualified from applying. Almost a hundred thousand undocumented high school students graduate each year. Many of these young people would be eligible for a renewed DACA program under the Biden administration. Since DACA status, which had been renewable every two years (each time for an additional $495), allowed students to study and work without fear of being apprehended, it is reasonable to assume that many would take advantage of a new DACA program. But this still leaves more than 6 million students, who have at least one parent or family member who is undocumented, to worry about their fate and the fate of their families.

Donald Trump campaigned on undoing President Obama’s policies and raised anti-immigrant sentiment to a fever pitch with his “build the wall” rhetoric. But it was the case of Rómulo Avélica-González that signaled to many that immigration enforcement had fundamentally changed. His story was published in the Los Angeles Times in July 2017, reprinted in local papers, carried on television nationwide; it sent shock waves across immigrant communities across the country. In this case, a father who had lived in the Los Angeles area for more than twenty years, raised his US-born children there, and had just dropped his daughter off at school was followed from the school, arrested blocks away by ICE, and told he would be deported. In the latter years of the Obama administration, deportations largely focused on people with police records or those crossing illegally at the border. Now, the Trump administration was signaling that apprehensions and deportations would affect long-established residents with no criminal history or only minor infractions, even parents of US-born children, as they went about their daily business. More recently, the targeting of hundreds of undocumented persons in California in several raids was widely perceived as “payback” for
In the state’s sanctuary policies, with one state senator quoted as saying it was “pure malice.” Many people have been left anxious and afraid to even go to work. Children cry in their classrooms for fear their parents will either lose their jobs or not be home when they return from school. Although the Biden administration has voiced its commitment to changing these policies, it will not happen overnight or, in the worst case, at all. Children will continue to cry in their classrooms for some time to come.

We noticed, however, that research documenting the effects of the Trump era of immigration enforcement neglected to examine the impact that these policies were having on the nation’s schools. Some research has rightly noted that children who are anxious and stressed about their home situation are hardly optimal learners. And many children worry about being apprehended while at school, which would certainly make it difficult to concentrate on studies. At least indirectly, reports have suggested that the children of immigrants are affected in their learning by seemingly random immigration raids. In fact, psychologists have found negative effects on cognitive development and educational progress among school-age children with unauthorized parents, even where the children are US citizens. But we had no idea how extensive these effects were, or how they were being experienced by the nation’s schools. Moreover, we wondered about the student who comes from a home personally untouched by these concerns but whose best friend at school is worried and anxious. Is that student worried and anxious, too? When classmates disappear overnight, does this unsettle the classroom? What about the counselors and administrators who must intervene, sometimes several times a day, with students who are acting out or decompensating in class? Or the administrator who meets with the parents seeking reassurance that the school will not turn them in to immigration agents? How do teachers, counselors, administrators, and other school personnel experience the effects of this aggressive immigration enforcement regime? Can this be thwarting efforts to improve learning and/or retain strong teachers and administrators in our most challenged schools? In addition to wanting to know how these immigration enforcement policies were affecting the schools, we also wanted to know how the schools addressed the challenges they encountered, and does this vary by region and by the political context of the states and communities?
To find the answers to these questions, we embarked on a survey during 2017–2018 to document both quantitative and qualitative responses from more than 3,600 educators in thirteen states, twenty-four school districts, and two educator networks. This book presents the findings from this survey in depth. It also draws on a number of follow-up studies and related studies to present what we believe is the first book to examine the impact of recent immigration enforcement practices on the nation’s schools through the eyes of educators who have experienced it.

It is important to note that public schools in the United States that serve the children of immigrants are largely the same schools that deal with numerous other challenges. They are principally heavily segregated Title I schools that receive federal funds to address issues associated with poverty. These schools have been under enormous pressure in recent years to close the yawning achievement gaps between poor and nonpoor students, and between White and Asian students on the one hand and Black and Latino students on the other.15 It is in this context that stepped-up immigration enforcement has been experienced by the schools that disproportionately serve immigrant students. Some would argue that the immigration enforcement regime places unreasonable, additional burdens on these schools, particularly in the absence of targeted support to address these burdens. Given the research that shows children of undocumented parents, on average, perform more poorly in school, have higher absenteeism, and graduate high school at lower rates, it can be impossible for these schools to achieve significant improvements in these students’ achievement under these additional exacerbating conditions.16 Moreover, immigration enforcement did not let up for many of these families during the coronavirus pandemic. In fact, ICE increased its activity in the hundred miles in which it is allowed to operate from the Mexican border, frightening many parents from going to their children’s schools to retrieve educational materials, learning devices, and food.

Although referred to as “immigrant students,” estimates indicate that at least 88 percent of the children of immigrants are, in fact, born in the United States and have US citizenship.17 Moreover, the small percentage of students who are foreign born also have the right to a free and equal public education through high school, guaranteed by the Plyler v. Doe Supreme Court
decision in 1982. However, none of this protects them from the negative consequences of immigration policy targeting their parents. More than 6 million children, residing in homes in which at least one family member is undocumented, live with the persistent threat of their parents’ deportation as well as economic and social instability. In these cases, researchers have linked the fears of deportation with poor physical and emotional health in both parents and children, even compromising family relations. Several thousand children have been separated from their parents through detention and deportation, and these children appear to suffer effects similar to those of children of incarcerated parents: psychological trauma, material hardship, residential instability, and for boys, aggression. This is underscored by research specifically on US citizen children whose parents are detained or deported, who show signs of depression, anxiety, aggression, and conduct problems not evident in children who have not experienced these events. Many of these children need mental health services and, of course, carry these problems into the classroom where educators must find ways to assist them.

ABOUT THIS BOOK

Following this introduction, we provide, in chapter 1, a short history of immigration enforcement in the United States as context for understanding the unprecedented reach of enforcement practices and the threat that these practices have posed in undermining efforts to provide an equitable education for all in American schools. We explain how the situation evolved and how it has affected the schools at the center of the nation’s educational agenda. The historical context is important for a number of reasons: immigrant bashing has been a favorite sport in the United States since its founding, so we should not think this phenomenon is new. However, while immigrant children have been discriminated against and segregated from their native-born, English-speaking peers in the schools, there are few accounts of how the schools have been affected by enforcement practices. This is also a period of unprecedented migration—and active responses against it—all over the world. Instantaneous communication between all parts of the globe combined with more methods of transport
have increased the movement of people exponentially, changing the size and nature of migration. Chapter 1 further points out that, especially for people of Mexican origin, the situation is not new. But it is more random, more broadly targeted, and affecting many more children than has been evident in the past.

Chapter 2 presents a big-picture view of the impacts of aggressive immigration enforcement that has resulted in increased absenteeism, increased behavioral and/or emotional problems among students, decreased achievement, decreased parent involvement, and a multitude of other effects on school climate and student well-being, including an increase in bullying. All of these effects, however, differ by region of the country and also by the demographics of a school. The chapter also explores these variations and how they can mitigate or aggravate the negative impacts. Chapter 3 further probes the impact of immigration enforcement, focusing on Title I schools where the federal government has been engaged for several decades in attempting to mitigate the vast inequities in American schools. In addition to describing the context of these schools and the features that make them so vulnerable, the chapter details how and why Title I schools were hit harder than non–Title I schools by threatening immigration enforcement. Title I schools with the highest percentage of English learners—children of immigrants—were the most impacted by immigration enforcement.

Chapter 4 examines the comments of almost 2,700 survey respondents who chose to weigh in, in their own words, on how this enforcement regime has affected their students and themselves. Teachers, counselors, administrators, and other school personnel describe the various impacts on students, and how their perspectives differ according to their particular jobs in the schools. It presents compelling stories of students and delivers voices of educators. We find that immigration enforcement can be experienced in various ways. One way is through its impact on individual learners and their interaction with classroom instruction. Another way is through the impact on school and classroom climate. A third way is through the estrangement of parents who come to fear contact with the schools. And a fourth way that immigration enforcement affects schools and their mission is through increased absenteeism and disenrollment.
Because absenteeism and declining enrollment is such a major issue in low-income schools especially, we have included a chapter by Thomas Dee and Mark Murphy (chapter 5), which examines the specific impact of collaboration between local law enforcement and immigration agents. The authors detail how local complicity with federal immigration officials affects Hispanic student displacement in the schools, which highly disrupts teaching and learning, and has direct impacts on school resources. Dee and Murphy also detail the demographics where this occurs most often and how these communities have responded.

The grave concerns that were expressed by educators in chapter 4 are not only about students. In chapter 6, Shena Sanchez, Rachel Freeman, and Patricia Martin explore the impacts of immigration enforcement on educators based on an in-depth qualitative study of thirty-eight educators from all corners of the United States who had responded to the 2017–2018 survey. Incorporating unpublished in-depth interview and questionnaire data, the authors pursued such questions as, Does this extra pressure cause teachers to become less effective? Does it challenge them to stay in teaching? Does it make their jobs harder? Many parts of the country are experiencing teacher shortages, which are most acute in the schools that serve immigrant and other disadvantaged students. Therefore, these questions are important to explore from an education policy perspective.

As we sought to understand the impact of aggressive immigration enforcement on the schools, we came to conceptualize this along a continuum, from activities that threaten, such as those described above, to those that support schools and students. With respect to the latter, we sought to know how educators and others have attempted to address the challenges brought about by these enforcement policies. To this end, chapter 7 recounts the ways in which school administrators from all four census regions of the country (Northeast, Midwest, West, and South) have organized to support students, and sometimes teachers, who have been caught up in enforcement. From twenty-two administrators and individuals working with community-based organizations, we heard creative and courageous stories of extraordinary commitment, support strategies, and a network operating locally and nationally, often below the radar, to help these students and their families.
We saw how schools can become a site of social justice and resistance. This chapter offers insights into what schools and districts can do, and are doing, to confront the crises in places where ICE is operating and, remarkably, in communities that exist in deeply anti-immigrant regions.

Chapter 8 offers an example of a sanctuary school that combined resources with a local university to uplift a heavily immigrant community and set its children on a path to college. Authored by Karen Hunter Quartz, Marco Murillo, Nina Rabin, and Leyda Garcia, the chapter explores how administrators in a sanctuary school have acted to shield students, teachers, and community members from the worst effects of the immigration enforcement regime. The school, in a heavily immigrant area of Los Angeles, has for several years been experimenting with a variety of policies and practices aimed at easing the fears and meeting the needs of everyone in the school community. The authors—two researchers, a lawyer, and an administrator—recount the ways that, over a decade, policies, procedures, and practices, including a legal clinic, have been created to protect their students. While the school enjoys the support of a major university with its law school and its students, it also exists in a very low-income neighborhood where dropout is common and few students typically go on to higher education. The school overwhelmingly serves students of immigrants living in poverty and in fear of ICE, yet more than 90 percent of its students go on to postsecondary education. We hope that readers will take a cue from these contributors and ask, “What might the college or university in my region be able to do to support our immigrant students?”

The coronavirus pandemic that struck the world in 2020 highlighted the vast inequities in society and, if nothing else, confirmed the ways in which we are all in this together. We hope this book exposes a problem that has affected millions of students and their futures that has been largely hidden. Regardless of the outcomes of the latest attempts to seek a solution to our broken immigration system, these children of immigrants will continue to bear the emotional scars of years of living in fear and questioning the relevance of their schooling. The injustices done to these students ripple outward to other students, to teachers, to a whole school community, and ultimately to the nation. We simply cannot afford to write off millions
of students in this generation. Therefore, in chapter 9 we lay out a set of conclusions and a list of recommendations for policy makers as well as on-the-ground educators, gleaned from three years of examining data and interviewing dozens of individuals on the front lines of the immigration enforcement crisis. Perhaps that understanding, combined with the lessons learned from so many deeply committed individuals whose words resonate through these pages, can result in a more just world for these students and their schools, caught in the terrible crucible of painful, unnecessarily harsh immigration enforcement.