

# Fully Realizing the Civic Potential of Immigrant Youth



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Over the course of a few cold days last February, immigrant families and their allies in Austin, Texas, were shaken by a series of raids as immigration officers descended upon the city. After all was said and done, Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) officials arrested 51 undocumented immigrants, most of whom had no criminal record.<sup>1</sup>

As the community raced to respond to the shock, teachers sought to protect their students. Reports flooded in of children being returned to school when bus drivers found no one to pick the students up at their stops, of teachers waiting with children until late into the evening when a relative was finally identified, of empty classrooms over the next several days, and of students who would never return. Families hurried to sign guardianship papers to protect their children in case they were ever detained or deported.

Educators saw an increase in students from immigrant families both wanting and needing emotional support; many students who came to school were distracted and worried, anxious that their parents wouldn't be there when they came home. Grades began to slip, and attendance began to drop. In a matter of days, numerous immigrant children and children of immigrants,\* many of them U.S. citizens, were withdrawn from school or simply stopped attending—their parents, fearing deportation (for AFT resources, see page 12), retreating from public view.

In the following weeks and months, school communities responded by identifying and providing resources to advise families about their legal rights and to help them navigate the system should they be faced with immigration officers and/or deportation. Educators' mobilization efforts and outreach provided the basis for a

communication network focused on immigrant families' safety and well-being.

Teachers concerned about the psychological well-being of immigrant families at one school shared with us a guide to creating an emergency student action plan that they sent home with their students to help prepare families if confronted by ICE officials. With room for the names and phone numbers of teachers and other important adults in children's lives, the guide prompts families to gather key documents and information in one place. The very act of creating this action plan also helps families take comfort in being proactive and planning ahead to ensure that someone will care for their children.

In this article, we step back from the immediate aftermath of those ICE raids—in Austin and numerous other cities around the United States—to consider the role U.S. schools and educators play in the civic growth of immigrant youth. Our purpose is to show educators how to build on the civic potential of immigrant youth and prepare them for an active role in public discourse, or what has been called “enlightened political engagement.”

Professor Walter Parker suggests that enlightened political engagement is a core goal of education. Specifically, he frames democratic enlightenment and political engagement as two distinct and necessary dimensions to enlightened political engagement. Democratic enlightenment encompasses the knowledge of democratic traditions, principles, and political institutions; a commitment to justice; and the disposition for tolerance. Political engagement, on the other hand, refers to the actions and activities found in civic participation. According to Parker, the synthesis of these dimensions promotes “wise participation in public affairs,”<sup>2</sup> or what he terms enlightened political engagement. To ensure that future generations actively and wisely participate in American democratic traditions, teachers of today's immigrant students will want to focus not only on democratic ideas and knowledge, but also on civic activities and actions.

\*We define immigrant youth as all children of immigrant parents, both those children born outside the United States (first generation), and those born in the United States (second generation).

## Fostering Civic Voice

Since the earliest one-room schoolhouses, a core purpose of American education has been to create a well-informed citizenry,<sup>3</sup> yet political forces often limit schools' ability to work toward this goal.<sup>4</sup> We developed this article, in part, in response to the challenging political context in which we find ourselves—both as researchers invested in American students' civic education and as teachers of immigrant youth.

As educators, we take our charge to nurture students' democratic dispositions seriously. In doing so, it is essential to consider the growing diversity of the U.S. student population, where children in immigrant families now account for one in four K–12 students.<sup>5</sup>

The social studies curriculum is one space where students learn about those democratic dispositions, and the rights and responsibilities of citizenship in the United States. This overarching purpose is present in civics, economics, geography, and history content, all part of social studies. Researchers have found a strong relationship for immigrant youth between taking social studies courses and voting in young adulthood, but not for children of U.S.-born parents.<sup>6</sup> In addition, other work has found patterns of limited social studies enrollment overall, especially in honors and Advanced Placement classes, among immigrant youth, which we hypothesize prevents many of these students from realizing their full civic potential.<sup>7</sup>

Most social studies content incorporates American sociocultural and historical narratives that may be less familiar to the children of foreign-born parents.<sup>8</sup> For instance, when immigrant students learn the history of Martin Luther King Jr., Rosa Parks, and Malcolm X, they come to understand that the legacy of slavery continued to affect race relations long after the end of the Civil War, and still does so today. Manifest Destiny and American exceptionalism are associated with particular narratives that frame the United States in a specific and positive way.

Teachers will want to be aware that these “familiar” narratives may not be familiar at all to their students' foreign-born parents, who may or may not have been socialized into these particular perspectives. Explicit experiences with and knowledge of these narratives better positions immigrant students to navigate the civic contexts of their new homeland, actively engaging in public discourse and championing the rights of their communities. Knowledge of these narratives does not necessarily produce unquestioning acceptance; rather, it provides background information to better

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understand the perspectives that these narratives may foster.

Given the significant relationship between academic attainment and civic involvement, secondary school teachers and counselors can help to ensure that immigrants are appropriately enrolled in challenging social studies courses. Immigrants' access to rich social studies content in honors and Advanced Placement courses will help ensure that democratic traditions not only survive but thrive.

observe and internalize how their parents are treated outside the home.

Immigrant parent engagement can be as simple as providing translators and services in families' native languages, outreach to the communities where parents live and work, and support for teachers to connect with parents on their terms.<sup>†</sup> This includes hiring immigrant educators in leadership positions and providing professional development opportunities for teachers to understand immigrant families. Together, these actions

leadership skills. Extracurricular activities place students in contact with a variety of peers and adults as they engage in academic competitions (e.g., science, math, engineering, and technology challenges, National History Day), service organizations (e.g., Key Club, 4-H), and speech and debate clubs. In addition to contributing to the development of civic identity, these interactions promote civil discourse and problem solving,<sup>14</sup> essential skills for democratic citizens. Just as important, educators can foster immigrant students' civic voices by drawing on their inherent strengths. More than two decades ago, researchers coined the term "immigrant optimism" to explain the academic advantage children of immigrant parents repeatedly demonstrate relative to their peers, pointing to immigrant parents' relatively high expectations.<sup>15</sup> Likewise, advocates for bilingual education have long cited research documenting a bilingual advantage among immigrant youth.<sup>‡</sup>

Well-developed bilingualism and biliteracy are linked to numerous academic, cognitive, and professional advantages,<sup>16</sup> similar to the ability of immigrant students to navigate and negotiate two or more cultures and perspectives.<sup>17</sup> Teachers can



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Even in this precarious time, with nationalism on the rise, we believe that educators and schools are well positioned to foster civic participation among immigrant youth. Strong civic actors recognize their own abilities to *act on* their communities in public and productive ways and to the benefit of the public or common good.<sup>9</sup> Without this commitment and a deep knowledge of American history, even the strongest of republics will eventually crumble. As educators, we miss an opportunity to strengthen and fortify our rich democratic traditions when we fail to recognize the civic potential of immigrant youth to fully engage in and commit to our republic.

### Ensuring Cohesive School Communities

Together, teachers and administrators set the tone of the school community. School leaders not only can provide clearly articulated policies and procedures to engage immigrant families, but also can model inclusiveness for all faculty, staff, and students. Making immigrant parents feel welcome at school is critical,<sup>10</sup> as children

validate immigrant parents and help incorporate them into the school community.

Both studying academic subjects such as reading, writing, math, social studies, and science, and forging bonds with adults and peers, are part and parcel of what we do in school. They form the center of a student's educational universe, especially during adolescence, when academics and social involvement coexist. Extracurricular experiences contribute to students' educational success,<sup>11</sup> with evidence to suggest particular relevance for Latino and immigrant youth.<sup>12</sup> In fact, immigrant youth may be particularly predisposed to volunteer in their communities and take on leadership positions.<sup>13</sup>

Educators can actively recruit and support immigrant youth in extracurricular activities, where they can develop a sense of belonging and commitment, as well as

capitalize on these immigrant advantages in their instruction. The ability to make sense of diverse perspectives is a core tenet of American democracy, and immigrant students experience this firsthand as they encounter diverse perspectives in their daily lives.

**A** strong civic identity includes a sense of membership in and commitment to improving one's community.<sup>18</sup> Simply living in a particular country or community guarantees neither a robust civic identity nor a connection to that place in particular.<sup>19</sup> One need look no further than the anti-immigrant rhetoric that has driven many notable state and local education policies<sup>20</sup> to understand that immigrant students' educational experiences are shaped not just by curriculum and instruction, but also by the current political climate.

*(Continued on page 41)*

<sup>†</sup>For more on parent engagement, see "Connecting with Students and Families through Home Visits" in the Fall 2015 issue of *American Educator*, available at [www.aft.org/ae/fall2015/faber](http://www.aft.org/ae/fall2015/faber).

<sup>‡</sup>For more on the history of bilingual education, see "Bilingual Education" in the Fall 2015 issue of *American Educator*, available at [www.aft.org/ae/fall2015/goldenberg\\_wagner](http://www.aft.org/ae/fall2015/goldenberg_wagner).

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### Engaging Immigrant Students (Continued from page 11)

In fact, the large-scale immigrant rights marches of 2006 were organized and run largely by U.S.-born children of immigrants, frustrated with the virulent anti-immigrant sentiment aimed at their parents.<sup>21</sup> It is in the best interest of our nation, our communities, our schools, and our students to nurture a healthy civic identity in immigrant youth. If, as a nation, we frame our demographic diversity as a strength rather than as a liability, we can fully realize the civic potential of immigrant youth and, ultimately, of our republic.

#### Endnotes

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