You Are Welcome Here

Reassuring Immigrant Students and Families in Northwest Indiana

The photos in this article are from "Educating Students and the Community in an Age of Immigration Uncertainty," a daylong conference held in August and sponsored by the Hammond Teachers Federation, the Hammond school district, and more than 40 organizations.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY ADAM DERSTINE, ILLUSTRATIONS BY JING JING TSONG

By Jennifer Dubin

Words can inspire hope or they can instill fear. Speaking at the third and final presidential debate in October 2016, Donald Trump chose fear. "We're going to secure the border, and once the border is secured at a later date, we'll make a determination as to the rest," he said. "But we have some bad hombres here, and we're going to get them out."[1]

Shortly after Trump became president, a dozen seniors in a U.S. government class at George Rogers Clark High School in the Hammond, Indiana, school district rode a bus 160 miles south to Indianapolis, where they met with their state representatives and senators, observed committee hearings from the balcony of the General Assembly, and participated in a rally to support public education.

Kyle Kwasny, their teacher and chaperone, recalls that the field trip went well and that students learned a great deal. But another 10 students who had expressed interest in attending didn't show up. The next day, Kwasny asked them what had happened. The students told him their parents were afraid to sign the permission slips. "Why?" he asked. Because their parents were undocumented immigrants, they said.

At the time, Trump had been president for less than two months. Cities nationwide were experiencing stepped up immigration enforcement, and Hammond was no different.

About 25 miles from downtown Chicago, the city of Hammond is one of 19 municipalities that constitute Lake County in northwest Indiana. The northern part of the county, where the Hammond schools are located, is home to a growing Hispanic population that has become increasingly fearful, given the nativist rhetoric emanating from the White House.

In January 2017, one week after taking office, Trump issued an executive order giving immigration agents greater leeway in enforcing federal laws and deporting undocumented immigrants.[2] In February, news accounts reported a surge in immigration raids in California, Kansas, New York, North Carolina, Texas,

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and Virginia, resulting in hundreds of arrests.[3] Raids also took place in Illinois, Indiana, Kentucky, Missouri, and Wisconsin. In Indiana, 52 arrests were reported.[4]

In March, video of a teenage girl sobbing as Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents arrested her father on the way to school in Los Angeles went viral.[5] Throughout the summer, other harrowing stories continued to make headlines, including one of an undocumented high school student arrested by ICE days before graduation,[6] and another of two undocumented brothers, both standout high school soccer players, who were deported after one of the boys voluntarily checked in with immigration officials to report that he had won a college scholarship and would be relocating.[7]

in August, the HTF partnered with the Hammond school district and more than 40 organizations to hold "Educating Students and the Community in an Age of Immigration Uncertainty." The day-long event at Morton High School in Hammond was a success; more than 400 people attended.

The HTF, with its 950 members, is among the smaller AFT locals. But the challenges facing immigrant students and educators in Hammond are no less formidable than the ones facing immigrant students and educators elsewhere. The success of this conference, both in terms of participation and collaboration, speaks to the power of this labor-management partnership and how the union and the school district galvanized a community to act on an issue as divisive and intractable as immigration.

Parents worried that signing a school document, such as a permission slip, might invite unwanted questions about their immigration status.

In Lake County, these accounts alarmed many residents, especially Hammond's teachers, who say their students constantly worry their parents won't be there when they get home from school. "Kids are asking, 'Am I going back to Mexico? What's going to happen to me?'" says Patrick O'Rourke, the president of the Hammond Teachers Federation (HTF). In his 43 years as president, O'Rourke had never seen such angst in his city. He and his fellow HTF officials couldn't believe the element of fear pervading their schools. They were stunned to learn that parents worried that signing a school document, such as a permission slip, might invite unwanted questions about their immigration status. So erring on the side of caution, they kept their children home. O'Rourke says the fear was also making it harder for teachers to do their jobs. As educators know all too well, and as research shows, if children are scared, they can't learn.[8]

In March, still seething at the idea that fear prevented students from participating in a field trip, O'Rourke read articles in the Spring 2017 issue of *American Educator* on the need to support Latino children and families.* He shared copies of the magazine with others in the district and also discussed the issue with Miriam Soto-Pressley, the HTF's educational issues chair, whose first language as a child was Spanish. In the last few years, Soto-Pressley has traveled to Austin, El Paso, Miami, and West Palm Beach to help facilitate conferences, sponsored by the American Federation of Teachers, geared toward English language learners (ELLs) and their teachers. These conferences focused on how to apply for U.S. citizenship, understanding the federal Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program, and sharing educational resources.

O'Rourke and Soto-Pressley decided the Hammond school district needed to hold its own conference to educate teachers and parents about the government's authority and limitations with regard to immigration. The conference would also enable educators to reassure the Hispanic community that—in schools, at least—families had nothing to fear. So on a Saturday morning

*The complete issue is available at www.aft.org/ae/spring2017.

A History of Ethnic Diversity

The northern part of Lake County, which includes cities such as East Chicago, Hammond, and Whiting, has long been a melting pot in terms of ethnic diversity. In the middle of the 20th century, the region's once-vibrant steel industry attracted many immigrants with the promise of steady union jobs. The majority of these workers came from Eastern Europe, and a fair number also hailed from south of the U.S.-Mexico border. But more than 20 years ago, the number of jobs in the steel mills began to decline. And while Eastern European immigration had long since tapered off by then, immigration in the county began to increase among Latinos seeking a better life.

Today, 47 percent of the 13,868 students enrolled in Hammond's schools are Hispanic. At Clark High School, where Kyle Kwasny teaches, that figure is 71 percent.

When Greg Ruiz first began working with English language learners in Hammond 25 years ago, only a handful lived in the district. Now, 10.7 percent of Hammond's students are ELLs, and they attend each of its 23 schools.[9] To put that figure in context, only 4.5 percent of students in the state of Indiana are ELLs.[10]

Two years ago, teachers in the district's Language Development Program began holding a free English-language boot camp for parents and students during the summer. Ruiz teaches some of the four-hour sessions, held over 15 days, where breakfast and lunch, as well as child care, are provided. For parents, the classes also continue during the academic year, while their children attend school. About 30 parents and 60 children registered for the program this summer, paid for with Title I and Title III funds (federal funds targeted to high-poverty schools and schools with large numbers of ELLs, respectively).

While such classes show the district's support for immigrants, many immigrants have remained skittish in the wake of the presidential election. Ruiz says a parent recently told him she was putting together a document—an agreement with family members—stating who would care for her children if she were deported. "With tears in her eyes, telling me that," he says, shaking his head.

Those outside the public schools have also noticed the fear among residents who may be undocumented. Frank Mrvan, the North Township trustee, a locally elected official in Lake County, says that many immigrants have receded from public life. He has seen a decrease in undocumented immigrants seeking help from his office, which provides emergency assistance to families when they can't pay utility bills or if they face eviction. Immigrants unauthorized to be in this country but who have lived and worked here for years are in increasing danger of being exploited, he says. "If a contractor says, 'Thank you for your work, but we're not going to pay you today,' what route does that individual have to recover that money? None."

For Mrvan, there's a big difference between protecting our country's borders and citizens from terrorists and violent criminals, and deporting law-abiding people. It's a difference our country's broken immigration system has yet to resolve. And it's at the heart of why Patrick O'Rourke and 20 others spent the summer organizing this conference in northwest Indiana.

Given their ties to the community, Mrvan and Ruiz agreed to help. So, one morning in July, they and other members of the conference planning committee sit around a table in the resource center of Morton High School to talk logistics. "My goal is to raise $30,000 in the next two weeks to fund this," O'Rourke says to the group, adding that local radio stations have assured him they will feature spots leading up to the event. Theresa Mayerik, the school district's assistant superintendent, says the district will soon send home letters in English and Spanish encouraging families to attend.

Mayra Rodriguez-Alvarez, a graduate of Hammond High School and a recent graduate of Valparaiso University Law School, suggests asking immigration attorneys to volunteer at the conference to answer attendees' questions in a closed setting. She knows firsthand the complexities of immigration law, having helped her husband, who had been undocumented, obtain his green card in April. Members of the group nod enthusiastically at the idea.

César Moreno-Pérez, of the AFT's human rights and community relations department, however, cautions that might be too much to do in one day. Based on his work helping to plan other AFT-sponsored conferences, he suggests holding a follow-up conference strictly for people to consult with attorneys. "You don't want this to be a one-off but a foundation to build on," he says. To that end, the group agrees to create a sign-up sheet for those attending the conference to meet with lawyers at another time. (That meeting took place on a Saturday in September, where seven lawyers helped 25 people with their immigration paperwork free of charge.)

Jose Bustos is pleased that free legal consultations (which can cost as much as $1,000) will eventually be offered. "The fear and anguish that exists in our communities is tremendous," he tells the group. A former union organizer with the Service Employees International Union in Chicago, Bustos now works at the Immigrant Support and Assistance Center in East Chicago. The organization, where Rodriguez-Alvarez volunteers, has received many calls from immigrants too scared to go outside their homes, Bustos says. Recently, a woman called his office after unsuccessfully trying to get food assistance from the local Salvation Army. She said the receptionist questioned her about her halting English and her

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immigration status, prompting the woman and her children to quickly leave, not only without the food they needed but also scared that immigration authorities would be called. "What can I do to protect me and my kids?" she asked the center.

Moreno-Pérez says that Steven Monroy, a legislative staff attorney at the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund (MALDEF), has agreed to give a presentation on knowing your rights and how families can protect themselves during an ICE raid at home or work. MALDEF has given similar presentations in conjunction with the AFT since the Obama administration first announced DACA in June 2012.

In addition to focusing on legal questions, Moreno-Pérez suggests the conference in Hammond also highlight AFT resources such as Colorín Colorado, a website for teachers and families of ELLs, available at www.colorincolorado.org. "Parents have to see that the teachers union is at the intersection of this work," he says. To emphasize that point, the group decides they will ask Mary Cathryn Ricker, the executive vice president of the AFT, to speak at the event.

O'Rourke then mentions the need to include a session on how residents can advocate for welcoming city ordinances, which various city councils have passed in recent years. The ordinances, which fall just short of declaring that they are sanctuary cities (that is, cities that limit their cooperation with federal immigration enforcement), are meant to reassure undocumented immigrants that city resources will not be used to enforce federal immigration law. So far, Gary is the only city in Lake County to have passed such an ordinance.[11] But O'Rourke hopes the rest of the county will follow its lead.

At some point in the discussion, committee members feel compelled to ask a basic question, given the climate of fear: Should the conference require registration? Doing so would certainly help them plan for the appropriate number of free lunches and backpacks with school supplies to distribute at the end of the day. But asking an already nervous population to submit their personal information seems unwise. So they ultimately agree that registrations aren't necessary and decide to accept both walk-ins and registrations online.

Though the group has successfully addressed that concern, another one hangs in the air: What if the individuals this conference is meant to help are too afraid to attend?

A Day Devoted to Immigration and Education

On August 5, committee members are visibly relieved to see that their concern has proven unfounded. By 9 a.m., the parking lot of Morton High School is nearly full, and the building inside buzzes with activity as 60 volunteers wearing bright orange T-shirts welcome families to the conference.

Resource tables piled high with free children's books, handouts, and school supplies, and staffed by representatives from various sponsoring organizations, such as the Hammond Hispanic Community Committee, Catholic Charities, and the Hammond Education Foundation, line the hall outside the auditorium. Inside the school's resource center, volunteers provide free child care. They supervise more than 80 young children, whose parents have dropped them off to read books, watch movies, and play games.

Before the workshops begin, attendees find seats in the auditorium to hear from a range of speakers. Walter Watkins, Hammond's superintendent, reassures families that administrators and staff members will do what they can to help. Dale Melczek, the recently retired bishop of the Catholic Diocese of Gary, reaffirms the church's support for refugees and leads the audience in a prayer. Anna Mamala, the vice president of the Hammond Board of School Trustees, reads a resolution the board passed in March reaffirming the district's "commitment to creating a safe and supportive learning environment for all students regardless of immigration status."

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The morning's most high-profile speaker is Carolyn Curiel, a native of northwest Indiana. A 1972 graduate of Morton High School, Curiel served as the U.S. ambassador to Belize under President Bill Clinton and is now the founder and executive director of the Purdue Institute for Civic Communication at Purdue University in West Lafayette, Indiana.

In her speech, Curiel briefly recounts her career as a journalist, her immigrant grandparents' experience, and the challenges that immigrants, undocumented or not, currently face. "In our time now with immigration policy in question, there are a lot of people fearing an ultimate rejection," she says. "They're concerned for their futures, their well-being, and the well-being of the people they love. And I want everyone here who is in a precarious position like that to look around the room and realize that you have a lot of help."

For the rest of the morning, that help takes the form of nine conference workshops held in classrooms throughout the school. For instance, Miriam Soto-Pressley, from the HTF, gives a presentation on helping parents become more involved in their children's education. And Joanne Anderson and Ingrid Miera, ELL trainers with the AFT, lead a workshop on how educators can support immigrant students and families.

Meanwhile, in the auditorium, Steven Monroy, from MALDEF, holds two sessions, one in English and one in Spanish, on how families can protect themselves from an ICE raid. "A warrant should be no older than three months," Monroy says. He points to a photograph of an actual warrant that he shows on a screen. A warrant must also have a judge's signature, he adds. And he emphasizes that during a raid, people have the right to videotape the police.

Meanwhile, the AFT's César Moreno-Pérez gives a presentation titled "Protecting Our Children & Families from the Threat of Deportation." Standing in a room filled to capacity with educators, Moreno-Pérez rattles off some statistics: There are 43 million immigrants in this country.[12] Eleven million of them are undocu-

mented.[13] More than 5.9 million children live in mixed-status households.[14] Between 54,000 and 68,000 children in Indiana have at least one parent who is undocumented.[15]

He reminds participants of the need to transform classrooms and schools into sanctuary places of learning free from racism, discrimination, bullying, and the threat of deportation. Then he briefly explains the relationship between schools and immigration enforcement. First, thanks to the 1982 U.S. Supreme Court case *Plyler v. Doe*, all students, regardless of immigration status, have the right to a public education. Second, the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) prohibits schools from sharing students' personal information with anyone, including ICE. Moreno-Pérez also explains that a Department of Homeland Security memo governing where ICE activities can take place makes clear that ICE cannot be present at schools, hospitals, churches, demonstrations, or funerals, unless there is an immediate threat to national security or a signed judicial warrant.

Moreno-Pérez then quickly recaps DACA, the federal immigration program that gives undocumented immigrants who meet certain requirements a reprieve from deportation as well as the opportunity to obtain a Social Security number and a renewable work permit. At the time of the conference, Trump had not yet announced his plans to rescind the program.[16]

As part of this presentation, Karen Reyes, a DACA recipient and teacher from Austin, Texas, shares her story. At age 2, her mother brought her to this country from Mexico. In high school, she realized that pursuing higher education as an undocumented student would be a challenge. But with the help of guidance counselors and teachers, she persevered. She applied to college, secured scholarships, and earned both an undergraduate and a graduate degree.

Because of DACA, Reyes, now 29, was able to apply for and accept her dream job: teaching preschool students who are deaf or hard of hearing. As a "DACAmented" teacher, she is active in her union, Education Austin,* which she says recently held a citizenship drive that helped 112 eligible permanent residents fill out their applications.

Reyes then reminds educators of their power. She urges them to lobby their legislators in favor of DACA and the Dream Act and to reject any anti-immigrant legislation. "Be an active advocate," she says. "Don't just say I support the immigrant community."

At the end of her presentation, audience members give Reyes thunderous applause. They had listened to every word with rapt attention.

"The Best of Us Will Triumph over the Worst of Us"

Throughout the day, conference-goers hear of the many positive steps Lake County officials have taken in recent years to support the immigrant community. Long considered a blue dot in a red state, Lake County is one of only four in Indiana that went for Hillary Clinton in the presidential election. So the audience is hardly surprised to hear Frank Mrvan, the North Township trustee, praise a couple of well-known progressives in attendance.

*For more on Education Austin's work supporting the immigrant community, see http://go.aft.org/AE417link1.

Long considered a blue dot in a red state, Lake County is one of only four in Indiana that went for Hillary Clinton in the presidential election.

First, he mentions the work of his father, Indiana state Senator Frank Mrvan. In 2013, Senator Mrvan, a longtime Democrat, tried to introduce legislation allowing undocumented immigrants with tax identification numbers to apply for driver's licenses, but the idea never got a hearing. He is now trying to introduce legislation to allow undocumented students in Indiana to pay in-state, rather than out-of-state, college tuition. Currently, at least 18 states allow in-state tuition rates for undocumented students. Indiana, however, is one of three states that prohibit it.[17]

After recognizing his father for his efforts, the younger Mrvan asks Calvin Bellamy to stand. Fifteen years ago, as president of Calumet Bank, Bellamy "took the courageous move," Mrvan says, of allowing people with tax identification numbers to open up bank accounts so they could avoid paying exorbitant fees when cashing their checks elsewhere. O'Rourke later tells me that not everyone in Lake County applauded the move; many vehemently opposed it. But in allowing undocumented immigrants to open accounts, Bellamy enabled them to save their money and build credit. As Bellamy rises, the audience loudly applauds, just as it had done minutes ago for Mrvan.

Toward the end of the conference, Mary Cathryn Ricker, the executive vice president of the AFT, thanks everyone for attending and strikes a reassuring tone. "This is an age of immigration uncertainty," she says. But "by coming here today, those of us in this room are certain about something. We are certain that the best of us will triumph over the worst of us."

Such words are exactly what many in the audience wanted and needed to hear. Still, conference attendees are reluctant to speak with me for this article. Several decline, even when Greg Ruiz, from the school district's language department, offers to translate as they share their thoughts.

A family of four, however, is among the few who agree to be interviewed. To protect their privacy, I tell them I will not publish last names. Sitting in the high school cafeteria eating the free lunch provided, Christian, 43, says he found out about the conference thanks to a phone call from his oldest son's school; he came to learn more about immigration. Originally from Panama, he moved to this country in 1989 to escape the violence that broke out when the United States invaded Panama to oust Manuel Noriega.

Although he has a Social Security number and a driver's license, Christian is not a citizen. He says he came to the United States on a special visa he received when his uncle worked for the U.S. Air Force. Because his immigration status is murky—he says he's not sure if the visa is still good—he is working with a lawyer in Chicago.

An electrician who earns about $50,000 a year, Christian says it will probably cost him $4,000 in legal fees by the time he becomes a citizen. He pays taxes and owns his home. But the house is in his wife's name, since she recently became a citizen.

Their two sons, 13 and 12, were born in this country and attend Hammond public schools. During the presidential campaign, his 13-year-old, who has autism, became terrified that his father would be deported. "He worries so much," Christian says, putting his arm around him.

Christian says he often tells his children not to worry, but he admits that if he's driving and sees a police car right behind him, he gets nervous. "If anything happens…," he says, as his voice trails off.

"I work hard," he says. "I pay my taxes. I tell my kids, if I get my papers today, I will join the National Guard tomorrow. That's how much I love this country." Tears well up in his eyes, and to comfort him, his wife rubs his arm.

Christian is proud that his family's pastor, Steve Munsey, of the Family Christian Center, a megachurch in Munster, Indiana, spoke at today's conference. (O'Rourke invited Munsey after the pastor asked him in July to promote the conference to his congregation of 30,000 members, many of whom are Hispanic.) Christian found Munsey's words of welcome reassuring and is pleased that his pastor is becoming more involved in issues related to immigration.

As his sons quietly eat, Christian says that immigrants, like him, just want to make a living and a better life for their kids. "That's all we want."

His family is grateful for all the supports the school district has put in place for his autistic son. In his class of 25 students, there are two teachers and two assistant teachers, and his son works with a paraprofessional who shadows him all day long. "I love Hammond because I know where my taxes go," Christian says—to his sons' terrific public schools.

State Senator Frank Mrvan is trying to introduce legislation to allow undocumented students in Indiana to pay in-state, rather than out-of-state, college tuition.

A week after the conference, O'Rourke is proud of how it all turned out. "I've got businesses that have called me and said, 'What's the next step? How can we help?'" he says. He adds that the chair of the Lake County Democratic Central Committee has also assured him that the organization is going to focus more on immigration as a matter of social justice.

But the most moving experience for O'Rourke happened on Monday morning, two days after the conference. As he drove to the union office, his cell phone rang. In halting English, a woman told him she had attended the conference and wanted to thank him for organizing it. "I feel loved, and I feel more secure," she told him. O'Rourke thanked her for coming. When he asked if he could get in touch with her again, she told him no. She preferred not to give her name or information. O'Rourke understood. "I have a feeling she was undocumented."

He reminded her that if she or anyone she knew needed to speak to an attorney about any situation happening in their lives, they could do so for free at another conference he was helping to organize. This one would be at Morton High School on Saturday, September 23.

"Thank you. Muchas gracias," she said warmly and hung up. ☐

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Endnotes

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